

Exhibition Report

MILK

Kiri Mitchell

Milk was first exhibited at the Dunedin School of Art Gallery in March 2017. The show comprised three large sculptural works and a 20-minute stop-motion claymation film titled *How to Decorate a Cake*. The intention of this body of work is to critique a narrative found in human interest documentaries where the 'abnormal' aberrations of the human body become a commodity for our viewing pleasure. A subgroup of these programs are dedicated to the phenomenon of bed-bound, morbidly obese individuals. The obese body, vulnerable to critique, becomes an illustration of physical and emotional dysfunction in the flesh.

However, in these pseudo-documentaries a fascination with the logistics of looking after a bed-bound individual takes precedence over identifying the complexities of the psychological and social factors involved in creating that body. *Milk* is positioned within a feminist framework and identifies the ease with which wives and mothers are cast as enablers and perpetrators of harm. As we cry out from the comfort of our armchairs, "Just stop feeding them!" the work questions a narrative which promotes the negating of individual responsibility and promotes social smugness. It critiques an environment in which the manipulation and presentation of information and our social conditioning ensures that stereotypes continue to be perpetuated.

However, the film revels in and exploits the comedy of the fat body and its abjection and alternates between validating a mother-blame culture and ridiculing it. The scale of the sculptures and the emotive narrative embedded in the stop-motion film are intended to provoke viewers, to make them aware of their own physicality and create a sense of psychological discomfort. I use Susan Stewart's 1984 essay, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, and the Collection* to discuss the strategies used in *Milk* in relation to scale, narrative and the concept of the spectacle.¹



Figure 1. Kiri Mitchell,
Milk, 2017, Beryl.



Figure 2. Kiri Mitchell,
Milk, 2017, Raymond.



Figure 3. Kiri Mitchell,
Milk, 2017, Cakestand.



Figure 4. Kiri Mitchell, *Milk*, 2017. Dunedin School of Art Gallery.

The body depicted always tends towards exaggeration, either in terms of the convention of the grotesque or the convention of the ideal. There are few images less interesting than an exact anatomical drawing of the human form.²

On entering the gallery space, the audience was confronted with a 3m-high bust modelled after a character from the stop-motion film. Her name is Beryl. Clutching her ample bare breast, she offers it to all who enter – mother's milk, the elixir of life, manifested in plaster. To her left is her obese son Raymond. He lies naked atop a round table, an asymmetrical blob of flesh. If he was a real boy he would be unable to remove himself from the table. He is repulsive yet compelling; made from latex and pillow foam, his form yields to the touch. Lying there prostrate, mouth open and ready to receive, he is full of unadulterated desire, searching for the elusive nipple. Raymond's gaze is fixed on a three-tiered cakestand where 12 dummy cakes depict an aged Beryl, iced and glazed, offering a spent nipple. On the end wall of the gallery the film *How to Decorate a Cake* is playing.

The film is a black comedy set in a meticulously handcrafted industrial bakery, where extraordinary feats of cake decoration and baking are achieved.

The film follows the life and times of Raymond, a monstrous passive male whose life is dominated by mother Beryl, wife Rayleen ... and feeding. A testament to a labour of maternal love and the versatility of breast milk, the film explores themes of co-dependency, fetish and desire. Using the model of reality television programs on the obese, *How to Decorate a Cake* oscillates between blaming the women in Raymond's life as enablers of his appalling physical condition and highlighting Raymond's missed opportunities to save himself.

The film titillates the viewer with intimate details of the characters' private lives, exposing the perversions which leave them vulnerable to scrutiny.



Figure 5. Still from *How to Decorate a Cake*.



Figure 6. Still from *How to Decorate a Cake* (Beryl).

How to Decorate a Cake, on the one hand, and the sculptures of Beryl and Raymond, on the other, are restatements of each other. While each work is able to function individually, together they present the audience with a different experience of the same subject matter. Having received a deluge of sensory stimuli, the audience is left to assimilate the information presented and consider their own position within this dysfunctional set of circumstances.

SCALE AND NARRATIVE

In Susan Stewart's 1984 essay, she describes her research as a "study of narrative, exaggeration, scale, and significance."¹³ She identifies her use of language and narrative to code the experience of scale. The two parts of her text that relate to my own project are the 'miniature' as a metaphor for interiority and the 'gigantic' to signify the exterior. I have used Stewart's essay to help identify the distinction between the two parts of the project – the physical experience of scale in relation to the sculptural work and the implied experience of scale depicted in the miniature world of the stop-motion set. Thirdly, there is the narrative they both share, the commodification of the spectacle.

THE GIGANTIC

It is the girth of the sculpture of Raymond that suggests he is monumental. If he were to stand, he would only be 150 cm tall, the height of a small man. The audience is merely given a gesture of scale – it is the viewer's own understanding and preconceived ideas about the obese body that creates the physical experience of Raymond. The scale of Beryl is more explicit as she dominates and overwhelms both the room and the viewer. There is



Figure 7. Still from *How to Decorate a Cake* (Rayleen).



Figure 8. Still from *How to decorate a Cake* (Raymond).



Figure 9. Kiri Mitchell, *Milk*, 2017.
Dunedin School of Art Gallery.



Figure 10. Kiri Mitchell, *Milk*, 2017, Raymond.

nothing obscure about Beryl and Raymond's narrative and what is implied by their scale, the exposed breast and yielding flesh. Beryl is Raymond's world and Raymond is Beryl's baby – she is ready for a lifetime of service devoted to him. The three-tiered cakestand supporting the 12 'spent' Beryls pays homage to this self-sacrifice.

The gallery space is a theatre without a stage; it is a "democratic space."⁴ According to Stewart:

But it is not simply the fact that this space can be directly confronted which makes it democratic; its democracy, its reciprocity, depends upon its *public* quality. It is just beyond the space that each culture variously determines as the private and just within the space that a culturally determined perception defines as remote. It is a space occupied by the other; the space of dialogue.⁵

The two figures are caricatures of caricatures, parodies of the characters from the film. The dummy cakestand mocks the seriousness of obesity and the dysfunctional relationship between a mother and her son. The exaggeration within the narrative and the scale of all the sculptural works function as tools to create a space for the absurd and for dark humour to rub up against the uncomfortable truths of 'real' people's lives.

THE MINIATURE

This macabre humour is explored in more depth in the stop-motion film. The set is a self-contained environment, like a dolls' house, where the toys inside inhabit a private world. Assuming that the audience comes with an understanding of how a stop-motion is made, my hope is that they will receive the film in a spirit of wonder at this fantastical world where anything is possible. *How to Decorate a Cake* is not a slick, flawless production – fingerprints embedded in the plasticine unmistakably carry the traces of the handmade. This strategy empowers the audience, as the flaws in the characters' construction invite the possibility of creating one's own world.

The narrative of *How to Decorate a Cake* is entirely set within the confines of the bakery. The building becomes a metaphor for the psychological entrapment of all its occupants; they are doomed to repeat the destructive cycle of unhealthy behaviours. The stop-motion reflects Stewart's notion of 'miniature' as a metaphor for interiority:



Figure 11. Still from *How to Decorate a Cake* (Beryl).



Figure 12. Still from *How to Decorate a Cake* (Rayleen).

The toy is the physical embodiment of the fiction; it is a device of fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative. The toy opens an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy in a way that the abstract space, the playground, of social play does not. To toy with something is to manipulate it, to try it out within sets of context, none of which is determinative.⁶

While the 2D projection distances the audience from the visceral content of the film, the viewer is in no doubt about the implications of abusing the flesh and its ever-changing manifestations within the film. The scale of the projection transforms the miniature world of stop-motion from an intimate experience into a spectacle of the flesh.

SPECTACLE

The scale of the film's characters projected onto the gallery walls mimics the scale of the sculptures. The democratic space collides with the private space of the stop-motion. The narrative is amplified and the two works oscillate between public and private, the miniature and gigantic. This spectacle unifies the works, likening *Milk* to the 'freak shows' exhibited as part of the carnival sideshows of the past, as well as the reality television shows of the present which have provided the source material for the project. As Stewart says:

In contrast, the viewer of the spectacle is absolutely aware of the distance between self and spectacle. The spectacle functions to avoid contamination: 'Stand back, ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to see will shock and amaze you.' And at the same time, the spectacle assumes a singular direction. In contrast to the reciprocal gaze of carnival and festival, the spectacle assumes that the object is blinded; only the audience sees.⁷



Figure 13. Still from *How to Decorate a Cake* (Rayleen).



Figure 14. Still from *How to decorate a Cake* (Rayleen and Raymond).

While the sculptures and the film affect the audience in different ways, they come together insofar as they critique television documentaries such as UK television's Channel 4 "Body Shock" series (first aired in 2006), where it has become normalised to view the aberrations of the human body paraded on our screens.

Documentary series such as "Body Shock" optimise occasions to present lengthy film footage of obese persons naked in shower stalls, suffering the indignity of struggling to wipe their genitals after going to the toilet or receiving sponge baths in beds they may never leave. It is possible that these segments are shown so that the audience is able to fully appreciate the discomfort of being burdened with such a cumbersome body. The reality is far more cynical. Shielded from scrutiny by being on the 'right' side of the screen, the audience is free to indulge in the voyeuristic spectacle of distorted flesh. These programs have reduced obese individuals to freaks of nature, objects of fascination for our viewing pleasure.

Milk perpetuates the role of the audience who sit in front of the television screen judging the fiascos of others' lives. The audience remains safe in the knowledge that regardless of whether or not their physical appearance falls within the norms of society, their bodies will not betray them, nor will their personal failures. As Stewart puts it: "Often referred to as a 'freak of nature', the freak, it must be emphasized, is a freak of culture. His or her anomalous status is articulated by the process of the spectacle as it distances the viewer, and thereby it 'normalizes' the viewer as much as it marks the freak as an aberration."⁸

The contemporary freak show lulls the participants into thinking that they are being given an opportunity to articulate their predicament in order to educate a hostile society. By so doing, they may hope to pave the way for mainstream society to allow them to assimilate and be accepted as 'normal.' But how receptive is this audience really? "Repeatedly in the history of the freaks it has been assumed that the freak is an object. The freak is actually captured and made a present of to the court or to the College of Surgeons, as the case may be. Or the contingencies of the economic system force the freak to sell himself or herself as a spectacle commodity."⁹

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- 1 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 2 Ibid., 115.
- 3 Ibid., ix.
- 4 Ibid., 107
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 56.
- 7 Ibid., 108.
- 8 Ibid., 109.
- 9 Ibid., 110.