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Francis Upritchard's Alternate Universe at MUMA, Melbourne

About 85 million years ago, New Zealand broke off and floated away from Australia and Antarctica. Isolated for millennia, the islands' plants and animals evolved in peculiar ways—giant, flightless birds, ground-walking bats, and enormous, carnivorous snails ruled the land. It's as if the island developed in an alternative history. Likewise, the lanky, multicolored figures that inhabit the world of New Zealand-born sculptor Francis Upritchard also seem to have evolved out of a different history, with their own esoteric garb, body decoration, rituals and artifacts. Upritchard's uncanny yet familiar world, however, springs forth not from a faraway, isolated land, but from the artist's interior and intuitive process.

Upritchard's work is currently the subject of a major survey exhibition at Monash University Museum of Art, in Melbourne, Australia. Despite being one of New Zealand's most successful international artists—she won New Zealand's prestigious Walters Prize in 2006, represented the country at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and has enjoyed major solo exhibitions in museums around the world, including the Vienna Secession in 2009, Nottingham Contemporary in 2012, Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre in 2012, MIMOCA in Kagawa, Japan, in 2013, and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, in 2014—she has rarely exhibited in Australia, New Zealand's closest neighbor. The exhibition at MUMA, titled "Jealous Saboteurs," brings together nearly twenty years of her work, with rarely seen and significant early works along with recent sculptures.

Upritchard was born in 1976 in New Plymouth, New Zealand, but has lived in London since 1998, after graduating from Christchurch's Ilam School of Fine Arts. Living in London but retaining close ties to New Zealand, Upritchard's work seems preoccupied with the notion of colonial empires and their repositories of artifacts. Early works include shrunken heads mounted on small brass or wooden pedestals, their teeth grotesquely protruding from gummy resin jaws, hair patchy, but intact. In Upritchard's world though, the shrunken heads appear to belong to the mustachioed white colonialists, rather than the natives, from whom their ceremonial preserved heads were usually pilfered for display in Western museums (there is currently an effort to repatriate the mokomokai, preserved heads of the Māori, held in private and museum collections around the world, back to New Zealand). Do Upritchard's heads appear as a kind of colonial comeuppance in her alternate history? These things are left up to the speculation of the viewer—the heads themselves say nothing.

In Upritchard's alternative anthropological museum, the method of display is a matter of prime significance. *Jealous Saboteurs*, from 2005, is a collection of rummage sale hockey sticks carved into toothy crocodile talismans, and arranged like trophies or tribal curios for inspection. Her sculptures of sloths, with their preposterously elongated limbs, recline under stodgy glass



Francis Upritchard, *Sun Worship (detail)*, 2013, modelling material, foil, wire, paint, cloth, 141 x 25 x 19 cm. Collection of Simon Robinson. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.



Francis Upritchard, *Untitled 1*, 2002-2003, fiberglass, resin, fake hair and dental teeth, 27 x 20 x 18 cm. Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

vitrines, like taxidermied oddities in a natural history museum belonging to another evolutionary history. In other works, figures are arranged atop cabinets and sideboards, in the manner that a shrewd collector might casually display his cultural loot.

The plinths on which so many of Upritchard's figures are perched, in many cases, contribute greatly to the overall dynamic of the work. In recent years, she has collaborated with her partner, Italian furniture and interior designer Martino Gamper, on the bespoke tables, plinths, and other supports for her figurative sculptures. The care taken in the aesthetic choices of furniture reveals Upritchard's interest in craft, further evidenced by her attention to textiles, lamps, jewelry, urns, and other accoutrements. In Upritchard's sculpture, it is not enough for the figure to be sculpted from clay and set upright—the drapery, adornment, and environment related to the figure are integral to the work itself.

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Upritchard's recent works feature a carnivalesque cast of characters—harlequins, hippies, soldiers, seers, and gurus—some life-size, adorned with colorful fabrics, headdresses, and elaborate body paint. With their heavy-lidded eyes and aquiline noses, some look oddly familiar, as if drawn from the collective unconscious, a late night fever dream mixing up Harry Potter with a Picasso portrait come-to-life. Upritchard's references derive from historical sources vaguely recalled before her process of sculpting by intuition takes over, and renders her figures wholly idiosyncratic and unique. The knights of the Bayeux tapestry become empty-handed medieval marionettes enacting a mysterious dance.

While Upritchard's style is indisputably her own and her works seem to originate from an alternate universe only she is privy to, her work does not exist in a complete vacuum. Other figurative sculptors preceding her surely figure strongly in the development of her work: Bruce Conner's mummified relic Child (1967), Paul Thek's vitrined, armored body parts and supine, life-size hippie entombed, to name two. In fact, one of Upritchard's works, entitled Paul (2009) a figure on his back with coin-shaped objects placed on his body, clearly pays homage to Thek's famous 1967 work The Tomb. Contemporaries of Upritchard also seem to share her interest in creating alternate worlds populated by Technicolor figures—a kinship can be seen in the sculptural works of Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, and the mythological future world envisioned by the artist Saya Woolfalk.

Upritchard's world resists easy categorization or explanation. Historical details are subsumed by individual, intuitive aesthetic choices. The sculptural object is complicated by the use of found objects and detritus, and by adornment and decoration. Her figures seem to belong to a wholly different culture, that may have evolved somewhere in an alternate universe, or perhaps developing some time in the distant future, creating their own



Francis Upritchard, *Jealous Saboteurs (detail)*, 2005, hockey sticks, plastic, modelling materials, dimensions variable. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.



Francis Upritchard, *Archer Plate (detail)*, 2012, modelling material, foil, paint, 52 x 35 cm. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki. Courtesy of the artist and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

relics from the cast-offs of our current material culture. Though their precise meanings remain ambiguous, Upritchard's figures, artifacts, and installations offer an attuned, critical look at how we signify, apprehend, and display culture.

"Francis Upritchard: Jealous Saboteurs" is at MUMA, Melbourne until April 16, 2016. It opens at City Gallery Wellington, Te Whare Toi on May 28 and runs until October 16, 2016.

—Natalie Hegert