Push and Pull

My Internal Debate with Francis Upritchard's Work

by Jessica Douglas

Published on 25.10.2018



Francis Upritchard, *Wetwang Slack*, Installation View, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 27 September 2018 – 6 January 2019. Photo: Angus Mill.



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Francis Upritchard, *Standing: Long Legs, Long Arms*, 2018 (detail). *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

I enjoy things that I know I shouldn't. Trashy TV. Comforting junk food. Too much time spent scrolling on social media. And I know I'm not alone: we all have our vices. But what about when that something isn't a simple guilty pleasure? What about when it contains extreme emotional power? When it embodies meaning and transmits possibility? When its purpose is to challenge?

I am, of course, talking about art.

For as long as I can remember, I've been a fan of Francis Upritchard's work. I think her objects are exquisitely and skilfully crafted. They are full of detail, life and colour, are completely and utterly mysterious, and are never boring. However, I also think her work edges its way into murky territory, blurring the lines between what's acceptable and what constitutes cultural appropriation. This rings true in her latest solo show, *Wetwang Slack,* exhibiting at the Barbican in London until early 2019.

Admittedly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, I was a little nervous to write this piece – and still am now that it's going live. I am Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent or non-Polynesian heritage),

Francis Upritchard is Pākehā, but the majority of Upritchard's work depicts a culture that is not. Needless to say, it's an extremely sensitive area. Although Upritchard describes her work as "meaningless,"[01] it isn't. Art never is. And her work holds clear references to existing history, culture and people. They might only be allusions – but that's the point. They allude to and point the finger towards traditions that are not her own.[02]



Curator Leila Hasham and artist Francis Upritchard at *Wetwang Slack*, Installation View, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 27 September 2018 – 6 January 2019. Photo: Angus Mill.



Francis Upritchard, *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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In *Wetwang Slack*, as is often the case with Upritchard's work, there doesn't seem to be any one culture on display. It's a mix of South American, Indian, East Asian, Ancient Greek, Western. The title itself, *Wetwang Slack*, is that of excavation and exposure – Wetwang Slack is an Iron-Age archaeological site in East Yorkshire.

By creating and presenting works that evoke (but blur) certain traditions, histories, cultures and ideologies, Upritchard gently mocks and critiques the way Western institutions collect and

display traditional or native items as curiosities removed from context. Yet, perhaps inadvertently, this is exactly what Upritchard herself ends up doing. She purposefully appropriates a culture that isn't hers, strips it of meaning, and presents it without context. Furthermore, as a viewer you end up staring and ogling at the oddities on display as an outsider, perceiving them as 'Other'.

When objects and artefacts with history and mana (a status of prestige, authority, spiritual power) are presented in museums and galleries, especially ones overseas, questions and concerns surrounding their ownership, presentation and engagement are pertinently posed. However, because Upritchard's works are created 'new', i.e. are without this history and mana, they are seemingly presented as untroubled by critiques of racism.

For those of you well versed in Upritchard's work and the discourse surrounding her practice, you will likely be familiar with Lana Lopesi's piece in *The Pantograph Punch*, The Moral Argument. For those that aren't, this essay was written late 2017 in response to Upritchard's touring, 20-year survey exhibition *Jealous Saboteurs*[03]. In it, Lopesi states:

> Upritchard is a professional borrower, taking things from other people and cultures and refashioning them into her art… There's a refusal to acknowledge where these objects and people come from unless you can identify the references visually yourself… [04]

These sentiments are echoed in Upritchard's London show in her depiction of the blue Vishnu deity of Hinduism, in her faux Neolithic jewellery, Parthenon-like reliefs, and in amongst her primarily Japanese figurative sculptures and their ethereal costumes.



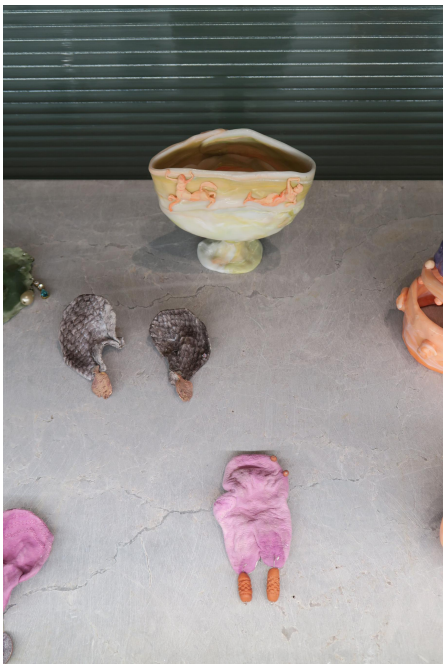
Francis Upritchard, *Standing: Long Legs, Long Arms*, 2018 (detail). *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *New Life,* 2018 (detail). *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Wetwang Slack,* The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Serious One*, 2018 (detail). *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

Upritchard's sculptures are what immediately greet you upon entering *Wetwang Slack*. They are flawlessly crafted with exquisite detail. There are nine in the first section, seven of them figurative and all of them quintessentially Upritchard. They are trademarked by their delicate facial features, small ears and hands, and flesh

which is moulded into a smooth finish – but not so smooth as to escape the impressions left by Upritchard's touch.

The figures are full of colour, from vibrant blue to bright yellow, pink and purple, and they strike various poses in their handmade garments. *New Life* (2018) is divided down the middle, half-blue and half-silver. She is adorned in a yellow outfit replete with a 'Fenberger House Visitor' badge. She sticks her arms straight out, parallel with the floor, and she juts her jaw, baring her teeth in a sort of childish growl-grin.

Across from *New Life* is *Happy Sad* (2018), whose arms are brought to her chest in a quizzical, 'who me?' gesture. She wears a Japanese quilted jacket over the top of a checkered outfit. The longer you stare at her, the more surrealist your encounter becomes. She wears bright blue glasses with smiley faces on the front. Her feet are replaced with orangey two-toed hooves (part crustacean, part farm animal). Her hands and face are covered in inky blue markings, and dangling from her ears are large, multi-coloured pom poms. These recall the native headdresses worn in Peru as well as those worn by the Tibeto-Burman Lisu people, the Ha Nhi women of Vietnam, and the Hutsuls of Ukraine and Romania. No indication is given as to which culture the pom poms specifically belong.

Three figures, *Wife in Straw Hat* (2017), *Green Earrings*, *Green Hands* (2017) and *Serious One* (2018), wear hats which echo the forthcoming shelves adorned with rows upon rows of caps and hats. These figures also sport tranquil expressions and layers of baggy clothing filled with geometric patterns.

Despite their vividness, these figures are also peaceful and meditative, encouraging reflection not only of themselves but also of our own inwardness. This is thanks to the soft rubbings left on the skin, suggesting personal intimacy and closeness, their poses which calmly rest mid-action, and their eyes not fully shut and yet not quite open either.



Francis Upritchard, *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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The sculptures teeter delicately on the tops of lollypop-purple-pink plinths which are angled in all directions and sitting at all heights. They gently follow the arc of the exhibition space, aptly titled 'The Curve', leading you around to the next portion of the show where you find small dinosaurs, a coiled snake and decapitated hands and fingers. Once you've peeled away from these curiosities, there's a large jewellery cabinet filled with coloured polymer plastic coloured ears bedecked with earrings (Upritchard had her ears pierced for the first time a few months ago, aged 41), and hanging industrial shelves filled with hats of all types, textures and colours. There are caps, bucket hats, conical ones, a boater, and so it goes on. There's a smiley face on one, 'fear dice' on another, and tassels, beads, stitched hands, pom poms and trinkets on others.

As mentioned previously, I've always enjoyed Upritchard's work. In particular, her coordinated tables and shelves and inlaid cabinets with medicine-like accessories, such as coloured glass vases and phials. I got the chance to see her *Jealous Saboteurs* exhibition at Christchurch Art Gallery in June 2017, and I not only marvelled at her pots and ceramic jars, but also her coloured watercolours in

which she cleverly fleshed out scale, posture, movement and colour. There was a special unity between her drawings and sculptured figures, and this added mysticism to the room.

Back in London, the surreal aestheticism to *Wetwang Slack*'s design certainly works in Upritchard's favour. The industrial hard stone and steel supports, shelves and glass cabinets are in complete contrast to the sculptures and objects that adorn them, such as the aforementioned hats. This modern and sleek exhibition design has been formed so that one is able to truly appreciate the play on scale between sculpture and objects, and the textures and patterns in the room. There's also an interesting relationship with colour which leaks out of the show as you walk through it, finally winding up at cold stone and earthy-brown Balata rubber pieces.

These Balata rubber objects are designed to evoke fossils of a bygone era. In regards to the works, Upritchard says, "I had an idea early on that I wanted to make some reliefs based on the centaur Metopes from the Parthenon that are housed at the British museum…"[05]

These works are mostly laid flat on stone table tops which are angled at about 45 degrees. There are centaurs, weapons, vases, pots and small figurines. The two large-scale sculptures at the end, *Standing: Long Legs, Long Arms* (2018) and *Stretching: Long Legs, Long Arms* (2019,) look like mummified human remains. In each, bodies are wrapped around one another – to the point where you can't decipher where one limb ends and the other begins. They are also intertwined with sea creature relics – octopus and fish – suggesting a moment and place in time far removed from the room in which you are standing.



Francis Upritchard, *Cosy Spot*, 2018. *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Francis Upritchard, *Stretching: Long Legs, Long Arms*, 2018 and *Standing: Long Legs, Long Arms*, 2018. *Wetwang Slack*, The Curve, Barbican Centre, 2018. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



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Within the room there also exists a perfect balance between the wonderfully heavy, Brutalist architecture of the Barbican and Upritchard's deft and delicate artworks. A personal favourite is *Gr een Muppet Hand* (2018). The work is a highly Instagrammable large fuzzy green claw, palm open and fingers pointing to the sky, which Upritchard likens to a hand of one of the huge monsters from *The Muppet Show*.

Upritchard made the move to London from Aotearoa New Zealand in 1998, one year after graduating from Ilam Canterbury School of Fine Arts in Christchurch. Even though she now calls London home, it's still an impressive feat that she’s exhibiting at the Barbican, which has a reputation for experimenting and pushing the boundaries of what art can achieve, not to mention it's the largest performing arts centre of its kind in Europe. Upritchard's impressive CV doesn't end here: she has held solo shows in the United States, the Netherlands, Japan, Ireland and Australia, to name a few, and she's previously exhibited at the Venice Biennale. Three times.

There's no question Upritchard creates carefully-mastered works. They are unusual, waxy and lyrical, and they hold a certain mystique and awe – which is no doubt why I've always been drawn to her objects. I can appreciate Upritchard's technical ability and creative mind. However, underneath that, her work misappropriates.

Where does the line begin?

If something questions tradition and history through a lens of dialogue between the old and the new, then I don't tend to have a problem with it. But if that same work questions it through the point of view of customs, culture and/or behaviour, and particularly if it's made without and removed from that community (i.e. it makes that community abject), then I think we start to have a problem.

And so I return to my first statement: I enjoy things that I know I shouldn't. But just because I, and so many others, do, this doesn't mean we should. In saying that, we the audience often consume art without the same knowledge or awareness as those from within the industry. This is where the powers that be, those in the top positions of institutions – the curators, directors, managers, dealers and, of course, artists – need to exercise their influence. They are in these positions for a reason and they need to encourage artworks and exhibitions that challenge society and reflect contemporary political and socio-economical discourse.

Ignorance is not bliss.

Footnotes

01. "They're very inaccurate – decorative rather than spiritual. They're meaningless, rather than full of the power of real taonga, and they have no mana." Francis Upritchard quoted in 'The Borrowings of Francis Upritchard', Christchurch Bulletin, B.187. www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz/bulletin/187/the-borrowings-of-francis-upritchard.

02. In the Wetwang Slack press release from the Barbican, it reads "Previous works include Upritchard's installation, *Traveller's Collection* (2003), in which she created a tomb-like cabinet of curiosities, influenced by both Ancient Egypt and Maori [sic] cultures". Emphasis on the word influenced.

03. *Jealous Saboteurs* exhibited at Monash University Museum of Art Melbourne, 13 February-16 April 2016; City Gallery Wellington, 28 May-16 October 2016; Christchurch Art Gallery, 1 April-16 July 2017; and Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 12 August-26 November 2017.

04. Lana Lopesi, 'The Moral Argument: A Review of 'Jealous Saboteurs', *The Pantograph Punch*, October 18, 2017. www.pantograph-punch.com/post/review-jealous-saboteurs.

05. Francis Upritchard, email to the author, October 3, 2018.

Biographies



Francis Upritchard was born in 1976 in New Plymouth, New Zealand and lives and works in London. After studying Fine Art at Ilam School of Art, Christchurch, she moved to London in 1998 where she co-founded the Bart Wells Institute, an artist run gallery, with artist Luke Gottelier. In 2006 Upritchard won New Zealand's prestigious Walters Prize, and has had major solo exhibitions at Vienna Secession in 2009, Nottingham Contemporary in 2012, Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center in 2012, Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art in 2013, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles in 2014. In 2009, she represented New Zealand at the Venice Biennale. Her work is in international collections including Tate, London; Hammer Museum, Los Angles; Paisley Museum, Scotland; Saatchi Gallery, London; Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tāmaki; Christchurch Art Gallery, Te Puna o Waiwhetu; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; and Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. She is represented by Kate MacGarry, London; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; and Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland.



Jessica Douglas lives in London where she is the UK Editor for Barnebys, a global search engine for auction houses and galleries. She is also a freelance arts writer, and has previously worked at Gus Fisher Gallery, Objectspace and *Art News New Zealand*, and she was the 2018 Marylyn Mayo intern at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Jessica holds an MA in art history from the University of Auckland.

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