

True to Life

The title for the exhibition 'True to Life' is a curious frame – what is immediately striking is the playful rendering and reordering of things. Brendan Huntley's seventh solo exhibition with Tolarno Galleries channels his distinct visual language to extend three bodies of work: large 'Cocoon Head' sculptures, small clay 'Pinhead' sculptures, and oil paintings. There are a lot of eyes, a lot of looking, and the motley assembly of creatures and faces feel like a relic of a myth or fairy tale.

Huntley's Cocoon Head sculptures are significantly larger than life in scale, arranged in dynamic postures, wings unfolded. They are composite works, with each head supporting a butterfly or moth, elevated like a thought or a dream. They are accompanied by a constellation of almost 100 clay Pinheads – small-scale sculptures of imaginary human faces the artist has been creating since 2015. Highly expressive, a spectrum of emotion is distilled in each endearing character, under the artist's thumb. Huntley selected six of his most compelling Pinheads as subjects for large oil paintings. These portraits are more abstract – tightly framed around the eye of each figure, bringing the texture of the subjects into focus, and exaggerating their colour, form and linework.

Both his paintings and sculptures retain organic traces of their making – the stamp of a seed pod, finger and palm marks in clay, or the texture of a mudbrick wall where an unstretched linen canvas first lay. These physical accidents or 'footprints' interplay with the mechanical tools and processes Huntley employs; refashioned stamps such as marker lids, wooden toys, and baking moulds mimic natural forms in an uncanny way.

Huntley knows when a work is resolved when the subject has 'come into being'. The tactile accidents impressed in each work through the gestation process are received as a kind of formal synchronicity. Each mark and gesture, and the multiple sets of eyes, are expressions of labour in the process of rendering an object with subjectivity. It is this magical threshold where Huntley pauses, at the moment the object feels animate – the moment the creature looks back. This delicate recursion endows Huntley's work with unusual agency, with a spark of sentience, even perhaps a spirit. His attunement to this process of becoming – to giving voice, sight and subjectivity to form – is what gives these works a feeling of revelation. Assembled as a family, they are expressive of their own accord. A curious choir, visceral and raw, suspended in surprise.

Huntley is a tactile, process-driven artist, always drawing on a well of intuition. The act of artistic creation is a birth of sorts, and the motif of chrysalis that drives this body of work was conceived in the months after the birth of Huntley's first child. This was followed by a time of nesting, and also of isolation, during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Huntley was interested in the idea of 'awe-deprivation' – the traps of solipsistic thought that can afflict people who are estranged from nature. To find yourself in a cloud on a mountain, to study a butterfly in a field, is humbling and awe-inspiring – it broadens the psychic perspective and reminds us that we are entangled in the flow and patterns of nature. Huntley's gift is his intuitive wielding of materials to marry content with form; to transform the earthly, primordial medium of clay into

something airborne and free. Being present and porous to the radiant joy of nature is a remedy. Materialising this wonder into being is an exercise at the heart of the notion of creation.

True to Life was created on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong lands of Kulin Nations. The artist pays respect to their Elders past, present and future, and their ongoing connection to land and lore.

Anita Spooner, 2023