

Duo cuts out a surreal poem

VISUAL ARTS

HADLEY+MAXWELL: WHO THAT HAPPENS

At the Or Gallery until May 7

◀ A swarm of ideas and sensations surrounds *Who That Happens*. This sculptural installation by the Vancouver-educated, Berlin-based duo Hadley+Maxwell stretches in a diagonal line across the darkened interior of the Or Gallery, its accumulation of severed, reassembled, and disjunct forms reading like a surrealist poem—or perhaps a Victorian nightmare. Facial features and body parts are sheared off wooden figurines; legs and corners are sawed off tables; and chimeras are created by conjoining human and animal elements.

The installation comprises a series of freestanding assemblages, each composed of altered found objects in combination with carved Styrofoam or other unlikely or offhand materials. The found objects, which include clumsy carvings of shepherds, hunters, hobos, and assorted beasts, are mostly wooden, mostly old, and mostly kitsch, purchased by the artists online or at flea markets. Although the surreal combinations and dim lighting that confront the viewer suggest the dark and irrational reaches of the unconscious mind, a rigorous line of reasoning runs throughout this work.

Hadley Howes and Maxwell Stephens, who have been collaborating since 1997 and who have realized their always intriguing ideas in video and sound as well as mixed-media installation, employ the literal act of “the cut” to symbolize modernism’s break with the past at the beginning of the last century. Using a handsaw, they have shaved decorative or descriptive contours off furniture and figurines, creating flat planes. They have then altered the surface finish of these objects and rebuilt them into



Creating a sort of Victorian nightmare, Hadley+Maxwell shear and saw away at figurines in this detail from the installation *Who That Happens*.

odd and unsettling conglomerates. Half of a bearded wanderer with a big bundle on his back balances on the sheared-off edge of a curiously painted pedestal table; a wooden head with face removed sits atop a plinth wrapped in cowhide; an assortment of animals with human faces stands on a Styrofoam mountain.

One of Hadley+Maxwell’s interests here, they told the *Straight* during a recent interview at the Or, is in “the undecidable status of the human: a being that defines itself as both not-animal and not-divine”. At the same time, they engage the forms and ideas of the grotesque in order to transgress boundaries that are spatial, material, and representational. The history of the grotesque in art is long and fascinating. The term was originally used to describe ancient Roman ornamental arrangements of arabesques and fantastical depictions of animals, humans, and monsters. Our more recent understanding of it, from the

Romantics forward, connotes the strangely or incongruously distorted or deformed.

Who That Happens conjures up postmodern ideas of instability and flux. It also directly invokes the modernist use of the grotesque to defy traditional representations of beauty and everyday reality. The artists make particular reference to the surrealists by quoting René Magritte. Inside a decorative kettle, half of it cut away, they’ve painted a characteristic Magritte blue sky with fluffy white clouds. And onto the shorn-off face of a carved wooden bust, they’ve appended a photocopied Magritte image of a head bound in a grey sack.

It’s significant to this installation that Magritte used a conventional painting style to convey his iconoclastic imagery, since Hadley+Maxwell employ kitsch objects to rearrange notions of the ways in which we represent ourselves—and to disturb the boundaries of our being.

> ROBIN LAURENCE