

Laura Ford

A couple in real beach shoes, now rendered sculptural, are absorbed into our world through a range of overpowering associative qualities. Ford's works are a combination of transformation and truth. Elements that seem as much in need of protection as comprehension pace, tread, or rove, with sure step, they carry bounty and appear predicable. A man, perhaps, and a woman with a wreath of flowers, act out a combination of studied fact and fairy tale. The point is the way in which they seem to know what they are doing, and their perpetual relation to story. The role we take as we walk through, and past characters from a folkloric eternity, carries a mish-mash of understanding from the magazine in an anthropological library or a children's book rendered real. Acting together in a combination of practical clothing and theatrical gear, they appear as spirits and harbingers of something altogether else. Independent in thought and purposeful, up to something, or having done it already, their action sits on either side of their appearance.

The relationship in art between stillness and activity is fascinating, almost everything. How hard it is to release a sculpture, for it to tell a story. Diana is a huntress, of course, the Slave is still a Slave, David is enormous, altogether human, and yet Ford moulds the fumble of ill fitting mittens, odd slippers, and thick wool braids, into the personification of descriptive silence. Whilst maintaining a relationship, her freestanding figures carry a logical fiction about them that allows a sense that something secret is being acted out and upon. Poetic space might surround the work, the context is important, and yet not essential, as Ford's sculpture is as equally able to inhabit the interior and sometimes the exterior of a stately home as much as the apparently neutral surrounding of a white walled gallery in a museum. Private yet open, these animals of the night, borrowers from fiction are living a parallel existence before us.

And then a real happening, post Breughel, as two creatures made out of sacking carry a couple of caricatures, a man with a moustache, a woman with a scarf, on a stretcher. The material that makes them, again, is not raw but the thing itself. Clothing is so very difficult to use as characters are held to what they are somehow. There is no timelessness, but also no time in terms of era. Bringing a sense of the past in terms of collective recognition, Ford's recent sculpture is using found material to allow the generic to sway away from the specific and then back again. The little people on the stretcher, the personification of a couple in a worn photograph left behind in a deserted cottage, are entering a world that combines child like innocence with heavy duty folklore. The association with illustration makes a strong and creative short cut. Sculpture can do that and Ford's presents a massive range of possibility with the same approach. The black flag and layered armour of processing birds, for instance, of a particular work is not about heraldry so much as the ease and speed with which eye and mind work together to turn fiction into fact. The manufacture is open; apparently exposed, to the point were that is what it becomes.

Otherworldly, difficult and sometimes in need of our gaze and trust, we have the sense of looking into a book, at an illustration, with the tunnel vision of belief.

The stitches are large and linked, and chunky loose wool plaits make a sinister pantomime toy. Force of strength continues with weak action, to seek, find, scamper, scuttle, and shuffle, with fabric against wood, tears, and smudged sewing. But a toy is the most effective aid to the extension of fact and fiction, to do the trick. Therapists give toys to children, and ask to indicate what may, or might have been, done to them, and by whom. Here, the child, also a toy, will find it easier to play make believe with something a touch smaller or even larger than itself, and scale is everything. The landscape seen from afar means the lake may also just be a puddle and the mountain a pile of stones. Ford makes characters slightly larger or slightly smaller, never one to one, in order to guarantee that whatever it is is kept away from us.

Through the shift of scale from up to down, or vice versa, Laura Ford's work makes a difficult relation between scale and skin. Laura Ford is returning the compliment, putting a half notion, half storyboard, mock reality before us. But still, a mass of real construction and contradiction brings with it a sense of desire and repulsion. The combination of acting, being acted upon, and independence, ensures that sadness and sympathy will also come out. Badness and loneliness, where the toy becomes the person and the person becomes a characterisation of the artist's construction, ensures that it is hard to leave the toy-people, ex-animals, rag-doll and heralds, who seem to stare and seek us out alone, and we continually check them from the corner of our eye. Entering a psychological place stronger than any real place, looking out of the window, a child or rag doll, clutches her own rag doll in a circular, one container represented within another, manner like the picture on the Saxa salt packet. Understanding is comforting as well as dangerous, and we look and know, and desperately seek manufacture as a pursuit of fact. Ford suggests feeling and touch, yet we want to make sure, ensure, that these independent elements are still really not worldly enough to fully enter, or potentially break, our hearts.

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