

# ARTFORUM

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

## Francis Upritchard GERTRUDE CONTEMPORARY ART SPACES

This has proven to be a milestone year for New Zealand-born, London-based sculptor Francis Upritchard. Her Selection as one of New Zealand's representatives for tis 2009 Venice Biennale pavilion followed residencies at two of Australia's most significant art venues, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand, and Sydney's Artpace, during which Upritchard's practice underwent a subtle change of direction. Famed for her postcolonial confrontations with her homeland's cultural heritage—in one series from 2002, Upritchard molded sculptures based on the shrunken heads of British colonizers captured by native New Zealanders—the artist this year has shifted into more folkloric, less agitated territory with her installations *rainwob i* and *rainwob ii*, both 2008, the second of which toured from Artpace to Melbourne.

For *rainwob ii*, Upritchard presented a shop display gone curiously awry. Upended white plinths faced onto the street through Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces' window-fronted gallery, a miniature modular landscape at once coolly minimalist and quasi-futuristic in the manner of Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 apartment complex in Montreal. Perched throughout this angular setting where not the designer handbags one might have expected, however, but a strange array of figures and formations that seemed to have come from other worlds, Multicolored miniature heads (human, animal, and hybrid) topped glass canopic-style jars. Oversized mushroom sculptures sprouted between cantilevered plinths. Roughly molded figurines stood precariously on gangly legs, or sat in self-contained rapture, hands raised and eyes closed as if in mystic reverie.

The initial impression was of a wistfully romantic idyll, as Upritchard has described some of her earlier works. This "rainwod" community seemed as nostalgic for a mythic past as it was a fantastical future vision—an intriguing mix of Alice's Wonderland, early Paul McCarthy, and the Hobbitty hidey-hole theme parks on which New Zealand's tourist industry has come to rely (the country served as the film location of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy). At the same time, this mild utopianism was tempered by decidedly postapocalyptic inflections. The figurines were set apart form each other, atomized, or at best, connected only through a shared spatial narrative of isolation. Moreover, the figures' outstretched arms, bowed legs, and distorted bodies harked back to well-known images of survivors and victims of war, such as Margaret Bourke-White's photographs of emaciated Jewish corpses



at the end of World War II or the plaintive appeal to Huýnh Công Út's camera by Kim Phuc after a napalm attack in South Vietnam. Reminders if death were never far away from this world at the end of a New Age rainbow.

Suspended between the Apocalypse and a hippie afterlife, *rainwob ii* rejected any easy resolution of its mix of historical referents. Instead, Upritchard insisted on keeping the installation's narrative possibilities in tension, catering to cultural pessimist and mystical spiritualist alike. Through hardly as biting or confrontational as her earlier sculptures *rainwob ii* nonetheless delicately extended Upritchard's interest in the diverse histories and cultural memories that inform contemporary imaginings.

—Anthony Gardner