

Mixed Feelings

Francis Upritchard's 1970s show

Justin Paton

She sits on a raw wooden stump at the end of a long white plinth. Weirdly thin-limbed, naked except for an odd cowl hat that flops over her eyes, and painted in colours that suggest an accident in a tie-dyeing vat, she raises one arm and points a blue-and-yellow finger beyond the artwork she's part of. The gesture conveys absolute conviction in a horizon we can't see. Where is she pointing? Is she the 'leader', why does the rest of her crew pay no attention? Is she from 1973 or 73 BC? What's the hat about? And what is she doing at the helm of an exhibition in New Plymouth by New Zealand-born, London-based artist Francis Upritchard?

I want to leave those questions dangling for the moment and take a small trip back in time. An indulgent trip, possibly, but so much has been said about Upritchard in the past few years – so many excitable magazine profiles, so many repetitions of that phrase 'rising star' – that some detours into new territory seem called for, and with this one I'd like to travel back to the 1970s. Not to the decade itself but to the show, and not to the well-known television show but the social history show called 'Out on the Street: New Zealand in the 1970s', which was on view a few years ago at The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. Te Papa is often skewered for its treatment of art, but my anxieties this time were aimed elsewhere. With eight years experience of the 1970s to my credit, I felt almost proprietary about this chunk of social history, and I climbed Te Papa's stairs expecting to bristle. Instead I found

myself responding with gawking and involuntary fascination, as I sighted an exact shade of burnt orange I didn't know was still buried in memory, ran my eyes over the weirdly familiar textures of flammable furniture fabric, or remembered with an appalled shock the Neanderthal look of 1970s news footage, with its gluey colours and hairy presenters. It wasn't just that I recognised this stuff. It seemed to be recognising *me*.

But the deeper I went in the show, the less I recognised – or, to put it more self-centredly, the less of me the show seemed to recognise. The issue wasn't a lack of material. From furniture and record covers to applied arts and television footage, the exhibition had a richness and reach that make most white-cube gallery exhibitions look ungenerous. It covered political protest, nuclear testing, communitarian values, home-grown music, geodesic domes, radical theatre, the lot. It was chock-a-block with pinpoint-detailed social history.

And there, for me, lay the problem.

Leaving Te Papa's show, you would have thought that every citizen of the 1970s daily stepped out of a geodesic dome in their bell-bottom trousers, clutching an album by The Plastic Ono Band under one arm and a copy of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* under the other, shouldered their way past anti-abortion protestors and headed out for a day of bra-burning, cheese fondue cook-offs and macramé lessons. But that New Zealand was simply not visible from the windows of the house in the Christchurch suburb of Richmond where I grew up.

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Francis Upritchard, Clan of Rob, 2007,
modelling material, foil, wire, paint,
35 x 28 x 27 cm, courtesy the artist and Kate
MacGarry, London

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Francis Upritchard, Reacher, 2008, 'rainwob
' series, modelling material, paint, steel,
50.5 x 20 x 32.5 cm, courtesy the artist and
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

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Francis Upritchard, Save yourself, 2003,
mixed media installation, 'Beck's Futures 2003',
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London,
courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

There, *Rainbow* was not a wholefoods cooperative but a children's television show imported from Britain. The nearest we came to a geodesic dome was the bubble house you passed on the road south out of Christchurch each holiday and which became a burger bar in the 1980s. My main mental picture of hippies came from parodies of American campus life in *Mad* magazine, and was replaced in the early 1980s by yet another parody when the punkish *The Young Ones* arrived on New Zealand television and with it the dreary hippy, Neil. In other words, for me, and I suspect many others, the official versions of the 1960s and 1970s arrived back-to-front, upside-down, late, and mistranslated.

This is the problem with 'decade' shows like 'Out on the Street'. They compress an era's flashpoints into a vision so busy and boiling there is no sense of measure or respite. It's like being in a period movie with an overenthusiastic art director, where every frame is packed with details that scream 'authentic'. In their frantic eagerness to place us in the thick of the action, these exhibitions fail to evoke what happens when 'nothing' appears to be happening: the negative epiphanies, the stretches of downtime. Of course we all dream of being there at the epicentre when the news is made and the culture shifts course. But wouldn't it be interesting for once, and potentially as consciousness-raising, to see a social history exhibition that, instead of evoking how it was for the few people who were there for the main events, rather evoked the impact of those events on everyone who *wasn't* there – the way the big themes of a decade were distorted by distance, picked up in fragments, and above all reshaped in memory.

But there are no such social history shows, or none I've encountered. This is one reason we turn to novels, to ride through a time and place inside another consciousness. This is also why we turn to artworks, to see what happens to the big picture when it's focused down through the idiosyncratic lens of one imagination. And this is why, as I walked around Te Papa, I began to dream of another version of the 1970s exhibition: the same exhibition, but infiltrated here and there by art that I think of as being of but not *from* the 1970s. In the fashion section, you'd encounter the funereal fashion models in Yvonne Todd's 'The Book of Martha' (see *Art & Australia* Autumn 2008), who look as if they had their hair set and make-up done back in 1973 and haven't moved since. In the alternative lifestyles section, you'd crouch down to enter the cardboard geodesic domes in Bekah Carran's wonderful installation *Welcome home my beautiful optimist*, 2006, which replays Buckminster Fuller's utopian structures as a rainy-day shelter. On the walls throughout, you'd encounter paintings by Saskia Leek, whose hesitant brushstrokes and wan colour seem to retrieve images just before they fade entirely from memory. And finally, I'd invade a far corner of the exhibition with some of the long-limbed, fine-featured, psychedelically coloured figures that have recently wobbled from Francis

Upritchard's studio and into art-world prominence. How beautifully confusing that would have been, among the peace posters and newspaper clippings, to find yourself surrounded by figures that seem to come simultaneously from the recent and distant past. Antiquities from the Age of Aquarius.

From Upritchard's wonky idols to Leek's pale views, it's a safe bet that no-one will be consulting these artists for reliable data on the period. But all four offer something equally valuable: not documentary accounts of how it felt at that moment but vivid portraits of how they feel – or can't decide they feel – about that moment today. 'There's no place that the past can take place except right now' runs a wonderful line of Robert Duncan's, and the period spanning the mid-1960s and mid-1970s is taking place right now in a startling number of studios. You see this in Jim Lambie's ragtag psychedelia, in Sam Durant's ambivalent reprisals of civil rights protests, in Dane Mitchell's anatomies of New Age belief, and the works of too many other artists to name. You see it in the novel *My Revolutions* (2007), which Upritchard's former partner, Hari Kunzru, was researching at the same time Upritchard was bringing this body of work to life. Why this fascination among artists born mostly in the late 1960s or early 1970s? Perhaps it's because we're especially drawn to the period just before we become adults, which exerts a kind of tyrannical glamour while we're young. Perhaps it's because incoming news about dwindling resources and the price of unbridled individualism make the period's communitarian dreams newly inspiring. Perhaps it's because the collapse of those dreams is itself so fascinating – the embarrassing speed with which a social movement devolved into fashion and New Age self-obsession.

Whatever the answer, this much is clear. In Upritchard's vision of the counter-cultural past, everything is subtly but decisively bent. Her approach is all there in miniature in her exhibition's title, where she takes the second half of 'rainbow' and turns it around. Where 'rainbow' has an ending that sounds open and expansive, 'wob' brings the word back to earth, with its echoes of blobs, gobbets, thingamabobs, and fainter echoes of 'wobble' and 'what'. As atmospheric phenomena that hover in the air after rain, rainbows made a perfect symbol of rejuvenation and spiritual aspiration in the art and culture of the 1960s and 1970s. But precisely because rainbows are atmospheric and immaterial, there's something oddly humiliating about all attempts to bring them to earth through representation. The centrepiece of Upritchard's show 'rainwob i' is a knot of wood so ingrown and back-bent you can't help feeling vague affection for whoever decided it was worth a coat of colour. Like the faded rainbow mural in Peter Doig's painting *Country rock*, 1998–99, or the rainbow curving faintly across an immense graffitied wall in Nigel Cooke's *Smile for the monkey man*, 2001–02, the rainbows embellishing Upritchard's tree stump are emphatically faded and forlorn. Yet despite that – maybe even because of it – a glimmer of faith in the shopworn symbol comes through.

art feature



Like their tree, the inhabitants of rainwob teeter between optimism and absurdity. Rolled and kneaded from a substance that looks a lot like home-made childhood playdough but goes by the name Super Sculpey, they don't gather so much as wait around on the surface of an enormous white plinth. The first of their kind came into view in Upritchard's presentation of 'Plastic People' in 2007 in London, a show whose unlikely stars included the fruit-and-veg-coloured *Amelia* and another called *Clan of Rob*, apparently in homage to Upritchard's brother Robert. Tottering forward on comically inadequate legs with palms upturned and eyes blankly staring, Amelia appears to be drawing down some higher force and bringing it direct to us. With his pond-weed beard and lank hair-band, *Clan of Rob* suggests a guru gone to seed, his shaggy vitality long since given way to heavy-lidded introversion. Only after looking for a while does one register fully the bizarre elongation of his arms, a detail so subtly dislocating it feels like you too have briefly entered whatever dreamy, psychotropic state he inhabits.

Rob is the most compelling of the Plastic People – the stringy king of the commune – and his strange mix of potential and passivity infuses the six sculpted figures in 'rainwob i'. A knock-kneed centaur hangs around, its human head and torso apparently bored by the sexual needs of its horsy lower half. A naked yellow dude with thinning hair pisses along one leg onto a colossal tengallon hat. A crayon-blue woman called Rona raises her hand to beg, or maybe test for rain. And near the front of the plinth lies what looks like one of the smooth Taranaki stones made famous by New Zealand painter Michael Smither – here reincarnated with lips and eyes. Backdropped by that spindly tree, these figures collectively evoke a commune in its hangover days, when the crops have failed, the body paint is fading, and disagreements have broken in on the old dream of togetherness. I'm reminded of Swedish filmmaker Lukas Moodysson's simultaneously tender and angry *Together* (2000), set in a commune in Stockholm in the 1970s. 'Porridge together is better than pork cutlets alone' says the commune's gentle leader, Göran, as he stirs a pot of clammy oatmeal under the noses of some singularly unimpressed kids, a scene that manages at once to chide the credulity of the counter-culture, marvel at the simple generosity of the thought, and sum up why artists of Upritchard's and Moodysson's generation – just a few years younger than the kids in the scene – might be at once so attracted to and ambivalent about that time and its hopes. In Upritchard's account, as in Moodysson's, admiration for old hopes mingles with knowledge of their failure, and weird distractions keep crowding in on the official version.

It's as if, in addition to the archival, social-history version of a decade, there is also the shadow decade – the decade as it lives in our memories and dream lives, full of misunderstandings, mis-rememberings and unpredictable jumps of focus. This dream-life is *especially* vivid in the minds of those who were not quite there; they have no choice but to reinvent that moment from whatever facts and fragments are at their disposal. Take, for example, Upritchard's *Zippy house*, 2008, a weird little structure that merges the utopian look of geodesic dome homes and Bucky Fuller 'dwelling machines' with the idiotically agreeable face of Zippy, the puppet from the 1970s British television show *Rainbow*. In this object, the television Upritchard watched as a kid born in 1976 seems to bleed back into what she knows 'officially' of the period, with thoroughly confusing results. Is she saying that the highest aim of the period's visionary architects amounted to nothing more than child's play? Or that popular culture trivialised those hopes? Or simply playing this material for laughs? The problem with this mode of questioning is that it assumes artists think the same way as their explainers – that they homework their material, weigh the evidence, then lay out a position. But it's impossible to interrogate Upritchard's absurdist objects without feeling slightly absurd yourself, and that's exactly where Upritchard wants us. 'I don't research because I don't want to get it right', she has said, a statement pitched directly against the anxiously explanatory rhetoric she encountered at art school in the 1990s. Far from providing answers, she wants her figures to *be* the questions. In each of the 'rainwob' figures we see an artist wondering in three dimensions about the past and its presence now. The sculptures are mixed feelings made real.

The fact they are so emphatically *made* is what makes Upritchard's tale of the recent past convincing. Where earlier works relied more on comic juxtapositions and deliberately gruesome or jokey distortions, the main new in Upritchard's recent shows has been the delicacy and subtle oddness of her modelling in soft substances like clay, leather and natural rubber. The soft pinch that creates a nose, the puttying of a too-thin arm, the almost dainty inadequacy of a hand or foot: these details tell us something about the individual characters, certainly, but more importantly they tell a story about their maker. Constantly in these works, Upritchard seems to be feeling around in her materials for faces and bodies she can only partly recall. There are hints and flashes of far older objects – limewood saints, time-smoothed

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The most compelling recent figurative sculpture in New Zealand has tended towards the armoured and impervious, as in Michael Parekowhai's gleaming mannequins, or the forensically gruesome, as in Ronnie van Hout's pores-and-all self-portraits. But Upritchard's figures – so small they're really figurines – are much less sure of themselves. And this physical uncertainty, more than the hippy trappings or acid-dream colours, gives 'rainwob i' its pathos and comedy.



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Hittite bronzes, praying figures from Ur, medieval figures carved in bone. But no sooner do such connections rise into view than they subside again into the material, as if whatever precedent Upritchard was reaching for had just slipped from her fingers.

There are plenty of painters who set up this kind of conversation between materials and memory; I think again of how Saskia Leek's hesitant brushstrokes bring all-but-forgotten images back into view. But, perhaps simply because it costs so much more to improvise in three dimensions than on a small square of canvas, it is much rarer to encounter this impressionistic quality in sculpture. The most compelling recent figurative sculpture in New Zealand has tended towards the armoured and impervious, as in Michael Parekowihi's gleaming mannequins, or the forensically gruesome, as in Ronnie van Hout's pores-and-all self-portraits. But Upritchard's figures – so small they're really figurines – are much less sure of themselves. And this physical uncertainty, more than the hippy trappings or acid-dream colours, gives 'rainwob i' its pathos and comedy. The figures waver and wander. They gesture outwards, yet seem too reedy and vulnerable to respond to any contact if it comes. They have soft froggy fingers and inadequate legs, as if caught out of their element. Their large heads suggest the mushrooming insights and oh-wow brainswells of full-time stoners, so mesmerised by their own thought patterns that other people become unreal to them. And this tension between togetherness and solipsism carries through to their placement on the colossal white plinth, not quite close enough to resemble a community but not dispersed enough to suggest total solitude.

This alone, however, doesn't explain the size of the plinth, which really is excessive. I realise I'm in danger of making too much sense of an artist who often likes to make none at all, but for me the key to the plinth is the *Reacher*, 2008, we encountered earlier. Obviously the plinth recalls the displays found in antiquities museums, those pristine structures designed to support a few time-worn fragments. But, with this figure stationed at one end with three solemn-faced lamps for company, the plinth also becomes a vessel moving through the gallery – part lifeboat, part escape craft, part ship of fools. And it's here, for me, that 'rainwob i' starts to line up tellingly with Upritchard's earlier works. Made not long after the artist had moved from New Zealand to 'the mother country', Upritchard's sculptures of the early 2000s, among them *Save yourself*, evoked the fag-ends of colonial adventure. With her stuffed exotic creatures, shrivelled souvenirs and the shrunken heads of European colonists, she offered comically glum and moth-eaten evidence of the nineteenth-century desire to strike out and civilise the 'New World'. Five years on, with 'rainwob i', she evokes the attempts made a century later to escape that very civilisation – the counter-cultural desire to cast away from the cities in search of less 'unnatural' ways of living. Between the two bodies of work, a rough genealogy emerges. What are her shrunken nineteenth-century colonists, if not the ancestors of the hippy seekers on the good ship *Rainwob* ...

One can't mention the plinth without mentioning the seat bolted to the front of it. Made of unpainted timber and draped with grey blankets and sheepskin rugs, it suggested two things to me straight away when I saw it in New Plymouth: a bench seat in a pick-up truck, and a couch on the verandah of a retirement home. With the first possibility comes a suggestion of movement, of heading out west with the 'windshield wipers slappin' time'. And with the second comes a suggestion of sunset stillness, of sitting resignedly as the light subsides. Of course the seat also offers kids the chance to kneel and look back at the sculptures at their own height – a family-friendly sort of gesture. But Upritchard offsets the friendliness by inviting grown-up gallery-goers to do the rudest thing possible – turn our backs on the art. And paradoxically, it's only when you do so that Upritchard's comedy of the past comes into full focus. As we've seen, Upritchard's figures have a half-remembered quality even when seen directly. But by turning us away from the art, she pushes the rainwobbers even farther into that indistinct realm. They become strange and persistent ghosts, literally milling at the back of your mind.

In the end the most charged space is not on the sculpture but ahead of it. It's the space you stare at from the seat, and the space *Reacher* points out into. This gesture is almost a Upritchard trademark, a long-armed reaching that's especially eloquent in the figures she made from natural rubber during a Brazilian residency in 2004. Robed like desert prophets, they lift their long arms sideways in gestures of doomy conviction. As in so many ancient sculptures, there's a poignant tension between the absolute certainty of their pointing and our absolute uncertainty about what they're pointing to. There they stand, striving to direct our attention offstage to some impending disaster. And there we stand, staring at them.

So while her companions mull their obsessions farther back on the raft, Upritchard's *Reacher* lifts one thin arm and points towards a space and time beyond this exhibition. To hear the bleakest commentators talk, the extent of the human future is rapidly shrinking. I suspect the late 1960s and early 1970s loom in the imaginations of many artists right now because people then appear to have had a less cautious and embarrassed sense of the future and its possibilities. There's a wonderfully withdrawn and inward quality to most of the 'rainwob' sculptures, each one tuned to their own psychic frequency. But I like this *Reacher* – or perhaps she is an overreacher – for at least pointing towards that unnamed future space. And by turning us away from the art to face the same space, Upritchard makes sure we too have our chance to puzzle over what is coming.

Francis Upritchard, *rainwob ii*, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne, 8 August – 6 September 2008; Artspace, Sydney, 4–26 April 2008; Francis Upritchard, *rainwob i*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand, 1 March – 18 May 2008.

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Francis Upritchard, *rainwob i*, 2008,
installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery,
New Plymouth, courtesy the artist and Govett-
Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.