

Sweet Monsters

the art of Dianne Longley

For the past few years, Adelaide artist Dianne Longley has been producing intriguing works combining encaustic and pokerwork on wooden panels. I first saw these works in “Sweet Monsters and ScallyWags”, at Adelaide Central Gallery in November 2006. At the time, I was a fourth year student ACSA, and Longley’s work, hung right outside my studio, provided a welcome respite in those final stressful months. Now, sometime later, Longley’s images remain with me, and as I settle at my laptop with my own Sweet Monster sitting next to me (10kg of orange feline [dis]grace,) I find I have rather a lot to write.

As always, the host of characters in Longley’s work provide much interest and speculation. The creatures in her latest instalment are at once familiar and unfamiliar: there are sphinxes, Medieval-esque hooded characters, and in one work, a monster with a face



Elemental Negotiations, pokerwork & mixed media on hoop ply, 2006

bearing an uncanny resemblance to one of the players in Maurice Sendak’s children’s classic, *Where the Wild Things Are*. Longley’s (beautifully designed) website also informs me that she has borrowed from 16th century drawings by François Rabelais and Conrad Gesner, and contemporary Japanese ‘kawaii’, pop-imagination figures and toys. Longley has chosen well, the original beasts are all in sympathy with Longley’s own drawing aesthetic, and the 16th Century European imagery somehow sits very comfortably with contemporary Japanese



pop characters. Through a long process of editing, refinement and reinvention, Longley has synthesised her host of players into new social structures and foreign landscapes.

Longley's new works are a mix of digital technology and the patiently hand crafted. Adept at combining a multitude of diverse techniques: she seems as at ease hand-planing wood for frames as she is fine-tuning her imagery in Photoshop. How is it that Longley can combine lazertran decals, encaustic, wood veneer, wax sticks and pokerwork to such effect? The results are inviting, fascinating, and surprising.



Celebration of Small Victories: a cautionary tale, pokerwork & mixed media on hoop ply, 2006

The recent works are a pleasure to look at – harmonious colour fields, mesmerising pokerwork, and creatures with enough eccentricities and flaws that the work escapes mere prettiness. For me, the meaning of these works revealed themselves gradually, sometimes obscured or distracted by little technical triumphs or puzzles. This isn't a bad thing – if the complete intended meaning of a work of art immediately hits you between the eyes, there is very little left to sustain repeat visits.

Although inhabited by otherworldly creatures, Longley's work is largely about the nature of human interactions, relationships, and human nature itself. It can be no mistake that Longley references Rabelais, known for his humanist, satirical and bawdy writings: the creatures in Longley's work are engaged in both serious and





humorous interchanges – surely a character named ‘Velour Fancy Pants’ deserves a giggle or two.

Longley follows in that long artistic tradition of depicting creatures that are half-human half-beast, and it is useful to speculate what this says about our own views on the human species. Do we recognise beastly traits in humans, or human traits in beasts? And

perhaps extra appendages such as wings, trunks, scales and horns are a device to visually express internal emotions and/or personality quirks.



Salutation, pokerwork & mixed media on Japanese ply, 2006

Longley’s art certainly makes us reassess our prejudices about the ugly and the beautiful, and the good and the bad. In fairy tale land, virtuous characters are always breathtakingly beautiful, and the evil are hideously ugly (think Cinderella and the Ugly Step Sisters.) However, in these works, traditionally ‘ugly’ monsters are seen carrying out good deeds; supporting their young on their backs, or having a kind word to

a neglected creature in the corner. Perhaps they are not all so monstrous after all. Conversely, Pikachu, the Pokemon character, (who makes repeat appearances throughout this body of work) is not as ‘cute’ as I had always perceived him to be. When I assess him in the same objective manner I have used for the other monsters, I realise that, with eyes the size of cricket balls, and ears sharpened to points that could gore you through the heart, he is no less threatening than any of the other traditionally ‘ugly’ creatures. In Longley’s world it pays to tread cautiously around the too beautiful, or too flashy, and to give the monsters a second chance.

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