

UNIVERSAL STATUARY

The Work of Matthew Groves

by
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“Think of this world... Then take it all away... Think of the universe itself. Then take away all the planets and the stars, take away every form of matter and energy, take away space itself and take away time. What is left? All that one might say is left is the absence of all these things. Now take away this absence. Nothing is left. Non-Being. So Being is what we have instead of this. Your Being and mine, the Being of our world.”—Frederick Buechner

Last fall I visited the exhibition “Universal Statuary” at the Chicago Cultural Center in Chicago, Illinois, which featured work by Matthew Groves. Groves grew up in England, graduating with a master’s degree in ceramics and glass from the Royal College of Art in London and moved to the US in the mid 1990s. He has been in Chicago for the past sixteen years. For eight of those years, he worked at The Field Museum, with two years spent working on the “Sue Project,” the world’s largest and most complete Tyrannosaurus Rex specimen. Groves was part of a team that reconstructed the fossil remains for scientific and research purposes. He also worked in the Replication Shop at the museum making items for exhibitions. It only makes sense that a person who has spent so much time touching, assembling, and recreating monumentally historical objects belonging to a species that lived, grew, and died out, has come to question what makes us human, ponder the brutality of our species, and to reflect on our own mortality.

It was difficult to walk into this exhibition and not immediately drift toward a sort of religious reflection based on the overarching themes of death and mortality. In the room, thirteen sculptures, about two feet each in height, sweep around the walls of the room, each possessing a perspective on the human condition: burdens from our past affecting our future, being unnoticed by society, the inevitability of death, the depraved spirit within each of us, and pride. Each piece captures facets of the human condition in varying degrees of formality.

Groves’ work is not charming; it is grotesque and troubling to look at. With that said, it is also exquisite and captivating. They are a far cry from the saccharine figures out of the Staffordshire tradition which Groves somewhat references, but carry the same

markings of painstakingly perfect execution. His figures are dark, questioning, and at times disturbing—some are the substance of nightmares, some are specters of coveted fantasies; several of them, half human and half monster, covered in chains, shake their fist at the viewer, as if vowing revenge for their present petrified condition. These figures rest between the worlds of life and death.

One of the most interesting pieces in the show is the collection of statues around/within a fireplace mantel. Two of the most skillfully crafted pieces, *Ignorant Skeleton* and *Pensive Skeleton*, rest on either side of the top of the mantel, while the piece *I’m On Fire* sits below in the firebox. *Ignorant Skeleton*, on the left side of

the mantel, stands, hands outstretched, with his cloak gently sliding off of his shoulders, revealing the superbly detailed frame of the skeleton, it’s as if he doesn’t quite know what has happened to him and how he arrived here. The *Pensive Skeleton* rests his frail elbow on a plinth, more aware of his situation. He looks tired, waiting. The irony is thick, since Death hadn’t quite finished him off and he seems to be pondering what has happened in life, things no longer in his control. Below sits a goblin on a coffin-like hearth, with smoldering wisps of smoke wafting up from the myriad of burnt matchsticks underneath him, looking at the viewer as if his internal (or actual) hell is just beginning. It was in this piece, *I’m On Fire*, that I first recognized an uncanny likeness between the figure in the sculpture and the figure of Matthew Groves himself.

Upon seeing Groves’ work for the first time, I assumed he

was using found plaster molds and recreating them into his own work. After speaking with him a bit, I realized he sometimes creates a positive sculpture form out of an oil-based clay (or at times plaster), casts the original sculpture (or creates smaller sculptures he can use in parts) in plaster and then uses the plaster casts as press molds, working with low-fire clay to create their final form. The fact these sculptures are cast from sculpted originals removes some of the hand work from the piece. That is not to say that these aren’t meticulously crafted or even made by hand, but rather, they imply a sort of detachment from the personal: a sense of being one step removed. Perhaps, in a way, even Groves is trying to gain a



1 Mantel with *Ignorant Skeleton*, *Pensive Skeleton*, and *I’m On Fire*.
2 *Earthly Glory (His)* and *Earthly Glory (Hearse)*, 27 in. (68 cm) in height, glazed earthenware, 2013.

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3 *Stat-You*, 27 in. (68 cm) in height, glazed earthenware, 2013. 4 *Mock Tudor*, 27 in. (68 cm) in height, glazed earthenware, 2012. 5 *The Execution*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, glazed earthenware, 2013. 6 Installation view of south wall, including from right to left, *The Execution*, *Dog Head Chains*, *Party in Chains*, and *Majolica Man*.

slightly distant perspective on his own questioning of life. Additionally, these small statuary are an interesting study of Groves immortalizing his personal history. Considering that four of the figures are representations of himself; by taking his own likeness and implementing it into his created figures, he is creating a version of himself and his history that will last beyond his own life. He is adding himself to the history he is replicating.

Some of the other delightful hidden treats of this exhibition are the familiar references via ceramics history to Groves' English heritage. Technically speaking, Groves is master in every sense of the word, and he draws you in through his sumptuous characters, which are incredible nods to many historic pieces. It is a snapshot of both English and the broader ceramics history redefined into contemporary language. Elements such as majolica (Delftware), Tang Dynasty glazes, Staffordshire bear jars and figurines, and drippy, honey-colored, lead-like earthenware glazes reappear in the form of monsters in space suits in *Party in Chains*; vague human figures rolled in grog in *Rock On*; and naked, emaciated figures that almost melt before your eyes in *Earthly Glory (His)* and *Earthly Glory (Hearse)*. Groves reaches out using these historic traditions to try to reconcile humanity and how we as individuals fit into the scope of history.

It seems to me the titles of Groves' work, which border on folksy, could be a result of sharing such personal, such deeply horrifying truths about one's fears; these are things that are too personal to share with the public. His choice of titles could be a way of deflecting his imminent mortality and the painful reality of society moving on without the individual; each of us will eventually face the same fate.

Universal Statuary is a wonderfully enticing and provocative body of work. In total, I saw this exhibition four different times during its four-month duration, each time bringing about a unique introspection and a different appreciation for it. Groves gives us a curious and dark look into the depravity and mystery of the human condition. His work poses an enigmatic question for us to reflect upon: what makes us human? Is it the commonalities each of us face, life and death, and how all of the cultures before us—for all of their differences—have felt the need to survive? Perhaps Groves creates these pieces, these statuary, these beings, to fill and hopefully answer the questions of this internal void.

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