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Logo by Lucy Skaer

Francis Upritchard A Hand of Cards

Francis Upritchard was born in New Plymouth, New Zealand in 1976. After studying Fine Art at Ilam School of Art, Christchurch, she moved to London in 1998 where she co-founded the Bart Wells Institute, an artist run gallery, with fellow artist Luke Gottelier. Upritchard has become well known for sculptures of technicoloured figures, which simultaneously evoke the archaic and the futuristic. In one sense, her exhibition is about the failure of the 1960s and 70s counter-culture and its gaudy, individualistic aftermath. Upritchard also draws on the medieval myths of Nottingham in her new works.

Francis Upritchard spoke with Abi Spinks, Assistant Curator, about the exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary and the influences behind her work.

Gallery 1: War Dance

“I’ve been interested for a long time in medieval sculpture and the Robin Hood idea of taxing. I thought ‘Who’s poor, who’s rich? Who’s fighting for the system? Who’s fighting against the system?’ These war dancers came out of that. They’re not exactly the Sheriff’s men or the state’s men, but people who are re-enacting a sort of war. They’re soldiers, but they have no weapons. I’ve been looking at the Bayeux Tapestry, which has a lot of interesting outfits and postures. It also has these elongated figures, which reminded me of Alfred Kubin’s artwork.

Gallery 1 & 2



Francis Upritchard, Rider (detail), 2012. Image courtesy of Kate MacGarry, London

I'm not trying to recreate something historical. Precise detail is for historians and I think artists need to talk about now. I've just finished Hilary Mantel's novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. What's so fantastic is she's got a brilliant level of detail, but it's her own. No one paints Cromwell as a rosy figure, yet she does and that's super interesting.

There's a degree of cynicism that runs through my work, but it's cynicism towards myself as well as the world. Perhaps it is a little bit of hopelessness on my part, because I admire people who try to change things. I find it appalling that people like (Julian) Assange and (Bradley) Manning who stand up and try to do the right thing get quashed by the system and have their freedom curtailed. Personally I hate to have such little control, to not want war to happen but to have so little power to do anything about it. War often feels like a man's game and it is quite grotesque when done in your name. As a soldier you're just doing as you are ordered but that means you're often doing some pretty violent things."

Gallery 2: Hippies and Holy Fools

“In New Zealand, there are more people who are living like hippies, outside of normal society. New Plymouth where I was brought up was quite free, lots of homeopaths and naturopaths, surfers, potters, weavers and artists. The oil industry is there as well, and my father worked for IWD experimenting with pesticides, so it was quite an interesting little city.

I think that if you do drop out and go off grid, part of you is completely moral but it is also a cop out in a way. It's really hard to live completely green and maybe these people who are thinking about it so hard should engage with society more. But then I don't blame them and it's maybe something I would like to do. I think it would drive me nutty though, I'm far too social for that and I've never liked rules. So there is a mixture of affection and contempt when I think about these alternative communities. I'm probably both a misanthrope and a philanthrope simultaneously – an optimist and a pessimist.

I was looking through a family photograph album and realised that the postures of my figures are quite a personal thing. We're quite an awkward, gangly family, our posture is quite stiff and it's very similar to these figures. A lot of them also look like they're about to do something, so their posture is between two actions, on its way to something else. The eyes of my figures are usually closed or not really seeing. I always want to distance people from my work, so I omit the pupil of the eye, which is like the soul or personality.”



Francis Upritchard, Christopher. 2012. Image courtesy of Kate MacGarry, London

Collaboration

“My first collaboration was with the jeweller Karl Fritsch. I saw some of his rings in an artist’s book he’d made. I loved them – they were like miniature sculptures, so complete and beautiful. I felt like I could learn something from him so I wrote to him and met him and we started working together from there. I began working with Martino Gamper in the same way. All three of us had a common approach, working with found objects and changing them in some way to transform them into something different. I was making canopic urns out of German vases with clay heads that reference Egyptian urns. Karl was finding old signet rings, wedding rings and engagement rings, pulling out the diamonds and sticking gold in their place and making these very new things that had a historical feel. I really like that time shift. Martino was doing the same, getting some chairs by the German design company Thonet, or finding things on the street and cutting them up to make something totally new, that then has this very classic, old feel.

I got Martino to design these hard, modern plinths for this exhibition because I wanted them to be very masculine and good quality. I wanted that hardness to act as a counter point to my work. My work is always ‘wrong’. His has to be correct and very good quality exhibition furniture.”



Francis Upritchard, Lunge, 2012. Image courtesy of Kate MacGarry, London

Colour and Craft

“Painting to me is very important. I looked at the work of The Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) group – of which Kubin was a member – and specifically at Kandinsky when I was researching for this exhibition. Kandinsky has got all this movement and light and colour: I’m trying to project that kind of paint technique onto these works. My friend Luke Gottelier told me he had an exercise at art school where they all had to paint using their least favourite colours. I thought that was fascinating. I’ve always hated triangles and I’ve always hated yellow and purple... so yellow’s now my favourite. And I’ve made a lot of work recently in purple. This exhibition is full of triangles and diamonds. The diamond is a triangle, twice.

I think it’s weird how separate art, craft and design are made, how there’s a hierarchy. I feel like I didn’t learn that much in art school. I learnt more by making pottery or visiting weavers. My brother makes stone carvings and my sister makes jewellery. In my family we always made things and it seems to me that the impulse is exactly the same as making art. It’s funny because Alfred Kubin is described as an illustrator quite a lot, and not an artist. That’s a bit like art and craft or art and design. They are seen as different in terms of importance.”

An extended film of this interview is available to watch in the Study, off Gallery 4.



Francis Upritchard, Goose Vessel, 2012. Image courtesy of Kate MacGarry, London

Gallery 3 & 4: Early Works

The Alfred Kubin exhibition, presented in Galleries 3 and 4, includes a number of early works by Francis Upritchard. These works reflect Upritchard's long-standing interest in natural history and museum artefacts, as well as her use of second-hand furniture as a mode of display, replacing the traditional gallery plinth. The works, placed among Alfred Kubin's, suggest a shared narrative.

Both artists make unsettling, dream-like images that introduce discomfort into domesticity and render the natural world – the animal kingdom especially – alien and bizarre. It is almost as if Upritchard's sculptures have materialised from the small imaginary spaces of Kubin's drawings.



Francis Upritchard, *Uncomfortable Chairs*, 2010. Image courtesy of Kate MacGarry, London

