

Sourced from DVD Work: The Joy of Beauty

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Me and my big head

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An artist's talk for the Hatched Symposium at PICA

One of the obvious questions that arises with respect to my current art activity, is why the huge head? So I'll begin by explaining how I got to that point.

During my studio practice of 2003, I indulged a compulsion to anthropomorphise all manner of blobs and lumps leading to an array of imperfect beings. Forms and materials evolved into vulnerable, desiring, unstable bodies through a process of three dimensional trash doodling combined with warped visions resulting from the detritus of consumer culture. The creatures or human surrogates were utilised in installations or tableaux to investigate human concerns exposing an underbelly of anxiety and pathos. Humour masking a more serious intent pervaded this work.

The bobbleheaded character or extension of myself developed from a desire to animate and enliven the lumpy, malformed creatures pieced together during my studio research. I dreamt of being skilled in animatronics and even considered using computer animation but I like the properties of certain materials and I love making objects by hand and I soon realised I lacked the patience and interest in becoming absorbed in those kind of technicalities. I was bereft of the resources of someone like Patricia Piccinini to enable me to engage the assistance of others. So I proceeded to construct sculptural extensions around the human body. The human body in question was usually my own, the form of which I covered and altered, in this particular case with a series of large prosthetic heads with the intention of performing as a sculpture to camera. I began with no particular desire for a big round head but my working process often involves me sitting in my studio and wondering what I can do with what I have. I happened to have purchased a faulty Gym ball for 98 cents and that seemed the obvious starting point so I set to with the papier-mache. That was the beginning of a ball that is still rolling.

Bobblehead donned a series of charming outfits either made by myself or purchased from Op Shops often in colours matching the paint job on the head. Firstly, I made a series of videos and video stills based around the peregrinations of this mute, feckless, lurking creature hovering around the fringes of art events in Adelaide followed by some appearances in the streets. I was concerned with stupidity, embarrassment, disguise, the presence of the outsider. This was combined a curiosity about aberration, abnormality, marginal states and social deviation and how those things might manifest in a public space.....and how people react or don't react.

These acts of appearing proved a useful exercise in testing the limits of my capacity to perform in front of an audience. Being a very shy person the head enabled me to do and be things that otherwise were not possible and encouraged me to continue the use of my body as a sculptural element and develop this highly functional alter ego which has come to be known as bobblehead. Curiously enough, my 'liberated performing self' ensconced in the trappings of this particular alter ego is still quite hesitant, shy and mostly hovers alone or engages in solitary activities. But without the disguise of the head I wouldn't be there at all!

It is these solitary activities in the studio coupled with an admiration for the art of Erwin Wurm and his ideas about presenting sculpture as photomedia that drove my Honours project. I remember puzzling over the fact

that I had a degree in visual arts “specialising in sculpture” yet, despite being quite accomplished at manipulating materials and constructing all sorts of weird objects I actually knew next to nothing about the concepts and principles of traditional sculpture. Much of Erwin Wurm’s works (particularly his one minute sculptures) *play with these classic parameters of sculpture such as gravity, weight, statics, stability, equilibrium, materiality and form.

Activities which involve persons using proscribed objects in a sculptural context is a fundamental aspect of Erwin Wurm’s field of vision. Another central concern is with innovations in sculpture and how it might be conceived as sudden and momentary. The work can come in the form of directions or drawings for a performance or enactments of processes for short moments which are often photographed or filmed for further presentation. Wurm retains a connection with the notion of traditional sculpture while investigating the relationship between performance, sculpture and photography.

So, with a nod to Erwin Wurm my area under investigation became one within which sculpture ceased to be a static object and became a dynamic act through the introduction of ideas of process, action and the living body. The building of sculptural forms and extensions around the body to create animated sculpture propelled my object/installation based practice into the area of performative sculpture. The presentation takes the form of video or sometimes photographic stills as the actual artwork, rather than the physical apprehension of the sculpture or performance by an audience. For me this eliminates an element of risk associated with live performance which I would prefer to avoid.

In some works Erwin Wurm uses traditional sculptural methods such as subtraction and addition of material in relation to form but in an ephemeral way well suited to photographic representation. The use of elimination and addition of non-traditional material in relation to the body took prominence in the series of ‘make-over’ actions in my video *The Joy of Beauty* shown here in the HATCHED 05 exhibition. The cosmetic and surgical processes involved in reshaping the body strike me as very similar to some of those used in sculpture....cutting, chiselling, filling, smoothing and decorating as well as the aforementioned manipulation of form.

The proliferation of ‘make-over’ shows on television has increased our exposure to plastic and reconstructive surgery affecting the ways in which we think about the appearance of human beings. The joy of beauty video shows a lo-fi humorous approach to solving the dilemmas of bodily dissatisfaction. The cute/pathetic creature engages in a series of home beauty treatments involving body sculpture and surface enhancement. The work doesn’t seek to critique all attempts at aesthetic improvement but considers the inherent potential for both pleasure and disgust. The joy of beauty is a response to the situation where a multi-million dollar advertising industry promotes an often singular, ideal view of beauty and offers an alternative of sorts!

Whatever I attempt to do in my art practice I seem utterly incapable of getting away from issues relating to human appearance and transformation. I am currently further exploring the use of the alter ego and how it functions in contemporary art practice. By having a deeper understanding of the implications and possibilities surrounding the subject I anticipate that my own development of fictional selves will be enhanced and next year me and my alter egos are planning a group exhibition.

