

All Flocked Up...

Inga Walton

The sculptures of Sydney-based Adam Laerkesen have a fairytale or dreamlike quality to them; strangely beautiful half-remembered fragments that nonetheless have a somewhat sinister edge. Stillness, an ominous quietude, and overtones of the gothic permeate the works which, "...ask the viewer to experience and think in new and divergent ways. This allows the possibility of the unconscious to manifest itself, giving space for poetic possibilities and the unfurling of the mysterious", he says enigmatically.

Laerkesen variously utilises flock, plaster, cast resin and foam, wood, forton, bone, and found objects to realise his intriguing creations. The materials are combined in such a way as to imply a synergy between the real and the imagined, the synthetic and the natural, the recognisable and the unsettling. "I create sculpture out of instinct, intuition and vision...The work itself has an open-ended quality allowing the viewer to imbue it with their own poetry and imagination", he remarks. "It is my intention that the viewer's initial response be experienced through the body; a haptic response, which bypasses the intellect, allowing the viewers' senses to reveal themselves through the art work". Ideas of impermanence and transition are conveyed in the apparent delicacy of the structures, "I think the tactility and fragility of my work gives it a vulnerability which is a very human condition. So the tension arises with the immediate urge to touch the works, yet their fragility acts as an inhibitor to this impulse", Laerkesen believes. "Even though these works have a strangeness to them, there is also an openness and familiarity within them allowing the audience to engage".

Laerkesen's practice makes reference to concepts articulated by French phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61), in that he seeks to unite the visible and the invisible, embracing the symbolic and transcending the literal. "In past exhibitions I've played with the idea of mutating nature through my sculpture, revealing its forces", he observes, "In this context, the gallery space could be seen as a laboratory where experiments on nature have been carried out, albeit poetic ones". "Animist Exodus" is Laerkesen's début solo show in Melbourne, comprising wall-mounted works, free-standing pieces, and some suspended installations. "I wanted the exhibition to have a loose narrative as if these creatures were in flight or fleeing, as if travelling to some destination- from one world to the next, seeking...". he explains. "The animist component of the title relates to the visual and conceptual aspect of the work, creating a sense of 'otherness', as if they were spirits. My ambition is eventually to travel to Japan to study their relationship to nature, art and animism".

The monkey and the deer are among Laerkesen's most consistent motifs, "I've been using stags since 2005. The inspiration to use these majestic forms came from memories and narratives from my father and his father, who was the Ranger to the King of Denmark [under Frederik VIII and Christian X] on the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea, where my Grandfather lived all his life", he relates. "At an early age I remember seeing photographs of my Grandfather's collection of antlers in the hunting lodge which were always a mystery to me. Years later I found a way of representing these early poignant memories in my work." This year Laerkesen received a commission for a large-scale representation of the spiritual epiphany of St. Eustace, who encountered a vision of Christ between the antlers of a stag while out hunting in Tivoli; he was martyred in AD 118 on the orders of the Emperor Hadrian. "The story of St Eustachius represents a sublime and daunting moment of surrender to an overwhelming vision...that is why I have chosen to represent him naked, to symbolize and elevate this experience. I am fascinated that so many spiritual visions are encountered in nature".

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Adam LAERKESEN,
Holiday Snap 2009,
82 x 24 x 38 cm,
material flock, plaster, resin, glass eyes.
Photography: Andrew Frollovs



For "Holiday Snap" (2009), a monkey wearing a spiked crown sits nonchalantly atop a memento mori skull covered in bright orange fabric, "On a visual level, the vervet monkey attracts me because it has this ethereal, spirit-like quality to it, and yet it also has strong humanistic associations as well", Laerkesen comments. "The monkey represents a kind of innocence which is elevated as it sits unconsciously and unaware on the symbol of mortality".

There is a distinctly funereal aesthetic present in Laerkesen's exploration of cartonnage, mummification, bandages, and layering. Wrapped in plaster like a damaged limb, or mimicking a protective cocoon, the outer shells or chrysalises seem abandoned by their occupiers. Drapery, reminiscent of shrouds, classical statuary, and the idea of a closed up house or room are also prevalent. "The notion of concealment and transformation is something that I reference in my work. The drapery is a visual device that works in two ways for me. In some sculptures it can energise the work with its movement. I was looking at [Gian Lorenzo] Bernini's work a lot and responded to the drama and theatricality...", he offers. "Drapery can lead the eye around the work in a very energetic and sensual way...In this instance it can symbolise the mystery of death, but also (in the context of the animals I use) nature, or signify something which is left behind- a relic. People comment that they see an ancient quality in my work, which has lead me towards the animist aspect".

Laerkesen has been a member of The Ultimo Project Inc. (founded in 1985) for six years, based around Huts 15 and 24 at the Addison Road Centre in Marrickville, a distinctive cultural precinct. "The space means a lot to me creatively because I have an immediate support group to throw around and exchange ideas about surviving in the art world. I have predominately had studios in collectives, because I find being an artist can be an isolating experience, the centre itself is a great resource for material...", he notes. The harmonious studio environment allows Laerkesen to adhere to a tight schedule, "I have recently started working on several pieces at once, primarily due to time constraints. I find this speeds up the working process and allows unexpected ideas to cross over from one work to the next. Once I have started a work, the work itself leads me to where it wants to go, so it is never usually completed how I intended it to be at the early outset", he admits. "My work is very labour-intensive because I do fiddle a lot with the elements to get it right. At the same time, I have to be very conscious not to overwork the sculpture. I enjoy the physicality of my work which I hope is picked up by the viewer".

Laerkesen's work is often informed by his fascination for figures he refers to as 'outsider artists'. "Broadly speaking, they are self-taught and are sometimes institutionalised. They often create artwork from visions, or have a religious theme, and achieve originality through their visions by mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar, which is a dominant aspect within my work. Raw Vision is a great international magazine I reference". One of Laerkesen's persistent challenges is attempting to capture elusive moments of inspiration, "I connect with these artists because the process of coming up with my concepts sometimes occurs with visions I have in an hypnagogic state", he reveals. Laerkesen's abbreviated forest of spectral branches and disconcerting creatures transports us to an arcane wonderland of possibility and divergent interpretation.

4 – 28 November, 2009 at Anita Traverso Gallery, 7 Albert Street, Richmond.

www.anitatraversogallery.com.au

Adam Laerkesen is also represented by Iain Dawson Gallery, Paddington, NSW.

www.iaindawson.com