



"The animal sculptures I create may be the future reminders of particular species"

Clockwise from far left: Jane Gillings's Found Feathered Friends include Female Satin Bowerbird and Golden Whistler; artist Louise Weaver, as shot for Vogue in 2001; Weaver's Sacred Kingfisher.

Contemporary Australian artists have a less gory relationship with animals in their art: perhaps the desire to replicate these little creatures in sculpture form is connected to an Australian yearning for a more rural bucolic existence where all we need is a pen of chooks and a milking cow to exist and be satisfied.

Louise Weaver is a Melbourne artist who creates elaborate mimicked environments for the strange beasts she has made using the once lost, now fashionable art of crochet. She uses taxidermists' models (skunks, hares, minks, foxes, bobcats and bears) to create animal forms which live in unusual and magically constructed kingdoms of sequins, glass droplets and diamantés. She says, because of our decreasing biodiversity, "the animal sculptures I create may be the only future reminders of particular species".

Kate Rohde is another Melbourne artist who understands ironic ostentation. Her fabulist baroque showcases made from expanding foam are exaggerated theatrical masterpieces. They are visually splendid, fake replicas of museum display dioramas. Brightly coloured, with as much faux fur, ferns and foliage as you could handle, her works are overt and luxurious, even sinful. "I was attracted to taxidermy," Rohde says, "as it is often featured in pop culture as dysfunctional, such as in *The Addams Family*. It was associated with abnormality but [also associated with] aristocratic homes and high society as an acceptable form of interior design." It makes sardonic sense that what is dysfunctional for average folk is acceptable, if not desirable, for the rich.

Kitsch is cool because it reminds us of a more reliable past era where mothers wore frilly aprons and dried their dishes with tea towels covered in pictures of koalas, and no-one was ashamed of their garden gnomes and stork statues. Kitsch brings to mind bright, tasteless colours and style gone askew. It is ironic, and ▶

the current generation of artists is nothing if not ironic. The double meanings and playful puns ooze directly into their art works. For Rohde this has manifested through her love of baroque and rococo styles. "Anyone today choosing to decorate their home in that [rococo] fashion would be seen as having bad taste and it tends to represent someone aspiring to look rich." So Rohde is creating super-vulgar kitsch animals within tasteless camp showcases to expose the hypocrisy of trying not to appear inelegant.

While Weaver may share a desire to create extroverted, ideal and pleasurable creatures in fantastical environments, she is aware of the schism between appearance and reality. In her work *Last Full Measure of Devotion (Emerald Bear)* she dressed a taxidermist's bear in handmade golden kimono slippers with green Gucci silk straps. It also wears a gilet by Martin Margiela, dyed fluorescent green. She says this work "mixes the genres between the natural world, haute couture and theatricality ... a character in the guise of Ziggy Stardust and aspects of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll".

The worlds of art, fashion, nature and technology are cross-referencing and cross-pollinating and we find ourselves intrigued when beauty and ugliness coexist, when reality and kitsch run hand-in-hand, and when irony and sarcasm are essentials in our lives. While these two artists are contributing a commentary on this recent aspect of popular culture, they are also manifesting it as co-conspirators.

Sydney artist Jane Gillings also makes use of little creatures, birds in this case, in her sculptures made entirely from found plastic. With experience as a model-maker for architects, a taxidermy assistant in the preparatory department of the Australian Museum and a cast-maker for dentists, she is well equipped to sculpt realistic copies of Australia's native bird life. Gillings herself is a bowerbird, a hoarder who keeps thousands of pieces of plastic junk in colour-coded boxes and drawers. Her studio is a clutter of found things that she transforms into lifelike birds. "Human beings love little things," she says. "We were designed to like cute creatures. Using old dolls and discarded toys takes you back to a time of life you might have forgotten." One of her influences is Joseph Cornell, a New Yorker who made ritualistic box dioramas in the 1950s and 60s, within which found objects took on symbolic meaning and value.

Australian Justine Cooper, currently artist-in-residence at the Center for Medical Simulation in Massachusetts in the US, recently held an exhibition entitled *Saved by*



Clockwise from left: Kate Rohde's Flourish at TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Victoria; Rohde's In My Nature; Jane Gillings's Barn Owl.

Science. Throughout the course of a year, she photographed some rarely seen collections at the

American Museum of Natural History, including elephant skulls in the attic, a trophy room full of deer and moose and a long shelf of preserved honey-eaters. These works bring us back to the concept of desire. It is human urge to wish to collect unusual and strange objects from the natural world. And yet collecting such grotesque and deformed examples of animals, insects and birds somehow seems unscrupulous, if not obscene. It is the obscenity and vulgarity in the work of all these artists using animals that reveals new truths about human nature.

Whether intended or not, some of the creatures in Weaver's work take on sexually implicit anthropomorphic attitudes. In her 2008 work *From the House of Fabius Rufus*, two crocheted birds in sequins and embroidery (the perfect lovers) are placed together, intimately. As Weaver explains: "They can never be physically connected or part of each other completely." The narrative and sexual

tension provide the work with potency. Her *Sacred Kingfisher* is made from a gradation of blue sequins, which changes barometrically with inclement weather, but this can also be seen as a mating ritual. These connotations are far from negative and are also a replication of existing absurdities in nature.

"What I've always really loved," Rohde says, "is the challenge of using unnatural and cheap materials to recreate the richness of the world ... based more on fantasy than any real

world experience. So many childhood stories feature the friendly animal companion and I always wished animals were more like that in real life." So whether animals are objects of

sexual or emotional desire, the wish to make them ornate and colourful, feathery and furry, is at the heart of animalia love.

Fabulous creatures in ornate outlandish costumes and fantasy worlds full of brightly plumed birds and fluorescent green kangaroos touch our hearts. Theatrical, camp performance pieces with piles of sequins, glitter and silver silk provide a change from the grey dullness of city lives. Cuddly and cute, silky and glittery, soft and alluring, animals fulfil a human desire for perfection. Artifice is the art. ■

Beastly tales

Meet the Australian artists who share a common fascination with all creatures stuffed and mounted.

Words: Prue Gibson

Kitsch is making a comeback in contemporary art. Cute fake animals, reams of faux fur and gaudy bird species are popping up with increasing regularity – the more ornate and glitzy the better. So what is the attraction of the vulgar beauty of artificial nature? Why does everyone love sweet, small animals?

Most animals are lovable because they are diminutive and vulnerable. They wave paws and cock ears, they have fur and they purr. There is a theory that humans like small creatures as part of a natural instinct to protect the longevity of all species. And then some beings, such as the bunny rabbit, have been a symbol for sexual longing in movies and art. But little mammals and frail

birds also represent a nostalgic desire for the past, a time when we were young and free to play with pets and be immersed in nature. Remember the TV series *Skippy*?

There has been a rash of artists working with animals lately and this trend is not specific to Australia. British art brat Damien Hirst, whose cabinets of unnatural wonders are an ode to the natural history museum, has made good use of animals in his work. Sharks, cows, steers, sheep and pigs have reared their deathly heads in his exhibitions, in both preserved and semi-preserved states. This choice of subject has as much to do with kitsch irony as it does with shock and horror.