**Laura Ford: Reveal and Conceal**

My piece of sculpture (usually figures)

do not represent only study in forms. they

represent emotional states usually of a painful

kind – such as… impending engulfment (under

water) a very old theme

*Louise Bourgeois (psychoanalytic writings, c.1958)[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Laura Ford’s sculpture invites us to respond to and acknowledge our animal self – the self that reveals itself in our unbidden thoughts, in disinhibited drunk behaviour, or moments of overwhelming emotion. This instinctive, un-edited version of ourselves is one that we associate with childhood: those years in which raw sensory response to situations can consume the body. In the arena of non-verbal communication, there are few things as starkly eloquent as a toddler’s tantrum, a young child skipping down the street, or the hunched shoulders of an adolescent sulk.

The children and animals that populate Ford’s sculptural universe are neither children, nor animals, precisely: they perform instead as avatars for feelings or states of various kinds. Ford is often associated with feminist artists of an earlier generation – notably Kiki Smith and Paula Rego – but their casts of birds, beasts and human characters are used to very different ends. Where Smith explores the symbolic and mystic vocabulary of various cultures, and Rego the dark and redemptive powers of fable and fairy tale, you need no knowledge of art historical symbolism to understand Ford’s work. Whether animal or human, her figures instead speak to us at an instinctive level. With the faces masked, or cloaked in elaborate costumes, they are reduced to a kind of raw abstract personhood. We read Ford’s sculptures as we read the body language of living humans, checking for signs of stress, fear, anger, shame or anxiety in the way that they hold themselves and relate to other figures in a group.

The lower space at East Quay hosts what seems to be a motley array of children in masquerade. Some wear animal costumes – a frog, an octopus and a pink poodle – albeit these are animals with the simplified cartoonish quality of plush toys. They might have wandered away from a birthday party or school play but while their outfits are festive, their demeanour is anything but. The little pink octopus appears isolated and lost in thought, while the frog and poodle are watching anxiously. Ford made this trio for a public exhibition in Cardiff in 2016: they were positioned in a glass shopfront looking out toward other figures positioned on the wall of Cardiff Castle.

At Watchet, they are reimagined within a huddle of figures manifesting intense emotional states. Two *Love/ Hate* *Girls* (2014) hide behind balaclavas, their pockets filled with miniaturised versions of themselves, as though trapped within a hall of mirrors. Three *Sorrow Filled Cats*(2014) dressed in bonneted Victorian capes give the mournful big-eyed stare of a manipulative pet soliciting treats. *Pale Fat Ghosts* (2019) weeps extravagantly as she grasps a pair of demon dolls to her chest, as though inviting them to communicate on her behalf.

In these unabashed public displays of feeling we are party to something that might otherwise remain private – Ford’s figures are physically costumed and masked, but emotionally naked – such is the ‘reveal’ of the exhibition’s title. Children and animals are a useful cypher for Ford precisely because we consider them to be open and honest.

Michel Foucault’s study of prisons, schools and military structures *Discipline and Punish* (1977)[[2]](#endnote-2) includes an eighteenth century engraving of a twisted oak sapling lashed to a stout pole, forcing it into an upright position. Foucault found the engraving in an orthopaedics manual: the tree was intended to suggest a child’s body, and the straightening that could be achieved with corrective restraints. But it also became a useful metaphor for psychological control, and a system of education and discipline that forcefully trains the developing mind and body. The end goal of such a system is to bring the subject to a state of docility in which it internalises and reproduces the controlling imperative, and compliantly polices its own (and others’) actions.

The lashed tree in *Discipline and Punish* is the spiritual forebear of Ford’s *Espaliered Girls* (2007) – child figures in which the upper half resembles a violently pruned and disciplined fruit tree[[3]](#endnote-3). At East Quay, Ford has positioned her *Espaliered Girls* before the other figures like a living fence. Having themselves been submitted to a violent form of control, the trained tree figures in turn exert control over their peers. Part of the social conditioning we receive in the transition between childhood and adulthood is to rein in – or at least hide – our feelings. Such is the control that the *Espaliered Girls* are attempting to exert over the other sculptures. In keeping the group contained along the back wall of the gallery, branching arms extended, the *Espaliered Girls* prevent us getting dangerously close to feelings that have apparently slipped beyond the limits of social acceptability.

Different revelations and concealments are underway upstairs. A new series of watercolours picture cats in various states of submersion. They are, at first glance, comic. The urge to laugh at feline behaviour seems to be near-universal: a cat video that’s funny in Yokohama will also raise a chuckle in Yeovil. There isn’t much material stuck to the walls of Ford’s studio, but of the two pictures taped up when I visited this spring, one was a reproduction of a painting by Paolo Uccello, and the other was a cat meme. We find cat videos funny because it’s hard to resist anthropomorphising domestic animals. Cat expressions and positions can seem uncannily reminiscent of human response: to us they might appear content, confused, louche, manic, humiliated, furious or affectionate. In attributing such feelings to feline companions we experience an enriched relationship with our pets. But really, who knows what’s going on in those little cat minds?

Ford’s painted cats are absolutely anthropomorphised: they are experiencing human feelings. The water in these paintings is an alien element, one that cats legendarily dislike, and they are responding to their immersion in a variety of ways. Ford worked on these paintings during lockdown, and they explore the disconcerting impact of months of enforced isolation. There is a whole broth of feelings at play here from anxiety to luxuriance. In many, the cat seems to be submitting to something that it does not enjoy, yet nevertheless accepts dutifully. As with the costumes worn by the childlike sculptural figures, the water becomes a masking device, so that we can never see both body and face. In many pictures, the head and paws stick out above the waves as though the cat were looking at us over a painted screen, a sense of artifice enhanced by more-or-less stylised rendering of the water.

The artist has described these works exploring a mind-body separation: these are beings divided between the two elements of water and air. This separation might permit a transcendence of limitations, and the ability to thrive in adverse circumstances. Or conversely it might manifest in the mind misbehaving (as it so often does), offering dark thoughts in light times.

Describing the female orgasm, we often reach for the language of water: we talk of feelings washing over us, ripples of pleasure, waves of sensation, liquid merging. Such are the invisible floods engulfing the two large bronze cats on the gallery floor. Describing the work, Ford referenced the ground-breaking book on women’s health and sexuality *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970)[[4]](#endnote-4) and its description of the complex, concealed structure of the clitoris and related erogenous zones. In learning about sexual response, women are often invited to imagine these areas as a visible, exterior shape – the US sculptor Sophia Wallace has based the forms of her *Swan* series on the hidden structure of the clitoris. Ford has instead imagined this felt presence in terms of phantom limbs, which for the sculpted cats manifest as vast bushy tails to be endlessly pursued, but seldom caught. One of the two bronze cats in the upper gallery is in the process of vigorously chasing her tail: the other we find reclining in a daze, having apparently just succeeded in catching hers.

We might find Ford’s sculptures funny, or cute, and that’s part of their dynamic. Scale has an impact on how we respond to them. Ford has made sculpture at an ‘adult’ size – the satirical *A King’s Appetite* (2017) included a grotesque Donald Trump-like Prince Regent lamenting his ailing giraffe – but those perform in a different way. We feel more comfortable approaching figures that we read as childlike: we let our guard down. They may be uncanny, but they are not immediately threatening. Ford appeals to our humour and our sympathy to lure us into engagement with her work. Rather like the soft costumes that clothe her hard sculptures, she eases us into a close encounter with feelings and other phenomena we might otherwise find distinctly discomforting.

1. Philip Larratt-Smith (ed.), *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed, Volume II: Psychoanalytic Writings* (Violette Editions, 2012) p.93 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, first published as *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison* (Éditions Gallimard, 1975) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Espalier’ denotes a tree trained to grow flat in a system of horizontal branches, often against a wall, to encourage fruiting. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New England Free Press, 1970) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)