

METROARTS & CULTURE

Breathing heroic and sinister life into the inert lump

VISUAL ARTS

CLAIRE WATSON

Ephemeral works, Counihan Gallery, 233 Sydney Road, Brunswick, until November 16

BRITT SALT

Monoform, manifold, Helen Gory Galerie, St Edmonds Road, Prahran, until November 15, helengory.com

SAM JINKS

Karen Woodbury Gallery, 4 Albert Street, Richmond, until November 8, kwgallery.com

Robert Nelson Reviewer

WHEN we look at the world, our brains are programmed to see life. When something isn't alive, we nevertheless animate it in our minds. This fascinated Leonardo da Vinci, who spoke of seeing faces amid random blotches on a wall.

When Claire Watson places a pineapple in the surf, you'd swear it was a human with a spiky haircut. Every time a wave comes along, you imagine the pineapple turning away from the impact — just as if it had a face — and taking a deep

breath before the immersion.

The bobbing and dunking of the heroic pineapple is seen in a hypnotic video at Counihan Gallery, on which Watson has gathered mostly photographic records of experiments with food. Cabbages in a forest look like souls in the woods, potatoes have their temperatures measured and jelly beans gather

in formations that make them look organised, like battalions.

The conceptual ironies in this work are explored in a useful catalogue essay by Jane O'Neill, that touches on the way food can be conditioned for consumer appeal. But before we get to this anthropomorphic manipulation in markets and manufacture, the mind has its



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own ideas and seeks intelligence in all ambiguous forms. Artists love to exploit this unconscious power of interpretation.

Take Britt Salt at Helen Gory Galerie. Her sculptural works in wire mesh are given the slightly contradictory title *Monoform: manifold*, which perfectly describes their paradoxical character. Screen mesh is bent and crimped into curious shapes, suggesting flight, cocoon-like sanctuaries and trigonometric fluxing planes. About the only connotation not present is the suburban flywire screen.

But your mind will not allow the cones and corrugations to be seen as a crumpled mess. It sees life in every ripple and busily constructs them as episodes.

The long tradition of sculpture has centred on a similar preoccupation: how to breathe life into the inert lump. Sam Jinks belongs to that lineage and more. His sculptures at Karen Woodbury Gallery are so life-like

that uncanny feelings arise in ogling the flesh. You sense you're intruding on a private space. His sculptures, like those of Ron Mueck, don't idealise, Greek-style, but show the blemishes, freckles and hairs you only see on people, never on sculptures. So Jinks almost has the opposite problem: how to contain the life he has created. Your brain doesn't have to impute life to the motionless material because the verisimilitude is so great that the eye mistakes the art for organic body presence. Instead, the sculptor actively reminds you it's a fiction by altering the scale and adding bizarre anomalies to common imagery.

Jinks attaches tattooed faces to the wall without a skull behind them. A woman is posted on a board like a science specimen, but shrunken to child size. A diminutive man asleep on a plinth has a dog's head.

An ingenious catalogue essay by Mark Feary proposes that the theme is death. He equates *Doghead* 2008 with the Egyptian

steward of the grave, Anubis. Indeed, there is something morbid in the slightly purple limp left hand, as if a clammy weakness creeps through the body and begins to isolate the spirit for the netherworld. Maybe not his spirit, because he is supernatural, but yours.

In spite of solemn archaic ancestry, the Anubis-guy is a malevolent novelty, a tricky larrikin, god spelt backwards. He's outside the realm of institutional fantasy, an undeclared 30-year-old with a canine head. He isn't like a graven statue or a vagabond dog-man such as Michael Vale's *Smoking dog* but a scale replica, with a sinister aspect. It's as if the fantasy has become too real and too snappy, where it ceases to be a social myth but lives as wicked reality in the private unconscious.

Artists make life from nothing and sometimes that nothing returns with a naughty vengeance.

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