

Master of Puppets

Human playthings and disfigured dolls in the work of Jean-Marie Appriou, Veit Laurent Kurz, Kris Lemsalu and Athena Papadopoulos

In his 1853 essay 'Morale du joujou' (The Philosophy of Toys), Charles Baudelaire describes how toys, in a child's hands, become 'actors in the great drama of life'. This drama, writes the poet, is a tragedy. At first, the child experiences a strange intensity of presence: their inanimate 'actors' have the spark of life. Later, children feel a deep sense of frustration, to the point of blind rage, at their toys' inertia. Where are their souls? The 'little brat' is consumed by an 'overriding desire' to know. She scratches, shakes, hurls, smashes and even destroys her toy, baffled by its stubborn refusal to awaken to life.

While Baudelaire ducks the question of sentimentality by framing his essay in terms of an irreversible disillusionment, the playthings that skulk and gambol through artists' oeuvres are invariably the products of an adult consciousness. Such dolls could well function as fetish-objects that channel base desires, or even point towards divine release from the limitations of human flesh. A well-curated toy box of examples might include Louise Bourgeois's contorted fabric mannequins, Hans Bellmer's sadistic doll project, Sophie Taeuber-Arp's dada marionettes and Greer Lankton's autobiographical puppets, with their warped, winnowed bodies uplifted by ballroom flair. In these works, the representational function of sculpture is subverted, perverted or otherwise modified through the figure of the puppet or doll. These body-objects are not toys. Rather, they present the body as a thing that is toyed with.

Recent years have seen a growing interest in this antic tradition. Working primarily across sculpture, installation and performance, the young artists discussed in this article present the human body in playful guises and dramatic situations. Their approach to figuration incorporates the impish,

the abject, the gothic, the metamorphic and the uncanny. Crucially, these artists create their works themselves, rather than outsourcing to fabricators or technicians. Theirs are emphatically tactile objects that evoke traditions of craft, whilst referencing teenage, hands-on hobbies such as scrapbooking, model-making and customized clothing. Thumb prints, ripped fabric, sliced Styrofoam: the viewer's eye is drawn, over and over, to material details that speak of the physical act of making. Like the golems of Jewish folklore and the automatons made by the Greek god Hephaestus, these body-forms are brought to *unheimlich* half-life by the artists' touch.



When I visited Athena Papadopoulos in southeast London, she showed me a number of recent works in

Athena
Papadopoulos,
Insatiable

which dismembered, doll-like bodies play a central role. *Escape from Riverdale (Dos-a-Dos Dangler)* (2016–17), for example, is a large canvas framed by stuffed legs in stilettos that resembles a quilted tapestry of tattooed human skin. Elsewhere stood an untitled work-in-progress: a pair of resin table tops studded with monkey nuts, dentures, fabric and a crucified toy frog. These works are a magical churn of material forms, in which limbs, furniture and found objects collide, forming hybrids that disturb the boundaries of subject and object, artwork and flesh. The richly adorned ‘womantree’ sculptures in ‘The Smurfette’, a 2017 solo show at Emalin in London, resemble a cross between hat-stands and party girls: gorgeous monsters covered in gluestiffened hair. For ‘Wolf Whistles’, a 2016 installation at Shoot the Lobster in New York, the artist hung stuffed sculptures resembling amputated body parts in an arrangement akin to that of an abattoir. Chunks of mutilated flesh were channelled through stuffed, plump objects resembling Jim Henson models – as though the bloody remnants of a massacre had joined the cast of *Sesame Street*.

Providers (Leg 1),
2016, mixed
media, 125 x 30 x
30 cm. Courtesy:
the artist and
Shoot the Lobster,
New York

Influenced by the DIY ethos of punk and the writings of Kathy Acker, Papadopoulos is working within a particular feminist tradition. Women’s bodies play a central, at times abject, role in her work – their physicality expressed through stitches, cuts, amputations and densely layered surfaces. One crucial difference between Papadopoulos’s dolls and those of, say, Bourgeois, is the former’s deliberately messy repurposing of commercial products such as Pepto Bismol, bleach and nail polish. Operating under conditions of austerity, the artist co-opts what is cheap and readily available. One obvious implication of using highstreet products to create puppet-like figures is that these works come to embody the very lack of freedom that life under consumer capitalism entails. Perhaps all consumers are playthings. But, perhaps, like disobedient dolls, we can resist our subjugation to unseen powers.

Jean-Marie Appriou’s hands-on engagement with telluric materials (clay, glass, bronze, zinc) speaks of a desire to return to more ancient, but no less

immediate, forms of making. Echoing the intuitive directness of Papadopoulos's approach, Appriou is largely self-taught. (The artist learned smelting and casting techniques from YouTube; for 'Ginger Succubes', his 2012 solo exhibition at Air de Paris, he built a kiln from scratch.) Recently, he has begun to collaborate with foundries to produce large-scale reliefs, including the series 'Vessel' (2016): a quartet of disembodied faces raised on twisted stilts, sprouting ships' sails and flowers, which were originally shaped by hand from clay. These pieces point towards a theme of mythic transformation: the human body evolving into, or hybridizing with, the inanimate. In 'Harvest' (2017), a solo exhibition at Jan Kaps in Cologne, clay women, glass heads and a nude aluminium figure inhabited the space with giant glass nutmegs clad in crimson jackets of mace, metallic grasshoppers and blownglass flowers. If the flowers suggested vegetal growth, a row of aluminium scythes symbolized their eventual culling. Here, the human body is implicated in immemorial cycles of consumption and natural renewal that refer back to the very process of the sculptures' making.



Veit Laurent Kurz, 'HER B-O-RA MA', 2015, exhibition view at The Duck,

Berlin. Courtesy: the artist and Johan Berggren Gallery, Malmö

Why sculpture? Why not animation, performance or video? One potential answer is that these artists are positioning themselves against the ‘digital turn’ in much recent art, in which CGI avatars or animatronic cyborgs, speaking direct from the uncanny valley, express the estrangement of identities and bodies, online and offline selves, in the network age.

Appriou’s sculptures posit other forms of embodied being, in which the solidity of sculpture expresses the possibility of physical mutation. In his series ‘Nude in the Rye’ (2016), cast aluminium figures of doll-like boys are adorned, like alien astronauts, with blown-glass helmets, twisted vines and other erupting growths. For Appriou, this child astronaut is ‘a passing being, a body in transition towards adolescence, a body that is transformed’.

The figure of the doll might also be considered in light of a collective anxiety concerning the body as it exists in, and is transformed by, an evolving economy. In a 2017 op-ed for the *New York Times* in praise of Airbnb’s business model, the conservative columnist Thomas L. Friedman coined a bizarre neologism for the workers of tomorrow: ‘self-driving people’. Friedman seeks to ameliorate the precarity of platform capitalism by envisioning a new kind of automatic human: a puppet made to dance by the invisible hand of a globalized market. For German artist Veit Laurent Kurz, life-sized puppets perform an understated dramatic function in elaborately realized, self-contained economies of imagined manufacture and consumption. They slouch and ponder, like grungy reincarnations of Auguste Rodin’s *The Thinker* (1902–04). They stand, sinister and mute, behind glass walls. They populate the artificial ecosystems at the heart of the artist’s practice and ‘activate’ his imagined scenarios by performing implied dramatic roles. If his installations are ‘stage-sets’, as he has described them, then his character-sculptures are actors: ‘self-driving people’ steering themselves towards deviancy, addiction and apathy – the only available routes, perhaps, through a corrupted world.

For ‘Kräutergasse’, a 2017 solo show at Städtische Galerie in Delmenhorst,

the artist constructed an elaborate multi-level installation that resembled a bio-chemical laboratory. Clinical white rooms were enriched with incongruous touches of art nouveau design. Clean floors were littered with squat-party detritus, such as empty cans, candlesticks and dirt. Plastic plants sprouted from strange, biomorphic furniture and grey walls of modelled stone, referencing the artist's teenage interest in model making.

Laurent Kurz thinks of his installations as 'habitats' in which his characters are 'embedded'. They have active 'lives', gestured at by their positioning, which the viewer must imagine and interpret. One reading of his puppets is that they are stand-ins or surrogates for the artist himself. The three main figures in 'Kräutergasse' – mannequins with corpse-paint faces, tailored boiler suits, lifelike eyes and realistic hair – are portraits of Laurent Kurz and his friends Stefan Tcherepnin and Taketo Shimada, with whom he often performs live music. Considered in this light, the puppets become actors in the artist's own Baudelairean drama – players on an imagined stage.





Another reading of Laurent Kurz's work introduces a darker set of power relations that entangle the puppets in cycles of production, consumption and excretion.

'Kräutergasse' was part of an ongoing series of works constructed around the fictional vitamin juice Herba-4, a lurid green fluid reflecting the artist's deep interest in the natural world, psychoactive drugs, healthcare products and substance addiction. Dotted throughout the series are Dilldapps: squat, meddlesome creatures from

German folklore, all toothy grins and hollow eyes. In the works' twisted ecosystem, these impish creatures swallow vegetation and shit out Herba-4, connecting a grinding cycle of production and consumption with dark, magic energies. Battered by scratches, spills and stains from their implied productivity, the body-puppets appear as instrumentalized workers ruined by a hedonistic addiction to the poisonous product that they actively manufacture.

Athena
Papadopoulos,
Smurfette,
TAPPED, 2017,
mixed media, 2.2 x
1.3 x 1.1 m.
Courtesy: the artist
and Emalin,
London;
photograph:
Plastiques

Kris Lemsalu's work abounds with chimerical creatures that offer more mischievous and liberated forms of being. Influenced by the fables of Aesop and Jean de La Fontaine, her work is populated by troupes of carnal beasts and sprightly mannequins assembled from porcelain, fur and found materials. As with Laurent Kurz, Lemsalu stages performances within or around her works, underscoring their role as props or players in larger dramatic schemes. There are hide-wrapped men with drooling dog-faces and grasping human hands (*Father Is in Town*, 2012) and owl-headed sailors in hi-vis jackets (*Wisdom and Eggs*, 2011). In *Cool Girls without Hands* (2016), alarmingly armless dolls with manga heads and furcovered bodies skateboard on a half-pipe. *Full Time Friend Erik* (2015) is a slouching puppet, seated on an inflatable armchair in an oversized suit, with ceramic trainers and a cartoonishly tiny skull that the artist found in a voodoo medicine market in Sierra Leone.



While these works channel pagan energies to offer imagined alternatives to human life (Erik is a ‘Blolo bian, a spirit spouse from the other world’), Lemsalu maintains that her characters are members of an extended ‘family’. Hunting for materials for *Old Friends* (2017), in which a glazed ceramic figure lies foetally in a hay-filled crib while an inflatable clown keeps watch, Lemsalu swapped an artwork for her friend’s dreadlocks. The choice of materials here returns us to the uncanny qualities of dolls or puppets that appear to tremble on the threshold of life. As well as emphasizing the importance of the personal, even bodily investment that is required to create sculpture, the inclusion of real hair disturbs the easy classification of the art object as wholly ‘non-human’.

Kris Lemsalu, *Cool Girls without Hands*, 2016, porcelain, cement, metal, dyed lambskin, textile, skateboards. Courtesy: the artist, Koppe Astner, Glasgow, and Temnikova Kasela, Tallinn; photograph: Roman Maerz, KAI 10 | Arthema Foundation

Baudelaire writes that toys are ‘tiny objects which imitate humanity’. What if the mimetic function of figurative sculpture were to be replaced by reinvention? For the artists discussed in this article, sculpture offers a testing ground. Animal and human, mythical and actual, male and female forms combine and recombine in ways that seem at once playful and

brutal, violent and tender. Bodies are bruised, bashed, broken, sliced into lumps of meat or slumped like discarded dolls. But out of the artists' expressive engagement with their chosen materials, from their messy entanglement with the base stuff that surrounds and defines us, arresting figurative sculptures cohere: skulking, shifting, handmade playthings that hint at alternative forms of being

Jean-Marie Appriou is an artist based in Paris, France. This year, his work has been exhibited at the Vienna Biennale, Austria, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and in solo shows at CLEARING, Brussels, Belgium, Palais de Toyko, Paris, and Jan Kaps, Cologne, Germany.

Veit Laurent Kurz is an artist who lives and works in Berlin and Frankfurt, Germany. He has had solo exhibitions at Städtische Galerie Delmenhorst, Germany (2017), and Off Vendome, Düsseldorf, Germany (2016).

Kris Lemsalu is an artist based in Tallinn, Estonia, and Berlin, Germany. In 2017, her work was included in the CONDO collaborative exhibition hosted by Southard Reid, London, UK, and she has an upcoming solo show at Komplot, Brussels, Belgium.

Athena Papadopoulos lives and works in London, UK. In 2017, she exhibited at COMA, Sydney, Australia, and Tate Modern, London, as part of 'Tate Exchange'. She has had solo shows at Emalin, London (2017), and Shoot the Lobster, New York, USA (2016).

Main image: Kris Lemsalu, Full Time Friend Erik (detail), 2015, skull, textile, porcelain, plastic. Courtesy: the artist, Koppe Astner, Glasgow, and Temnikova Kasela, Tallinn

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