

Carla Cescon - Lifeforce

Carla Cescon, *lifeforce*, Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland, 15/07 - 02/08 2003

I first encountered Carla Cescon's artwork in a friend's living room. The sculpture perched on a table consisted of two small figures writhing together, indistinguishable as either humans or animals. It looked gothic, like either something from a nightmare, a Halloween costume party or a B-grade horror film.

While her work displays a comical, joke-like quality, Cescon's sculptures constantly investigate the darker side of life. They examine emotions often swept aside as too ugly or too difficult. They embrace attitudes and beliefs on the margins. While the imagery can appear demonic, there is more to her work than the supernatural. There is an empathy with the underdog, the forgotten and the misrepresented.

What attracted you to making art?

Art's liberating because you have all the control and if you let yourself be honest somehow, and let stuff happen it feels good. [But] I never saw it as therapy, more like manifesting things, sounds, pictures that you think may be interesting to see or hear.

Your work suggests an interest in the occult. How did you become interested in this?

I grew up with strange vivid, superstitious stories [about] how my dad's family, the Cescons, were cursed. My aunty was possessed, she underwent a few exorcisms by priests in and out of town. This was 1950s Italy. Inexplicable stuff went on in the 500-year-old house they lived in, mysterious illnesses. My mother has always had prophetic dreams, she gets signs from some relatives when they die, although my dad has had a few odd connections with all that as well. So I've always been drawn to all odd or marginal beliefs.

[I have] always felt like an outsider, tried to have visions, hung out in haunted places, tried to open myself up to gather in the ghosts. I think I'm using that sort of imagery to translate the darker emotional stuff you collect through life experiences. The crap that shouldn't exist but does 'cause people don't really respect life. Trying to make sense of the darker side of the human spirit. Trying to visualise emotions.

Has your work always dealt with similar themes?

I think I've been influenced by sci-fi. Once I made a porn video, [I] only showed photos from it though.

What is the relation of religion to your work?

I think I probably borrow the ugliest iconography and words from religious history but I thought it ended up going somewhere else. I'm always saying that artists

are blind when it comes to explaining the outcome of their work.

Do you have a religious background?

Roman Catholic, but I've never been able to connect with religion, [I] always felt like it was fiction.

I guess I asked about religion because there seems to be a strong sense of good versus evil in your work or at least references to the devil...

Have you seen the artspective.com interview?

Yeah...

I was a bit cranky that day and it was hard to give anything and I think I did say something like everything is [about] Jesus and the Devil. You know it just seems so absurd to think like that, so it's the absurdity that attracts me on one level and the power of belief through years of practice that gets me on another.

Some of the titles of your work express a political awareness or consciousness e.g. Wands for the Proletariat...

I have socialist values, maybe occultist aesthetics. [I am] wanting to support the underdog with other worldly symbols. [The] Wands came about when I was sick of reading sensationalist reports in the paper and current affairs programs targeting average people, highlighting woes and fears, and generally promoting social paranoia. So I tried to make a tool that wasn't too fancy but on mass could look like it could make something happen like stop media pollution.

Stop media pollution?

I went through a stage of hating topical news programs like *60 Minutes*, *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*. They just seemed like modern witch-hunts, looking for non-mainstream people, practices and lifestyles and demonising them through sensationalist journalism. I can't read the paper anymore, not Sydney papers anyway. The mass media will never really change. To think to stop misinformation, propaganda and product advertising is not within anybody's grasp. The Wands were like a futile gesture, fictional armament.

I read in an interview with you that politics is an inspiration for your work...

Yes it is. It's not overt in my work but I reckon it provokes my attitude, especially with the Bush administration. I hate violence [and] he's created this whole "axis of evil" map and concept, something that will eventually unravel. [He] tries to be this wrath of god type thing. Good versus evil is an everyday attitude. Its 1950s politics, paranoia, with crusader, Christian, righteous energy. I can't cope hearing if-



Carla Cescon, *Hellbox* (2003)

you're-not-with-me-you're-against-me type speeches. Colin Powell once stated that he saw [the] American military poised globally and at the ready "like the bully on the block" that [it was in the] early 1990s. Most of the people within this administration are ex-CEOs with strong ties to multinational companies. Give them money to become or continue being politicians, then reap rewards via paybacks.

I wish I could work with issues openly. I find it gets mangled, regurgitated and looking darkly spiritual. Maybe I'm stuck trying to visualise the dark underbelly of the human spirit.

Do you feel like imagery from popular culture has effected your work? I am thinking about film etc...

I like films by Werner Herzog , Roman Polanski. I like vampire stuff.

It seems like there is a lot on television these days that relates to the supernatural or at least has an element of science fiction...

Are you thinking of *Buffy* and *Charmed*, *X-Files* and *Millennium*?

Yeah...

I wish I could get into them! They're a bit too American. Although there are some good episodes of the *X-Files* and some out there *Millennium* ones. [I] don't watch that much TV – heaps of movies though.

I know that you work part-time with people who have a mental illness. Has this had an influence on your work?

I don't think it does in a straightforward way. But I think your environment comes into it no matter what or where you're at. That's the beauty or horror of life, people adapt to almost anything.

The materials you use for your work are kind of unusual. Using polyurethane isn't that common. Is there a reason that you chose to use them?

Polyurethane foams are dynamic in that they are unpredictable most of the time, especially when you use different combinations. I like to think I'm being dictated by the material in the final outcome. [I'm] not really in control. It's like working with an animal or something.

How does this affect your work?

It loosens things up conceptually. [It] can make something look pathetic when you wanted powerful. There are a lot of throwaways. Even though I let things be, I do have a critical side that heavily edits.

Louise Poppelwell is a writer living in Auckland.