

Vernacular symbols and other hidden conspiracies: Grant Foster's Holy Island – Lorena Muñoz-Alonso

I enter the room where Grant Foster's paintings are hanging and I find myself surrounded by children. Lost in their thoughts and games, they ignore me, uninterrupted. I hadn't encountered such an unabashed pictorial fixation with infants since Balthus, but the controversial French-Polish artist's subjects were self-possessed, almost miniature adults, as if grown-up problems had already furrowed their brows, all depicted with great detail and intricacy. Foster's are more child-like, playful, and also ominously faceless, their countenances mazes of thick colour. On this trodden path, the London-based artist is in good company: the British were key in developing the picturesque tradition of child portraiture during the 18th century, which was then exported and embraced by a number of European artists. Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Joshua

Reynolds, George Romney or Thomas Lawrence are a few names that spring to mind. But the question is why. Why devote such laboured attention to children, a subject that could be considered either creepy or just plain kitsch? This frisson is precisely Foster's point, as he is interested in poking at the contradictions underpinning our current morality. For him children are the perfect symbol: emblems of our recalcitrant need to maintain the crumbling façade of civilised, stable values and good intentions. Borrowing imagery from two populist British sources – the picturesque tradition and tabloid newspapers – Foster's paintings explore the simultaneous demise and exacerbation of moral values, the ubiquitous and hysterical rhetoric of "goodies and baddies". At the top of *Stunted Growth*, for example, a photograph of a baby beauty queen has been collaged to the canvas, her mouth obliterated and, with it, her ability to speak for herself. With her heavy made up doll face and her well-rehearsed flirty looks, one wonders what kind of world this is, in which we aim to protect minors while bartering them as sexual commodities. It is, of course, a safe and reassuring idea, that of equating children and innocence, but the more I look at these paintings, the less and less innocent these kids begin to seem. Their faceless indeterminacy is eerie, their endeavours unclear, and I am instantly reminded of Jean Cocteau's perverse fascination with youths. In *Les Enfants Terribles* (1929) – a mesmerising novella that explores the tenebrous and sensuous recesses of childhood – he writes: "[Children have] animal, vegetable instincts, almost indefinable because they operate in regions below conscious memory, and vanish without a trace, like some of childhood's grief: and also because children stop talking when grown-ups draw nigh. [...] Their rites are obscure, inexorably secret; calling, we know, for infinite cunning, for ordeal by fear and torture; requiring victims, summary executions, human sacrifices." Cocteau crafted a beautiful and dark cautionary tale to warn us of the dangers of letting young ones run wild, free to transmigrate their fantasies to real life. So for a moment I wonder, are Foster's children the victims, or are they perhaps the instigators?

On the floor, inhabiting the loaded space created by the paintings, sits a group of sculptures that have quite a different effect. If the protagonists of the canvases are ensnared in a fog that clouds their individual personalities, the sculptures are pretty much fully-formed characters, brought to life in a precarious materiality that is both abject and irresistibly appealing. Consider *The Crusader*, for example, a green half-man half-monster that embodies the conspiracy theory of the reptilian humanoid. This theory, Foster tells me, argues that reptilian aliens arrived on earth 5,000 years ago and began breeding with humans. The reptilian blood line, the story goes, endured until today and pervaded the highest echelons of society, including powerful politicians who are now hard at work to create a new world order. These paranoia-fuelled constructs are, for Foster, the surrogate and atomised religions of our secular times. Like religion, these beliefs are just as impossible to prove as to disprove, and epitomise the twilight zone between reason and imagination that the human consciousness so cosily inhabits, sublimating almost effortlessly the cognitive dissonances that ensue thereafter.

Nearby sits *Provincial She Ra From the Seaside*, a re-appearance of a childhood delight or trauma (depending on how you see it). Foster grew up in Worthing, on the south coast of England, and used to spend a lot of leisure time in the amusement arcades on its pier, playing this game where he'd control a robotic woman contained in a glass box. Foster recalls her being unsettling and ugly, but also alluring in a "Hans Bellmer sort of way". The cone shaped hat that crowns her head – a motif borrowed from Hieronymus Bosch that Foster employs regularly in his sculptures – represents the inability to reach the heavens and comprehend the infinite (or conspiracy theory of choice). Foster's re-configurations of the British vernacular – the holy island of the exhibition's title – blended with childhood memories, popular culture memes and art historical imagery, create a universe that manages to be both highly personal and strangely universal. His paintings and sculptures are material endeavours to attempt to understand his own heritage and context, which despite their proximity remain rather unfathomable to him. Amused and disgusted in equal terms by the free-floating absurdity that surrounds him, Foster's art satirises his own struggle to make sense, and the re-

sulting pieces tap into something dark and sinister, yet tantalising. His are artefacts that one can't stop looking at with a smirk, frozen at the sudden realisation that the joke is on us, and not on them.

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