

CURATORIAL REVIEW

***Play* – An Exhibition by Rebecca Agnew, Jaquelyn Greenbank, Simon Lawrence, Morgan Oliver and Jamie Richardson**

(Dunedin: Blue Oyster Gallery, 2006)

By Ali Bramwell

Play was constructed around the work of particular individuals and set up a series of *play-ful* relations between histories, modes of practice and content.

Jaimie Richardson's contribution to *Play* is a return to an eighties sensibility in the form of a suite of cheerfully macabre 'toon-like toys. *Zombag and Zompouf* (2006) is a Zombie bean bag with various remains of limbs that gets to use its own severed head as a footrest. Various fatal woundings and amputations are sewn in novelty shop stylisation on a comfortably fat and soggy vinyl body. Completing Richardson's contribution is the set of four *Zomboyz*, mini zombie dolls with maiming and dismemberment tenderly hand-sewn in pastel coloured felt. I can't help thinking of Bart and Lisa Simpson laughing at the bloody mayhem of the Itchy and Scratchy show.

All the visual cues suggest a formative attachment by the artist to best (worst, depending on your perspective) shock horror the eighties had to offer. Jason and Frankenstein are both lurking as are B-Grade splatter classics like *Chopping Mall*, *Day of the Living Dead* and Jackson's *The Frighteners*. At first glance it seems that

Richardson has mined the material in quite a direct way for content which reflects mass culture in an unselfconscious rather than ironic way. His enthusiasm then would be the geeky obsession of a genre convert who is attaching to post-event merchandising as "transitional" objects in the Lacanian sense. One of the first impressions is of affect and proximity; the work is loaded with warmth for the genre of pulp horror that it dips into and the result is almost absurdly appealing. It is knowingly and even sardonically referential, but from the soft focus of an enthusiast rather than cool and often arid cynicism – or another alternative, lugubrious anti-capitalist politicisation – that is often associated with art in the shadow of things popular and mass cultural. *Play* has imported part of an existing narrative about good and evil and de-contextualised it in the rising damp of our sub-urban basement gallery, where, in contrast with the undeniable tendency towards dank of the concrete rooms, the *Zomboyz* are arguably transposed from the Bad Guys into Good Guys (neck stump and exposed brains and all) by virtue of their unrelenting cheerfulness.

For his work *Unreal Gallery* (2006) Morgan Oliver adapts an existing game engine or 'interactive frame' – commercially available with some recent shoot-em-up games – specifically for Blue Oyster. He does this by carefully 3D-modelling the entire gallery space with obedient and attentive detail (including the office, although the administrative detritus is missing, particularly the staff) – an impressive undertaking in itself. The unreal gallery then becomes the game space; now one can select an avatar and stalk others with murderous intent through the rooms where art-y-facts usually reside. The avatars are a haphazard and clichéd collection of characters that are both silly and sinister. It is now possible to



Jaimie Richardson, 2006, *Zomboyz*, mixed media (image source: The Blue Oyster Gallery, photograph: Charlotte Dick).

Morgan Oliver, 2006, still image from *Unreal Gallery*, 3D-modelled projection (image courtesy of the artist).



see Sponge Bob Square Pants engaged in a death match with a caricature of Hitler. The cheesy images die with the usual gouts of unreal gore; strangely satisfying, it has to be said, seeing and hearing a cliché gunned down. Instead of setting up systems in the gallery that would allow gallery visitors to shoot each other on the spot, Oliver played the game beforehand with several friends and projected the recorded result. The size of the projection created an interesting affect, carefully cropped so that it matched the room fairly seamlessly, a gallery mirror space that was grafted onto the existing. Watching the cat and mouse games inside the same rooms I am currently standing in, gradually causes an itch to develop between the shoulder blades as the unreal and the real start to merge. While watching, I turn my head compulsively several times towards the open doorways at my back, more than half expecting that cartoon warrior bitch to spring out and shoot me. This reaction is particularly strong for anyone already familiar with the gallery rooms. New visitors are often much slower to recognise and identify themselves as being immersed in the same labyrinthine white rooms being used as a war zone.

Simon Lawrence manages to activate the gallery space in a different way. His two-channel moving image work *PFFFFT* (2006) shows a pair of domestic living spaces with the artist-as-conjurer transporting himself endlessly from one space to the other. In *Harry Potter meets The Fly*, the trainee magician decorporealises – discombobulates? decomposes his atoms? *disappears* at any rate – from a seventies-style living room with the traditional puff of smoke and reincarnates himself some seconds afterwards in a seventies-style hallway on the other side of the gallery, and back again, ad nauseum. It's easy to imagine his particles streaming invisibly through the air between the two



moving images, and equally easy to expect something to go wrong with the transmission. Even though the event doesn't change, average viewers patiently wait for several cycles, turning their heads in a slow motion Wimbledon swivel; perhaps mesmerised by the possibility of catastrophe or simply by the movement of something shiny (as are sheep and magpies) and the enviable, albeit demonically repetitious, powers of the mind on display.



Rebecca Agnew's work *Runner Up* (2004) consists of six fibreglass figurative works, busts of sportswomen mounted on wall plaques. The multiplicity of sporting references have become a cacophony within the group, with each figure fairly literally representing a different sporting code: power lifting, javelin, tennis, shooting and the sexual gaming of the sexes. The entire group has exaggeratedly long fingernails which makes the busts less credible as sportswomen. The nails are long enough to be talons: women as a naturally dangerous and predatory adversary like the lion or bear, the kind that offers better sport and greater prestige, especially when stuffed and mounted over the mantelpiece



Images (top to bottom):

Simon Lawrence, 2006, still from *PFFFT*, 2-channel moving image (image source: The Blue Oyster Gallery, photograph: Charlotte Dick).

Rebecca Agnew, 2004, *Runner-up*, fibreglass (image source: The Blue Oyster Gallery, photograph: Charlotte Dick).

Jacquelyn Greenbank, 2005, *St Edwards Crown*, crocheting (image source: The Blue Oyster Gallery, photograph: Charlotte Dick).

of the successful hunter. They are also the same nails that fifties 'trophy women' wore; the kind of woman that only a rich man could maintain, one who never used her hands for any form of work. The references to different kinds of female prowess may have been intended as celebratory; the busts are bronze-coloured and could be seen as achievement awards. However, using physical beauty and sexuality as a source of power makes this reading a lot more murky and unstable. The question becomes: what kind of achievement is marked by a powder compact? The six were wall-mounted in a tight group at eye height, surrounding the would-be viewer in a threatening manner. The rifle woman's gun barrel was pointed directly at your face as you entered the gallery, the javelin and tennis racquet also in potentially lethal arrangements. All these implications suggest a contest far from finished and despite the artist's stated intention to disrupt conventions, the combat appears to be continuing in a game pattern well-worn enough to be ritualised.

Jacquelyn Greenbank leverages nostalgia in several different ways, using traditional craft techniques of crochet to create a down-home facsimile of a royal heirloom, *St. Edwards Crown* (2005). It is a peculiarly old school New Zealand thing to do to make a craft homage to things royal; not forgetting for instance that Charles and Di's royal wedding merchandising took the form of domestic items: tea cloths and biscuit tins. The crown depicted is the one that has been used to crown British monarchs since Charles II (except for Queen Vic and Edward VII, both of whom thought the thing was too heavy to wear). To make such an object from a humble cottage process could be read as a power reversal, a democratising impulse. Any housewife can make herself queen in her own

kitchen if *Woman's Day* would only publish the construction pattern. Alternatively, the act could be seen as an expression of the way we still claim a connection with the Royal Family despite all rational evidence, like children making excuses for a perpetually missing parent. At any rate, when Liz comes over for a cup of tea we can all put our crowns on and have a lovely chat.

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