

Jealous Saboteurs review: Francis Upritchard's forlorn figures test our empathy

by Robert Nelson



Detail of Francis Upritchard's *Jealous Saboteurs*, 2005. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki*

Francis Upritchard has modified a group of hockey sticks at MUMA to resemble a collection of exotic lizards or long missiles. The handle becomes the tail and the lopped head is split, yielding a wicked suggestion of jaws. They uncannily capture both the looks of a creature and the weapon used to kill them.

Recalling anthropological collections of spears mounted upon a wall, Upritchard's horizontal array of altered sporting gear represents injury on the wall, an arsenal of agony, vectors of grief that club the onlooker's security.

cT-imagePortrait

With the title of *Jealous saboteurs* (also used for the exhibition as a whole) these dangerous specimens retain their origins of a hockey stick, where characteristic details in the binding of the handle are not suppressed. The ambiguity of something ordinary and something outlandish keeps both alive in your imagination and the two reflect on one another.

The hockey stick takes on the hungry violence of a school of skinny fish: and meanwhile, the sea creatures – whatever they are – swim across the wall like a battalion of bruisers, serving no purpose than whacking a puck from one side of a field to another.

Simultaneously a kind of bat and a reptile, Upritchard's aesthetic concept is oxymoronic: the hockey sticks are delicately brutal, quaintly savage, decoratively dismal.



Blue and Green Scarf, 2012, by Francis Upritchard. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London*

With the title of Jealous saboteurs (also used for the exhibition as a whole) these dangerous specimens retain their origins of a hockey stick, where characteristic details in the binding of the handle are not suppressed. The ambiguity of something ordinary and something outlandish keeps both alive in your imagination and the two reflect on one another.

The hockey stick takes on the hungry violence of a school of skinny fish: and meanwhile, the sea creatures – whatever they are – swim across the wall like a battalion of bruisers, serving no purpose than whacking a puck from one side of a field to another.

Simultaneously a kind of bat and a reptile, Upritchard's aesthetic concept is oxymoronic: the hockey sticks are delicately brutal, quaintly savage, decoratively dismal.

Confounding nature and culture in this way draws out the pointlessness behind human rituals which are assumed to have a firm basis in the customary order of things. The same quizzing of natural behaviour arises with modified pool cues and other pieces of sporting equipment with allegorical imagery and titles.

Upritchard is at her strongest when most capricious. She has a curiously medieval relish in the grotesque, which toggles between the endearing and the dire, as with her figures emerging from bottles. They're playful but sinister, animating the normal with the demonic.

It could just be clever mannerism or it could be something profoundly insightful about the precariousness of the noble view that we have of ourselves. A lot hangs on Upritchard's more monumental treatment of the human figure, many examples of which populate the largest space at MUMA



Sun Worship, 2013, by Francis Upritchard. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London*

Upritchard's figures look like derelict loners who have come out of their antiquated lodgings in their pyjamas, their hand-me-downs, old coats and discarded costumes from the theatre. They live outside the self-conscious world of fashion and social convention; like statements of oblivion, they moon and stumble in their language of yesteryear, their absorption in the narrowness of their own experience, their routines and withdrawn preoccupations.

As if stumped by the obstinate self-containment of the figures, the co-curator of the exhibition, Robert Leonard, wonders if they are "Kabuki performers, dervishes, American Indians, harlequins, or hippies in technicolour dream coats, gurus or imbeciles?" He well describes the quandary with Upritchard's outsiders: do we scorn their cultural innocence or admire it?

When we encounter someone else's experience, we either fold it into our own experience or dismiss it as eccentric or alien. At her best, Upritchard tests our sympathy. When we look at her forlorn and graceless individuals, we feel called upon to resist our laughter and join these ungainly oddballs in search of their enthusiasm, their contentment, their blessed freedom from middle-class expectations.



Detail of Francis Upritchard's *Sun Worship*, 2013. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London*

At her best, Upritchard makes me feel that the abject are enviable, that their turn into social exclusion is enlightened and unburdened of vanity. As weak as they appear, they are no longer vulnerable to the competitive conventions that lock us into restless ambitions. Upritchard's work, however, is patchy. The animals made from discarded fur coats strain for a symbolic rationale; the moderne furniture seems to have no poetic justification as plinth or installation and all the works with burial artefacts, talismans and disfigured heads strike me as gratuitously gothic, without a credible link to the Maori circumstances that might have inspired them.

Co-curator (and MUMA director) Charlotte Day is correct in observing how "Upritchard evokes historical narratives and forms but subverts" them at the same time. Her works "come from a different realm, further complicating their readings as a whole". It is both a blessing and a curse, because ambiguous artwork inspires ambivalent interpretations.



Tourist, 2012, by Francis Upritchard. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London*