

'Arse Mouth'
An interview with artist, Amanda Newall



Fabulous creatures. Sculptures of feminine fingers stitched into butcher like bags. Computer games where disembodied objects float in space, a fragment of an austere building, the rubber face of a male sex doll, a dogs stomach full of maggots. Amanda Newall's art is hard to define; she works across a range of disciplines. Her work is like her personality, tough and eclectic, full of flourishes of black humour and obscure performances.

Megan Dunn talks to the artist who says, 'I like to approach my art with the ambiguity of a stranger.'

The first work I saw by you was a video of an oblique almost lumpen golden seal 'performing' outside the sky tower. There was almost a belligerent quality to this work – it was at once so public and yet so purposefully inaccessible...

I could barely breathe inside that costume and I couldn't see out which made the work uneasy. I performed in a variety of environments including outside the museum. Later, when I watched the video footage I discovered a child watching and copying all my movements, engaging at a grass roots level. I quite like to see art that is disruptive. Maybe it's a personal thing but I have always enjoyed annoying and irritating people. Not being able to understand art can be very irritating for an audience.

Arse Mouth, in the kitchen (2004) wool and stitching. Photographed at Boquitas Pintadas, Argentina.

Describe your first ever art works to me...

The first art works I remember are a series of books made out of tissue paper. When I was small I used to get really bad croup and once I was sent home from school for barking like a dog. My mother brought me an old wooden ironing board that I could stretch across my bed to draw on. When I was sick I used to sit in bed reading Mad magazines and drawing books on tissue paper. The books were always idealized stories about teddy bears. The king and queen of the teddies would go on special picnics, and decide to live happily ever after.

Your art now consists of costumes and creatures; from your Avon Lady with sheer pink talons to the retro fright wig quality of your recent vinyl costumes. Who are these creatures and where do they come from?

The creatures are based on my experience as a human being and my experience of other humans... as a child I always wondered where our local Avon lady came from. She would turn up on our door



Rubber Gloves and Guns (2005) (detail) cast glass. from 'Sic Games 2', the New Zealand Film Archive, Auckland.

step in Timaru where my parents ran a tombstone business. To me, the Avon lady seemed to have come from nowhere. I used to make up ideas of what she did when not selling cosmetics. I thought because we lived across from the gardens perhaps she liked to feed the ducks. So when I made the Avon lady costume in 2000, I videoed myself feeding the ducks... it was a kind of tribute to my idea of her. I remember convincing Mum to buy stupid things for me like three little pig soaps and a black glass panther with cologne for my father. I thought these things would keep the Avon lady and her mystique coming back to the house.

Perhaps that cologne bottle is where your fascination with panthers comes from? (In London Amanda showed me a frosted glass panther she had made, carefully packed away in a pair of her socks.)

Every time I came through customs the officers made me take the panther out of my socks and wait while they tested it for drugs?! I have always liked the sleek nature of panthers. I also like the idea of turning something large and organic, like a panther, into a small container for holding male perfume. Perfection can so easily be turned into something tacky and kitsch.

And what about your vinyl costumes? What inspired those?

Those costumes were based on the children that used to appear on 'That's Incredible'. I especially remember the kids that had that aging disease, the one that made them look about 70 when they were only ten years old. They would always wear basket ball caps and be given a trip to Disneyland out of sympathy.

Yes, then they would get to wear the silver jacket with 'That's Incredible' written on the back.

I always wanted one of those jackets. I used to wish I had a strange illness or extra long fingernails so I could get on the show too. Perhaps I could have gone on 'That's Incredible' for being great with dominos?

You have also made a lot of sculptures of waxen pink hands and bear-like claws...

I have used feet and hands in my work for a long time. When I was teaching at Waiangarei Polytechnic on a residency I made a series of raku-fired toes and fingers and morphed hands. Often I have ideas that can not be presented fully in one medium and I like to combine traditional techniques like painting and sculpture with computer art. In 'Operation Game' I inserted images of the raku-fired feet, toes and fingers into a photograph of my hand.

What intrigues you about the human body?

I like the way we strive to make our bodies beautiful yet there are always hidden grotesque elements, for example, bad feet, extra, missing or webbed toes. Recently someone told me her aunt has an extra nipple on her leg and people have been known to grow hair in their pancreas and fingernails in the folds of their flesh. The body is like a computer bug, things can come out of nowhere and act...

Is that why you made 'Operation Game'?

'Operation Game' was based on the eighties board game Operation, where players would pull bones and organs out of a human using small instruments. If the instrument touched the sides of the human there would be terrible feedback and flashing.

Your version was quite different....

I decided to make a game using gory pictures of the palm of my hand opened up. Inside I embedded images of the raku-fired toes and fingers. The viewer could manipulate the mouse to pull the fingers and toes. When they are pulled in the right direction a video sequence gets played as a reward. I liked the idea of using this structure to view a video, cut up in pieces and embedded in a random order. The viewer sees fragments and tries to piece the story together in a manner similar to forensic evidence.

I enjoyed the thrill of spiralling into brief excerpts of a strange video...

The video called 'Tarred and Feathered' was of a marionette I took to the gardens behind Parnell, dropped into an oil tank then covered in feathers.

For some reason 'Tarred and Feathered' reminded me of the disturbing soot-faced monster who lived behind the diner in 'Mulholland Drive'...

That creature was my favorite character in the film; it was humorous yet horrific, like it had been plucked fresh out of the human psyche.

Is that a quality you strive for in your own work?

My work often has a macabre, mysterious or slightly sick nature to it. When I presented work at a conference in Edinburgh one of the professors said it was immoral.

What part does horror play in your work?

I like the comedy and intensity of horror. When I was about two and a half years old I got my thumb stuck in a baby's bottle and couldn't get it out. Being practical I smashed the bottle (with my thumb still inside) against some concrete. It was lucky my parents lived across from the hospital (even so dad drove me there). I still have lace like scars all over my thumb...

Who is Kelvin S. C. Corpus?

Kelvin S. C. Corpus is a manifestation of part of me. Corpus stands for "body piece" and S.C. stands for "Strange Creature". I made labels with cartoons of myself on them for this show. For me that exhibition was an uncanny and horrific experience because my close friend and contemporary James Wallace died just weeks before. After that the work became very much, in an esoteric way, about him. I even made a garment for him...

What was the garment?

It was a cotton shirt that looked designer-made yet was also a straight jacket. The sleeves had hands with false nails that seemed to negate the restrictive nature of the jacket by suggesting some kind of escape or freedom of movement.

Now you are making more computer games. What do these games consist of?

The games vary; what they all have in common is a reference to how we store information and experience space. One game I made, 'Tree structure,' was a



Top: *Becoming Tamarin* (2005) (detail) persona interface for 'Sic Games' from 'Sic Games 2', SoFA Gallery, Christchurch and New Zealand Film Archive, Auckland. **Centre:** *Sic Games* (2005) (detail) projection digital interactive, SoFA Gallery, Christchurch. **Bottom:** *The Avon Lady's gloves* (2000) vinyl, fingernails and netting from 'Naked Lodge' installation and video downtown Auckland.

visual representation of a tree structure. It was made up out of 1000 images set against a black space. The game starts with an interface of three floating objects, a robot Hoover, a building and a male sex doll. The sex doll was sourced from a website called 'realdoll.com' where you can build your ideal doll out of pieces, choosing everything down to the cut and color of the pubic hair.

How is 'Tree Structure' played?

When you zoom into any object a series of new objects appear, zoom in again and these objects break into pieces. The game is like an endless tunnel of things... for example when you zoom into the female sex doll a dog's stomach appears, full of maggots. You can then click on one of the maggots, which contain everything from fingernails to robots, prosthetic feet and furniture.

What work did you show on your recent trip to Argentina?

I exhibited a series of photographs called 'Arse mouth'. The work was made in collaboration with my close friend Benedict Webb who was living in Argentina at the time. He gave me a mask as a present before he went away. (*'Ass mouth' is a black balaclava with a huge crooked red mouth like a woollen gash – at once sinister, funny and obscene*). I then shot images of myself wearing the mask at a geothermal tourist site in Rotorua.

Why did 'Ass Mouth' decide to go to Rotorua?

My sister Melanie organized a family bonding trip there and I decided to capitalise on the opportunity and make some work as well. At the time there was a lot of political stuff happening about land rights that was relevant to the piece.

The photos had a grainy surveillance quality, 'Ass mouth' standing blankly in front of pools of wafting steam like an alien. What did the other tourists make of it?

The day I took the photos there weren't many tourists around although I think the staff in the shop were concerned. Royce, my brother, was extremely embarrassed when I tried to buy my entrance ticket wearing 'ass mouth'. He made me take it off.

What role does humiliation play in your performances?

In my performances if anyone or thing is humiliated it tends to be me.

I loved the animation of your flatmate Joseph wearing a pair of Tiger ears, paws and huge slipper feet. It felt like a portrait to me.

I made that costume specifically for Joseph, no-one else could have pulled it off. Joseph reminds me of a Tiger. He is sort of nice and sweet on the surface yet there is a sinister, mischievous and slightly predatory quality under the surface.

His Tiger slippers were really comfortable, I enjoyed wearing them round the house while you were in London...



Sic Games 2 (2005) (detail) networked four-player digital interactive game. The New Zealand Film Archive, Auckland.

Joseph used to wear them at home every day and night. When I was going to the conference in Edinburgh he wouldn't let me have them back – I had to steal the slippers from his room when he was out. The work itself was made up of photographic stills; Joseph – as the Tiger – spins around continuously stuck in a constant repeating motion he cannot break. It's like the space controls him.

For me 'The Tiger' sums up the mischievousness that is always present in your work, especially your performances. Are you a mischievous person?

No.

Finally, how do you want people to respond to your work?

I like it if people can add something to the work. I think that is why I have a history of making performances or interventions in the social landscape. Mystery inspires me and I like it if the public can share that mystery too. Maybe that's selfish?

Megan Dunn is the daughter of Alastair and Lee Dunn. Formerly of Invercargill.

Amanda Newall makes digital games, interactive glass sculpture and likes to dress people.