

KATE MACGARRY

Francis Upritchard Kate MacGarry *London*

Francis Upritchard has often been cast by critics as a voodoo priestess, enchanting the detritus of everyday life, slipping the manna of indigenous art into cheap tourist trinkets, creating talismans out of trash. 'Echo', her third solo show at Kate MacGarry, brought her sensitivity to the discipline of sculpture to the fore, mixing supernatural flight with formal control.

Figures of hippies and fools clamour for enlightenment in postures of surrender, ascetism and excess. As though dwarfed by the enormity of their own spiritual quests, they are small in scale, most no taller than 60cm. Upritchard – a London-based New Zealander who represented her country at the 2009 Venice Biennale – is exact though refuses to be polished; there is pathos in these figures' mottled and painterly surfaces. Their bodies and faces are scarred by the long search for a Utopia that won't appear.

Breath (2011), for example, comprises an elderly hippy, about the size of baby doll, who lies prostrate on a table; rigor mortis seems to be setting in, curling his delicate toes and fingers, transforming his flesh and hair into a rainbow of colour. Death has made him vivid. Sacred artefacts and broken rubbish lie around him: a demonically grinning toy, a purse, a sliver of tooth. These objects, both made and found by the artist, are designed to carry the dead man into the afterlife. They seem gestures of a futile though necessary spirituality. Close by, *The Misanthrope* (2011) stares at the wall, covered by an acid-yellow tie-dye hood, his face barely revealed to the viewer. I had to awkwardly crane my neck to see his expression, as though intruding on a deep, hostile kind of solitude. Animistic or simply materialistic, here meaning is invested in possessions. A silver chain with a tiny turquoise charm droops out of his pocket. The misanthrope is the archetype who turns away from humanity, repulsed by what we have become.

Upritchard has said that, for her, 'The hippy is a point of failure.' In a recent

interview, the artist remarked: 'All the things that the hippies hoped would happen, or felt might happen, didn't. Now they are trying to do it on an individual level, but they are still failing.' Like Paul Thek's *The Tomb (Dead Hippie)* (1967), a long-haired wax mannequin which was modelled on the artist himself, Upritchard's sculptures seems to indict the political naivety of the 1960s and '70s. Nostalgia is sharply revoked, even killed off.

Echo Cabinet (2011) shows John the fool and Mervyn the knowing jester cavorting, crippled and grimacing, atop an exquisite Italian-oak table, designed by the artist. Their unchoreographed moves are jerky and isolated, perhaps mad. The fool is the archetype of the child-like desire for experience; he is often in danger of wandering off a precipice. The compact though beautifully lit gallery space seems vast in comparison to their tiny bodies. Like Erasmus Grasser's medieval sculptures of Morris dancers, a source of inspiration for Upritchard, Mervyn and John appear part of a ritual performance, albeit one half-remembered. Their bodies are aged yet ape the exuberance of youth.

Upritchard works mainly in Super Sculpey, a polymer clay. Her awkward dolls are alarming yet vague; they seem to be imbued with a desperate bid for life, rather than life itself; a desperate bid to know and not know. The single moment of communion in the show occurs between two decapitated heads, part of a mock-indigenous necklace fashioned out of a tennis racket (*Men Who Hongi*, 2006). The heads touch noses, about to kiss. On closer inspection, they are not lovers, but twins, each an imperfect image of the other. Here is Upritchard's echo, a truncated narcissus gazing at his own reflection.

The eeriness of the work belies its political urgency. If the countercultural movements of the 1960s sought to liberate the collective as well as the individual soul, to give social meaning to the notion of losing oneself, now a nihilistic darkness prevails. Such a darkness is evident in these figures' inward-looking eyes.

Zoe Pilger

Winner of the Frieze Writer's Prize 2011

