

## The Artist's Island

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Mark Amery on artist Francis Upritchard's enchanted oceanic anywhere.



Dream, if you will, a great artist's work as an island. Influences on its endemic nature and culture arrive by way of ocean currents and windborne packages, from other islands near and far.

So infused with their island environment are these artists' way with colour, form and concepts that the very air might seem different - in Bill Hammond's bird land, in the leafy pastel glades of Saskia Leek, up on Jason Grieg's shadowy rocky outcrops, or Paul Dibble's brittle, barren bronze atoll. Imagine the archipelagos.

Francis Upritchard's 20-year survey exhibition *Jealous Saboteurs*, organised jointly by Melbourne's Monash University and Wellington's City Gallery, could be a museum display of the prized artefacts and preserved specimens of an enchanted island: a place where people of all stripes go to commune on a higher plane. An island where centuries of sophisticated, utopian concepts, aesthetic and spiritual, have washed up together in the trade between Europe, Asia and the Pacific.

Long based in London, perhaps New Zealand-raised Upritchard dreams of the Pacific. I remain struck by how well one of her expressive thin figures, atop its Martino Gamper pedestal, stood in the community of tapa cloth, Melanesian shields and Polynesian lei at the National Gallery of Victoria when I visited last month.

In truth Upritchard's work would sing beautifully as part of a cultural display from an oceanic anywhere. It is awash with the traffic between cultures, contemporary and historic.

Installed across the three ground floor galleries of City Gallery, this exhibition's most significant weakness is that the flow between the works has had to be broken into different compartments. Together the works form one dreamy world, both beautiful and grotesque (as Upritchard herself notes, the likes of Hieronymus Bosch Island aren't far away). She offers space for us to muse on how the way we clothe ourselves reflects our beliefs.

Opportunities to understand why Upritchard represented New Zealand at the Venice Biennale in 2009 have been limited here since she won the Walters Prize in 2006. This survey does just that. It should tour further.

To me *Jealous Saboteurs* connects with New Zealand's utopian shaky isles place in the world's imagination. A place where, from European settlement to the counterculture 70's, new, enlightened societal possibilities are envisaged.

The Venice Biennale exhibition was notable for Upritchard strongly introducing the human figure into her work, connecting to sculpture's figurative history in a way rare among contemporary artists. The highlight of this survey is the East Gallery presentation of figures, demonstrating how confidently she has developed this work between 2011 and now.

An eclectic group of seers, oddbods and misfits - eyes closed in communion with themselves or some higher existential plain - they resemble a lithe-limbed dance troupe. Or, given your first reaction might be to giggle, this could be a comedy ensemble frozen in a game of musical statues. Upritchard tip-toes gorgeously on a tragicomic edge.

Like some alternative messed-up Benetton colour-coded collection, in their many coloured and patterned skins these figures represent the collision of cultures across the world. I'm reminded of the medieval carnivalesque band of performers that featured in Kushana Bush's paintings, seen at City Gallery earlier in the year (the Kushana Bush island perhaps lies not far away).

Humour and social observation are great, rare strengths. These are clowns for our time. Take 'Mandrake', the harlequin-patterned, wrinkled leotard-wearing jester in extravagant ruffles, winklepickers and shades, who first appeared, Pantaloon-like in Venice - a new Shakespearian fool at court. Elegant yet ungainly, pretentious yet at peace: we laugh at him and with him.

Bedecked in very fine hand-painted and stitched scarves and blankets Upritchard's figures look less grubby hippies than dandy wealthy art patrons, dressed to state individuality and an allegiance with art. It's an impression aided by the addition to the figures in this room of a fine decorated plate and pot (of limited interest to me personally) - quite different props to the spindly tree off-cuts featured in the tableau of Venice.

These figures are sophisticates. Wearing applied art, they might

themselves, rather worryingly, be fine art applied. They might represent today's senior art-loving citizens, who once danced naked at Nambassa but are now wealthy off the unshackling of assets that came with privatisation.

Alternately, in today's times of worship of the dollar, the digital and disposable goods younger generations might find these figures powerful talismen for valuing the less tangible realms of emotion and spirit.

These multiple readings are a mark of Upritchard's strength - her art's ability to mean many things and question all those things, all at once.

My favourite work in this room is 'Jockey', a luridly patchwork-coloured man whose careful crouched position suggests he's either been riding a horse too long, deep in a tai chi pose, or is about to defecate. His spaghetti hairstyle is so deeply unfashionable it's fashionable.

Striking is the way Upritchard surreally, intuitively extends human form and its representation of spirit. A close island I'm reminded of is that of the great sculptor Giacometti. Take the broken poetry of Jockey's flattened washboard stomach, the fragility of his weedy arms, and the scar of the break around his body visible below the wash of paint.

Jealous Saboteurs' use of the central Hancock Gallery is less successful in its medley of watercolour drawings and earlier work, but striking are the writhing, rigor mortis frozen furry, spindly sloths. Their four hands (no feet) sport white gloves, evoking some Tarzan-like tale of captured exotic wild animals turned society dancers, spinning on their backs on the museum floor.

The 'Victorian cabinet of curiosities feel' runs through the West Gallery, with playful collections of objects that riff off the absurdity of anthropological museum displays and categorization. I find these presentations of Upritchard's work of varied and muddled effect - singular works are not always aided by their cobbled presentation. Best are those like the animated hockey sticks 'Jealous Saboteurs' (of the exhibition's name) that work as a collection of their own kind.

At best with works like these Upritchard escapes both past and present, evoking multiple cultural mythologies and fictions. The best of the sloths is here, captured stilled in dynamic struggle on its back in a glass cabinet. Grotesque yet gleeful human heads are bandaged and paint daubed - all joke teeth, hair and ears like dodgy film set offcasts. They're reminiscent of the humour, fragility and relatability of Upritchard's figures. Rather than something from an archaeological dig, a head like 'Untitled 1' might be a gruesome home-crafted stitch together of your Uncle Murray.

Certain props appear repeatedly through Upritchard's career, strengthening their potential symbolism when seen in survey: glasses, hats, and urns. Meanwhile, whether it's the solar system as a series of small sculpted planets on the points of compasses, or pocket-sized McCahon-inspired green mountain ranges held inside spectacle cases, Upritchard asserts that you can hold the diversity, enormity and, above all, mystery of the world in your hand, using materials close at hand.

The earliest work in the show is a model of a volcanic island on a card table. There are buttons to push to light up the vacant interior of the vents, like a school science fair exhibit of some physical eruption on this ring of fire. It's an island waiting to be populated and played with.