

Sarah CrowEST Review & Interview, 2007

by Ken Bolton

Sarah CrowEST's work has for some time manifested as a preoccupation with the Other, the alien, figuring it as bodily presence and as another subjectivity weighted equally with the spectator's. A CrowEST exhibition of some years ago at Downtown gallery (*End Of Roll Approaching*, 2003) showed vaguely sugar-almond shapes, ranging from about a foot or so to maybe fifteen centimetres in height. These were housed in chains of adjoining cubicles that the viewer stood over to peer into from above. Imprisoned within, these figures were variously seen to be sleeping, bored or in despair; numbly 'seated', curled in corners; or trying to scale the walls—to escape or join others. Some, like pet animals (gerbils, guinea pigs) had pooped their cages. The work risked being cute you would think, hearing it described, but it was not. The sense it gave off was of enormous ennui and frustration—creatures literally 'climbing the walls'—of time dragging slowly, of tragedy. The viewer was able to smile at the creatures' cuteness—but their pain censured this. One felt great sympathy. And perhaps the 'cuteness' stands in for the colourful charm often attributed to other cultures: CrowEST has us attribute it *and* see that we have done so, caught out as patronising, smugly dehumanising—or able to *see* the reflex that way and move beyond it.

CrowEST's current projection-pieces employ a development of some of these same strategies, worked up over time and through sorties into the performance area over the last few years.

The works deal with body-image and with anxieties as to beauty, attractiveness, acceptability. The alien featured is to us, I think, quite beautiful: strikingly ice-cream white, with dramatically wide-set and elegant eyes, tiny mouth, no nose: features of the stylization that cartoons use (perhaps especially relevantly, Manga cartoons) to make their characters cute, feminized and childlike, or *cute-ly* child-like. Seeing such an irresistible 'alien' disfiguring itself in an effort to 'join the club' is rather heartbreaking, painful even. We want to intervene, allay its fears, disavow any perceived superiority in ourselves.

The creature does great harm to itself, aside from the distress it seems to feel already over its self-image. It is driven, helpless not to go on, in a frenzy of self-punishment and self-mutilation.

These works of CrowEST's are focused, here, more on the issue of women's alienation from their own bodies, that of Western women most particularly. However, the same mechanisms in the work generate a like critique and set of responses in the viewer: we see the figure as already beautiful and the disfigurement as distressing and shocking—and can do nothing to prevent it. (In this I am reminded of Mike Parr's strategies in many performance works, both recent and from the early 70s.)

It is painful to look on. But the empathy we feel with the creature I think we extend to ourselves and others. (The viewer is aware that the creature need not, strictly, be read as female, though this would be the most usual interpretation: the issue might extend to males as well, or, in continuity with CrowEST's earlier work, might read as treating different racial or cultural norms of beauty and acceptability.)

The use of the 'alien' mannequin in all this gets us past the shock that seeing these themes treated more literally or naturalistically would produce. Real people enacting this cosmetic anxiety tend to look too pitiful, too desperate or hysterical, for us to identify—or they are too close to us and we shut down self-protectively, placing a distance between us and them, or rejecting the art as 'seventies' in its preoccupations and its aesthetic. CrowEST here uses a glamour that 'stands for' human beauty or normalcy (without resembling it). Were she to use a real person their 'look' would be their own, effectively: particular, not so generalizable to the simply human, or to the class of 'all' women. The undecidability of exact reference is a strength of the work rather than a weakness.

The range of small sculptural figures relates to the earlier works described above. The objects are made intuitively and directly, the artist says, avoiding second thoughts. The intention is to deal in the (irrationally) emotional and sensual aspects of the materials and to deal in 'appearances', to produce positive and negative reactions to these resulting figures' presence. The objects—'personages'—are intended to look as though they are making self-presentations, are consciously 'on display', attempting to put their best aspects to the fore (and to

hide others). They are meant to seem self-conscious, therefore—and not simply guileless and straightforward. Of course this is not a position of strength—passivity before the anticipated or invited gaze. One is to be judged, after all, and is vulnerable. The spectator will see this and will likely feel unwilling to be the judge. The power is incriminating, makes us uneasy.

Have all of these beings equally got their appearance under control? Are there hints of eruptive elements that might marr the projected appearance, and which—to be kind—must be overlooked? As we inspect this side-show taxonomy it would seem so.

In the center of the space sits a slightly abject mirror-ball. It is an amusing reminder of the themes of public display, the arena in which one is judged, found presentable or unacceptable, and in which the fiction is that we are (all) calm, equal and un-judging. Oh, anxiety!

INTERVIEW WITH SARAH CROWEST

Ken Bolton: Sarah, you've produced a number of bodies of work. All of them employing a kitsch mode, or guise, to treat serious things. I remember sort of sugared-almond 'figures', each about the size and shape of a small bread loaf—climbing the walls of their cells, or sitting sadly—which all seemed to be about detention centres, asylum. The EAF show featured a more shrill-ly Tokyo aesthetic that gave us a taxonomy of curious, benign alien beings, glamorously star-dusted and twinkled but also—and 'abjectly'—distressed, leaking a little (though almost discreetly, as if with embarrassment) bodily fluids and so on. I wonder if you've shown very different things interstate—or have they seen what we've seen in Adelaide?

Sarah: I've shown the video—'the joy of beauty'—in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Canberra and Darwin, with assorted groups of creatures crawling up the walls, so those exhibitions have been similar to my last EAF show. However Canberra is about to see something more recent and quite different. This has evolved out of my Masters project which investigates the function of the alter-ego in contemporary art practice.

Q: A lot of your work over the last few years involves calls upon the viewer for ‘empathy’—with ‘creatures’ that offer themselves as rather flakey (too cute, too disposable etc) and yet the works succeed because, self-consciously, we give it.

But there were earlier photographic series: the shots of your ‘actual’ guises, over years as a young party-goer, growing up—with moves towards various sub-group styles and ‘looks’ (Mod, punk, ganja queen and so on). And that show where Adelaide art scene ‘names’ were represented by photos of others, chosen because they had the *same* names. Both these shows dealt in Identity. But minus that empathy factor. So, this new work moves things along a bit?

Sarah: Ah, Ken. I find it touching that you ‘give in’ and respond to my creatures and their plight. My recent work draws on all the threads you mention, attempts to separate them out and examine them in different ways but perhaps ending up in a nasty knot....a scriggle! I decided recently that all my work is about anxiety in some way. I am also still deeply interested in those things that elicit tender heartedness within us.

Q: One main difference is that, in working with film, you will tend towards narrative maybe? And there are popular genres that might provide the models that you play off. True? I’m thinking of one you showed at the EAF that was about body-image anxiety: a big-headed alien (that was coded as ‘female’) tore at her complexion as her makeup was deemed to fail her. What structures underlie the recent work? Will they look very different in terms of film quality?

Sarah: Yes, because film is time-based and something happens no matter how slight and the vignettes I make appear to be little windows or insights into a much larger story. I think of my video work as being akin to portraiture, with an emphasis on behaviours. The actions are often quite simple and straightforward but have an underlying

suggestion of an emotionally charged state, where perhaps some bad stuff on the inside seeps out or is enacted prosthetically on the outside of the body.

The big bobbleheaded figures reference a range of popular cultural languages (the style of contemporary Japanese manga, scientific experiments, cooking demonstrations and extreme makeovers) but also art historical works.

I am currently making a film, 'Caught in a Loop', which plays off models from 1960s and 1970s conceptual and performance art in it's aesthetic—but in filmic terms it is a constructed documentary. I'm using real life monologues with lip-synched performances by actors. It will be shot in black and white on 16 mm film and I anticipate that the quality will look remarkably different from my low-fi video efforts. I may be dreaming here but I'm longing for a touch of Diane Arbus and Gillian Wearing in the mix. The Project is being supported by the Media Resource Centre as part of the Raw Nerve Initiative: so there's access to equipment, materials, crew and mentoring—which is going to make a remarkable difference to the quality. So...stand by.....

Q: Yes, I've heard a little about this project: a kind of *Lives Of The Artists*, isn't it: the expressionist do-good plodder, the over-confident rich-girl, and so on, pursuing their careers as artists—and you play all three, or all seven?

Sarah: No, that's what I did for my masters and just finished....

Q: What a fast-moving artist. Are these changes of the last few years what you envisaged—as a direction in which your work was obviously and, of course, *interestingly*, headed? Or have they been imposed by the requirements of study? (I know you're finishing a degree at the moment—which I suppose always means zeroing in on a topic that you figure you can explore but also figure will be (well) within your means.)

Sarah: I didn't envisage the journey I eventually undertook during my masters in any way whatsoever! I had a vague idea that I was going to immerse myself in an exploration of excess and make enormous uncontrolled, gloopy installations. Some 'supervision' (read 'input from supervisor') set me on the path of confronting my predisposition towards inhabiting various alter-egos. What was that all about? I had no idea, so I set about trying to understand more about that activity. I had been doing it for years without even really noticing! The study careered terrifyingly towards art therapy.

Q: So the film you spoke of—Arbus/Wearing in feel, 60s/70s Conceptualist—that's part of this same pursuit of the alter-ego compulsion, or is it an escape from that?

Sarah: It follows on.... in the sense that one of the characters is a version of myself. But the other subjects (being a combination of real life monologues lip-synched by actors) are developing into a way out for me. It is a move away from self examination, lurking alone in the studio, and the beginning of looking at, and working with, others. I'm not so self-absorbed these days after suffering a surfeit during my masters research.

The only problem is now I really have to make phone calls to strangers and interface with other human beings to get things done. That's terrifying. Anxiety is still a core issue here but it's other people's as much as my own which inevitably seeps into all proceedings.

Q: Becoming a movie mogul will toughen you up. You'll become a robust and bruising personality! Hell is other people, as I think Ivan Milat said. Or there's Ted Berrigan: "I like to beat people up!" Though I can't see that as quite you. You know Kurosawa said he eventually came to feel that he didn't have an opinion unless he had his megaphone in his hand? Jodorowski's wife said that when he wanted to think hard he always put on his jodhpurs and sat in his old director's chair.

Sarah: Dangerous.

Q: Do you think the alter-ego theme was really the whole story? I mean it seemed to me that a large part of what was good about some of your work ‘this century’ was that they were projected, imagined ‘others’—a matter of empathy, rather than of guises hidden behind. That seemed to be the point for the viewer. The abject and embarrassed aliens weren’t the-many-versions-of-Sarah CrowEST, but were offered for the viewer to consider. That was my take on the Downtown and EAF sequences. One of my favourite artists, Micky Allan, did a lot of ‘friendly’ space critters in the early 80s—drawing and paintings. You might have liked them. Weirdly benign. Different from your creatures’ discomfort.

Sarah: Yes! Well spotted! It’s quite true that the bobbleheaded aliens were not, strictly speaking, versions of myself. But the very first one grew out of a very personal need to perform and hide at the same time. Then the others evolved as vehicles within which to enact and examine human behaviours and compulsions in a broader way. The heads got re-painted, renovated and re-cycled for different projects.

The alter-ego tack was definitely not the whole story—but by isolating that aspect for study and using it for some (semi) controlled experiments in art-making I gained insight into some of the forces at work. I can set the alter-egos to one side for the time being. As for those headsI’m soon taking them out to a school in central Australia to let the children make of them what they will, with paint, performing bodies and a video camera.

Q: Ten or so years ago I knew you only as someone selling small pieces made for the Xmas period: a desperate attempt to cover the rent, probably. I thought it was just kitsch for the most part. I mean, it was cheeky and it had bite, so it was amusing. But your art seems to handle this dangerous material with a degree of unsentimental acceptance of the stuff’s negligibility at one level—a knowledge that it has to be offered ‘second-degree’, at a remove. (A term I haven’t heard much

since the early days of *Art and Text*. Now 'second degree' probably registers to most people as a further qualification, like a Master in Fine Arts!)

Sarah: I've always been interested in the idea of art as commodity and actually selling work to make a living instead of doing some tedious job. I've worked variously across design, craft and visual arts and because I love to make things and I'm prolific it makes sense for me to sell art as product. However, perversely, I have mostly attempted to do this on my own terms—which has involved making objects that are not particularly commercially appealing. When they do verge on becoming acceptable and start to look like something people might really want to buy, I sabotage the proceedings and add some eccentric or revolting features. I can't help it. So the 'sales' I used to have in my house/shop/studio in Kensington were mostly quite tragic attempts to offload lots of really weird shit. Some lucky people did score some of my best art works at very cheap prices—but often I saw it as an exercise in creating a shop that would arouse curiosity and somehow exist beyond commercial imperatives. It's like playing shops. I've always done it. As a child I'd set up a table on the street to sell conkers (from a nearby tree) to the local children!

Q: Like Claes Oldenburg in the early 60s—remember he set up a 'store'? as a performance or as a 'happening' even? When did you arrive in Australia and what was your art background at that point?

Sarah: Yeah—I love those wonky goods Oldenburg made and I think too of David Hammons selling snowballs on a Brooklyn Street in midwinter. I have a recurring vision of myself as an old lady trying to sell my creatures on a blanket outside the Tate Modern or some Kunsthalle. It's a kind of fear of what my future might be but I like it so much I'm already beginning to act it out. I did it outside ACCA!

I came to Australia from England in 1987. I'd gone to art school straight from grammar school at 16 and studied fashion design.

It's funny, because I wanted to paint and I moved into the textile design area because it offered the freedom to use/juxtapose any kind of imagery—without the imperative to explain myself, as I might be expected to do in the painting department. I barely spoke a word. I was a mute punk-rocker making screen prints of barbed wire and broken glass.

This will sound odd, but around that time a big Robert Ryman show at the Whitechapel really turned my head as far as painting goes. Although these days I make objects and videos I always manage to find a way to paint things. I think often of that work.

Q: Ryman—yes, for me, the *only* minimalist painter. I guess there have been other influences?

Sarah: I enjoy the work of Erwin Wurm and Callum Morton immensely. I was very moved by Gillian Wearing's show at ACCA... I mostly admire artists who make work quite unlike my own. I do get influenced by other artists in terms of process, materials, structure etc, but then my intentions are quite divergent. Or the other way around: I'll find someone whose area of interest is similar in terms of ideas but where the form is utterly uninteresting to me. That happened throughout my research—into how artist's have used the alter-ego in their practice. Beyond the mere fact of inhabiting another persona to enable certain behaviours, my work and that of, for example, Luke Roberts, Suzanne Treister, Marcel Duchamp, Claude Cahun, Kim Jones, has very few points of intersection.

I wish I had one or two mentors that I could revere and follow but I'm all over the place. That's part of the reason Robert Ryman intrigues me. He has remained in his narrow field for decades and is nothing if not consistent. He's quite happy and boring. I'm just hungry for different approaches all the time—although I do try to make my creatures recur, like a white square. I fail.

Q: Now you're off to Portugal—or maybe Germany—courtesy of Samstag. Do you feel change in the air?

Sarah: I anticipate making videos, short films and maybe photographs whilst I am in Europe.....I will develop a post-studio practice. I don't want to be encumbered by lots of stuff and I will relish the discipline of resisting making lots of objects.

Q: Will you be able to?

Sarah: That's the thing: I don't know!