

IKON

Exhibition Guide

Ruth Claxton *Lands End*

2 April – 18 May

Second Floor Galleries

This is Ruth Claxton's first museum exhibition. Born in Ipswich in 1971 and now based in Birmingham, Claxton is an artist whose practice is concerned essentially with the materiality of the world and our increasingly mediated experience of it through digital technology.

For Ikon, Claxton has created an ambitious new installation, a sprawling landscape of mirrored discs fixed within utilitarian grey display stands to create the illusion of towers stretching beyond the boundaries of the gallery. Complicated arrangements of steel hoops are caught, as if in mid-flight, high in the walls of the space. Platforms overlap forming complex networks of interlocking shapes; the mirrors capture the viewer at multiple angles, confusing the sense of space, distance and scale. As a whole, the installation tests our perceptual limits, immersing us into a world that exemplifies Claxton's preoccupation with different versions of reality, including virtual worlds. Claxton herself comments,

... technological landscape is a sublime experience, an experience that we can't fully comprehend, that's even more enormous and edgeless and beyond ourselves than nature. We don't know and can't illustrate how big the Internet is for instance; thus we become this minute element outside a different kind of sublime. These ideas do have a relationship to the works I make; its roots are in the real world but one that seems to move and slip around, one that you're never really sure of.

Claxton extends this uncertainty to the porcelain figurines that inhabit her strange world of steel and glass. These very sentimental objets d'art, often proudly displayed by their owners on mantelpieces or sideboards, have been collected from car-boot sales, junk shops and internet auction sites, their domesticity at odds with the vast structure in which they find themselves. The artist has specifically chosen figures that are animated in some way; each has a gesture, a gaze and thereby seeks some

form of engagement with the viewer. However, this possibility is thwarted by the repulsive growths, at once organic and artificial, that obscure their faces.

Sequins, rubbers, beads and children's modelling clay emerge from mass produced, hand-painted heads. Compelled to look more closely, we see that the ceramic characters continue with their pose, undisturbed by their new appendages, instead blinded by or suspended in the wonder of what is right in front of their eyes. Sometimes presented in pairs, linked by unnatural umbilical-like connections made from familiar, colourful pound-shop finds or twinned in different sections of the installation, various figures and birds perch on islands, adrift and isolated. Here again, Claxton alludes to the uncomfortable implications of mediating our being in the world through technology – a dehumanisation, where perception is divorced from experience. Incidentally, it is therefore not surprising to learn that this artist is fascinated by Second Life, the on-line community that provides its users anonymity alongside a platform to participate in a real, financially-driven economy. Virtual properties are built and sold, virtual shares traded, virtual events promoted.

To coincide with this exhibition, Claxton has produced a series of postcard pieces on display at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham. Cutting into the surface of cards, commercial reproductions of works in the Barber collection, she modifies the imagery, extending it out towards the viewer whilst also hiding it from view. As with all Claxton's work, the physical elaboration of the surface foils our attempts to see what lies behind.