

## Think Big

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*We're the ninjas of the mundane.*

– Andy Partridge, XTC

One of the enduring leitmotifs of storytelling throughout the world is transmogrification. Literature, folklore and various other forms of popular narrative are full of moments of radical transformation. In Japanese folk tales, Kitsune, the fox, becomes a woman in order to play tricks on the unsuspecting, while conversely, in European legend the lycanthropic human morphs into a wolf. In Robert Louis Stevenson's tale the mild-mannered Dr. Jekyll struggles against his murderous other self, Mr. Hyde, while in the pages of Marvel Comics, scientist Dr. Bruce Banner futilely resists his transformation into the brute form of the raging green Hulk. Less violently, though no less wondrously, the girl in rags becomes the belle of the ball with the wave of a wand, and the mousy secretary lets down her hair and is transformed into a steaming seductress or golden lasso-toting superhero.

Whatever the motives and consequences of these transformations, the notion of an ordinary being with the ability to become something else is universally fascinating. There is a desire to see the mundane transform into something more, something greater or more spectacular. This process of transformation—the shift from ordinary to extraordinary—is the subject of the *Think Big* exhibition.

The word “mascot” is derived from the Provençal *masco*, meaning “witch.” A mascot has two purposes: it acts as a fetish or good luck charm and, more recently, it operates as a public representative and promotional tool. Endearingly cute and larger than life, a mascot charms us into cheering on the team or buying the product. An overgrown toy with an agenda, it is at once compelling and unnerving. Myfanwy MacLeod's *Mascot* is a wide-eyed innocent, loosely based on anime characters such as *Sailor*

*Moon*. Yet MacLeod's Technicolor girl is not all lovable sweetness: she carries a big club that suggests she is not to be messed with. MacLeod's “artist as superhero” is a stand-in for MacLeod herself in the commodification of her art.<sup>1</sup> Created for the Melbourne International Biennial in 1999, *Mascot* fulfilled its function: to promote MacLeod in the superheated environment of the large-scale international exhibition. In its subsequent form, passively resting in the gallery, *Mascot* sits like the skin of a selkie<sup>2</sup>, waiting for its owner to re-inhabit it should the need arise.

The term “shapeshifter” generally conjures up a folkloric or supernatural being with the ability to change form at will. What may not come to mind as readily is the economic and aesthetic reassignment of mass-produced consumer goods into a rarefied object of art. Brian Jungen's *Shapeshifter* is composed of inexpensive plastic lawn chairs cut up and reassembled into an immense whale skeleton suspended from the gallery ceiling in the manner of a natural history display. The work is visually striking, and Jungen's co-option of museological vernacular invests it with an authority at odds with its material composition. The play between these two polarities—the banal and the fetishized—is central to Jungen's artistic oeuvre. Rather than an either/or proposition, the work inhabits a hybrid middle ground. This notion of hybridity informs the artist's approach to contemporary Aboriginal identity in relation to globalization. Jungen's *Shapeshifter* and his mask series *Prototypes for New Understanding* reference West Coast Aboriginal iconography while also addressing broader themes relating to the global market economy. As Cuauhtémoc Medina points out, “In dissecting expensive shoes to produce pseudo-Aboriginal masks, in assembling plastic lawn chairs to emulate the skeleton of a whale... the artist aims to confuse economic and cultural values and to subject the viewer to the alienating experience of being unable to assess the status of objects.”<sup>3</sup>

Like Jungen, hybrid identity and the post-colonial condition are the subject of Rubén Ortiz Torres' multidisciplinary practice. A Mexican artist based in Los Angeles, Ortiz Torres explores the experience of Hispanics in the United States, specifically the U.S./

Mexico border region. He has produced a number of works that focus on low-rider culture, where ordinary cars are customized to excess as a means of self-expression. Ortiz Torres suggests that these cars provide an outlet for immigrants and illegal aliens forced to maintain a low profile and suppress their cultural identity within the mainstream. He writes, "They drive slow, pumping their music and blocking traffic, messing with a social system that is not eager to accept them. Their cars are turned into political and aesthetic signifiers."<sup>4</sup>

Ortiz Torres' *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is part of a series of works employing customizing techniques on the power tools used in gardening work, an area of employment traditionally accessible to Mexicans in Los Angeles. Ortiz Torres refitted a ride-on lawn mower, tricking it out with magenta paint, gold plating and break-away body parts. Like some morphing mutant, the mower unfolds itself, spins and dances with the flick of the control switches. In the video version of the work, the mower dances to a soundtrack made up of a pounding beat interwoven with the sounds generated by gardeners. Another mutant machine is depicted in Ortiz Torres' small model work *Bad Creation*. While it possesses stock low-rider details such as a gold chain steering wheel and gold-rimmed wheels, it is an amorphous mass—part car, part minimalist sculpture.

Whereas Brian Jungen and Rubén Ortiz Torres transform consumer products in their work, Rita McBride makes utilitarian objects out of precious materials (as in her *Chair* and *Glass Conduits* sculptures made from Murano glass) or employs pragmatic, decidedly unglamorous materials in unlikely ways. Rattan, used as a wood substitute in the production of inexpensive furniture, was McBride's material of choice when making a number of works including *Double Helix Spiral Staircase*. Like Jack's beanstalk, this imposing sculpture climbs seven metres to the ceiling, its organic form twisting around a central brass pole of the kind used by firefighters. There is a triple play at work here: the implied climb up something that is meant to be slid down; the humble material and the daunting dimensions; and the pedestrian definition of the double helix as a

geometric shape and its pre-eminent manifestation as deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA).

These kinds of ruptures in meaning are also evident in McBride's *Waikiki*, as is her interest in questioning modernist precepts within art and design. Minimalism's clean lines make it well-suited to the no-nonsense functionality of a Murphy bed. McBride's version, however, is made of porcelain enamel and titanium, and its weight is at odds with its purpose. The work is named after a typewriter, the Waikiki Sand, manufactured by IBM in the 1960s, and its mid-century aesthetic extends to the black-and-white silk spread on the bed imprinted with a photomural of the United Nations buildings, a paradigm of modernist architecture.

A yarn pom-pom is a pointless adornment. Sitting atop a knitted hat, it serves no purpose whatsoever. Despite this, or rather because of it, Kathy Slade has chosen to elevate this insignificant bobble into a commanding sculpture that references both minimalism and women's handiwork in its making. Her *Orange Pom-pom* can be viewed in relation to the minimalist imperative, for while its title gives a clue to its origin, its shape is non-representational; its size and density, even its colour tie it to works by Donald Judd, Yves Klein and others. And yet its shaggy over-abundance is warm and inviting, and its visceral qualities, including the visible evidence of its making, set it apart from more "masculine" minimalist objects. It is hard to resist the desire to interact with Slade's *Orange Pom-pom*, to touch, to fluff. This is in stark contrast to the ideal of the detached observer privileged by minimalism.

The sense of intimacy present in Slade's sculptural work carries through to her two-dimensional series *Ordinary World*. Consistent with her emphasis on reclaiming forms of women's work, Slade uses embroidery as her medium. Unconventionally, she combines this with the sheet music to a song by the slick '80s pop band Duran Duran. Though seemingly incompatible, the sweet sentimentality of *Ordinary World* is well-suited to the historical associations of embroidery. The needle of the machine embroidery acts as a substitute for the transcriber's pen as well as the record needle, and the words and notes stand in for the embroidery sampler historically used to instruct young women through verse. In both *Ordinary*

*World and Orange Pom-pom*, Slade navigates between the undervalued and the over-inflated. Meaning is not fixed but moves fluidly from one position to the next and then back.

Fiona Banner has dedicated an expansive body of work to monumentalizing the humble "full stop" or period. She has produced full stops in bronze, porcelain and polystyrene. There are full-stop drawings (such as the one in *Think Big*) in numerous typefaces and in a variety of sizes. In speaking about the work, Banner has said, "I sensed or experienced a big blip in my language, in my personal language... That's when I started making the full stops. So in a sense it seemed to me that instead of *content* or *subject* I had nothing. I had a space, I had a gap. And rather than that gap being an emptiness, I wanted it to be a fullness... I found myself building these big nothings, these big empty spaces, making them physical. Once language is formed, whether in writing or in art, one is often informed by its impossibility."<sup>5</sup>

This inadequacy of language informs Banner's ongoing "still films" project as well. These text works consist of her blow-by-blow accounts of films, including a series of Vietnam War movies and more recently pornographic films. *Kiss* is a silkscreen diptych in fluorescent pink. The handwritten text scrawled across the paper reads like a mad pornographic rant, the messy writing coupled with the burning hot colour making it almost impossible to read. Its indecipherability is further heightened by the way the text reads forward on one panel and backward on the other. As a genre, porn is well suited to articulating a sense of lack. It melds the highly exaggerated with the intimate. A private act becomes a master narrative.

In an episode of the British television series *Dr. Who*, an alien entity called The Wire infiltrates the television waves, plaintively crying, "Hungry, feed me." Just before she drains the life from unsuspecting viewers, she speaks to them familiarly from the screen in the calm, authoritative tones of the television presenter she is pretending to be. Like the entity in *Dr. Who*, the news anchors and reporters in Omer Fast's *CNN Concatenated* disrupt the normal subject/object relationship of viewer/presenter. Using thousands of edited clips and isolating them into single words, Fast has the cast of familiar CNN news

presenters voicing feelings of insecurity, concern and apprehension: "I need more from you. I need your attention. I need to know I'm being listened to."

Journalism operates under a façade of neutrality. It must be seen to be unbiased and impartial. The talking heads of new reportage are there to deliver the facts and nothing else. CNN gained prominence after 9/11 by feeding on the ensuing paranoia and fear. As a station that presents nothing but news, it needs to fuel fear in order to remain viable. The more news you watch, the more fearful you become, and the more fearful you become the more news you need to watch. Fast's *CNN Concatenated* foregrounds the fraught nature of this codependent relationship. While CNN manipulates the news and the viewer, Fast manipulates CNN.

*DMT* by Jeremy Shaw (aka March21) encapsulates the inability to articulate profound experiences. Shaw's single-channel video depicts the artist on DMT (dimethyltryptamine), a hallucinogenic drug that induces a hyper-real out-of-body state. Commonly, those on the drug imagine alien entities and engage in complicated scenarios despite the relatively short duration of the "high." In *DMT*, the artist is filmed in closeup as he reacts to what is being played out in his head. Subtitles at the bottom of the screen attempt to describe the indescribable. Ordinary language fails him. We watch and read, but are ultimately unable to share the experience.

The version of *DMT* included in *Think Big* is a prototype for a larger eight-channel installation work. The expanded version is presented in a darkened pod-like room where viewers move between screens, each of which shows one of eight subjects undergoing the same tortured experience as Shaw. The voyeuristic nature of Shaw's *DMT* becomes even more overt in the peep show structure of the larger installation. As a drug, DMT has its roots in South American shamanic ritual. The use of psychotropic drugs speaks to our innate desire to experience "more." Whether that want is defined as a spiritual quest or just a means of distraction from the everyday, it comes from the same need to encounter something more profound.

Akin to drug culture, the mythologies of rock music are steeped in notions of transcendence. From the raw sexuality of Elvis' gyrating hips to the

tuning-in, dropping-out hippies, rock music has had a lot to do with throwing off the restrictive confines of the ordinary and everyday. In the late sixties and seventies, as counterculture sought alternatives to the mainstream, many rock bands looked to Eastern philosophy and Celtic mysticism for inspiration. This is evidenced by the music of Led Zeppelin, especially songs such as *Kashmir*, *Immigrant's Song* and *Stairway to Heaven*. Eight minutes long, the iconic *Stairway to Heaven* unfolds with Tolkien-like passages:

There's a feeling I get when I look to the west,  
And my spirit is crying for leaving.  
In my thoughts I have seen rings of smoke through the trees,  
And the voices of those who stand looking.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning with an unmistakable melody and building to a plaintive wail, the song conjures feelings of nostalgia and longing both for an idealized life of "hedgerows" and "May queens" and for the experiences and emotional hyper-state of youth. It is these laden associations that are at play in Kevin Schmidt's work *Long Beach Led Zep*. In his video Schmidt performs the cliché of playing guitar on a beach. However, unlike the usual acoustic rendition beside a campfire, Schmidt plays *Stairway to Heaven* on an electric guitar powered by Marshall amplifiers and a generator, the sea and purple-hued sunset providing the idyllic backdrop. The video serves as a homage to the landscape and surfing culture of Vancouver Island's Long Beach, to which Schmidt has a strong affinity. It also provides a visual expression of *Stairway to Heaven*'s indulgent spirituality and the search for the sublime.

While Kevin Schmidt's *Long Beach Led Zep* plays out in awe-inspiring natural surroundings, Volker Tiemann's photographic series *Geworfene Gegenstände* and *Ruhende Gegenstände* are located in a very ordinary domestic environment. In contrast to Schmidt's grand gesture, Tiemann creates fleeting moments of enchantment within the minutiae of everyday life. Banal objects are imbued with the extraordinary in images such as *Geworfene Gegenstände (von A nach B)*, in which two egg cups in a kitchen sink transform into an arching fountain; or *Ruhende Gegenstände (Balance mit Butter)*, where

a pile of food is precariously balanced on a knife which is in turn cantilevered on the edge of a plate. While carefully staged, these little tableaux give the appearance of random occurrences. They are fleeting moments that could easily be overlooked, thus reminding us of the potential that surrounds us in our routine lives.

In the sage words of Jon Bon Jovi, "Change your perception of what a miracle is and you'll see them all around you." Logically, we know that a dog can't fly, but Tiemann's *Gerworfene Gegenstände (der Hund meiner Mutter)* presents an image of a dog doing just that. and so we must consider the possibility that this run-of-the-mill canine has the ability to defy gravity. After all, considering the legacy of folklore and the mutative powers of genetic engineering, anything is possible.

#### Notes

- 1 M. MacLeod interviewed by Deborah MacLeod, "Greetings from Myfanwy MacLeod," *Canadian Art*, Spring 2005.
- 2 In Irish, Icelandic and Scottish mythology, selkies are seals that can shed their skin in order to transform into humans. As long as their skin is saved they can revert to their seal form at will.
- 3 C. Medina, "High Curios," *Brian Jungen*, Vancouver Art Gallery (Vancouver/Toronto/Berkeley: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), p. 35.
- 4 R. Ortiz Torres, "Cathedral on Wheels," *The Foundations for Advanced Critical Studies, Inc.*, originally published in *Art Issues*, September/October 1998.
- 5 F. Banner, interviewed by Joanna Pocock, "From Arsewoman to Explosives: A chat with Fiona Banner," *Interview Stream*.
- 6 J. Page and R. Plant, *Stairway to Heaven*, 1970.