

With her figurative sculptures, New Zealand artist Francis Upritchard [afb. A] (1976) occupies a unique position within the field of contemporary sculpture. Upritchard's oeuvre is characterised by rigorous experimentation with material, colour, form, scale and various other disciplines. Her sculptures continually explore cultural, geographical and historical boundaries. The artist's references vary from Mokomokai and Japanese folklore to science fiction literature. Fascinated by museology, she presents her sculptures in self-designed displays and settings. The title of the exhibition alludes to an eponymous pen drawing by Pieter Breugel the Elder (*Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, 1556 [img. B]). The title reflects Upritchard's interest in fiction, mythology and factual history. Her project at the MDD is a reinterpretation of the exhibition *Wetwang Slack*, presented at the Barbican Centre in London, 2018.

The anthropomorphic sculptures displayed in the exhibition, such as *New Life and Hot Future* for instance, are typical of Upritchard's oeuvre. Their colourful eclecticism, serene poses, closed eyes and contemplative posture invite associations. Often recurring references include loom weaving, Native American patterns, medieval mythology and the indigenous Maori culture of New Zealand. The sculptures, however, do not represent specific persons or characters. Gender, time and space are also kept deliberately vague and indefinable. They seem to hover between melancholy and ecstasy, between utopia and dystopia, object and subject. Upritchard likes this ambiguous quality:

"These are all portraits of me, because it's all my experiences and what I've seen and I've done. That's why I do this loose research, so I can't say I am going to represent any exact thing."

The smaller sculptures displayed in glass showcases and shelves (such as the hats, hands, ears and vases) bear witness to the same narrative. The variations in scale, perspective and materials reflect Upritchard's interest in fiction and myths – what they are and how they can affect our relationship to the reality that surrounds us. In this way, the children's book *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* [afb. C] (1938) by Dr. Seuss became the source of inspiration for the collection of headgear in the exhibition. The book tells the story of a boy who is unable to take off his hat for the King because, every time he takes off his hat, a new one appears. As in many of Upritchard's works, the fictional narrative merely serves as a starting point for reflection on a larger social discourse, its fiction and malleability.

Many of the works were inspired by Wetwang Slack [img. D], an archaeological site with remains of the Arras culture and the tradition of chariot burial in East Yorkshire. An important part of this collection is now in the British Museum in London. This pre-Celtic culture was brought to an end by the Romans, when they, in turn, conquered England. Upritchard links this specific cultural

history to Greek mythology and the literature of the Afro-American science fiction writer Octavia Butler. Several of the sculptures in the exhibition feature motifs such as horseshoes and wagon wheels and refer to the metopes [img. E] of the Greek Parthenon depicting the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs.

Central in the exhibition is the new rubber sculpture *Long Legs, Long Arms Go Eeling in New Zealand*. Upritchard drew inspiration from the Japanese eighteenth-century Netsuke [img. F] sculptures from the LACMA collection. The small naked male figures with Ashinaga (long legs) and Tenaga (long arms) embody symbiosis and symbolise harmonious collaboration. The stone base of Upritchard's sculpture refers to the Greek mythological hero Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a rock up a mountain for eternity as punishment for his disobedience.

Upritchard explains: "Sisyphus is all about one man being macho, always doing this one task on his own. I thought maybe it would be really sweet to have these two co-operators doing a Sisyphean type of task together."

Upritchard is fascinated with the physical, and often intensive, process of production and is constantly experimenting with techniques and materials such as textiles, ceramics, glass, bronze, plastics and polymer clay. In the exhibition, Upritchard explored new materials such as thermoplastics, which were used for the vases and dishes. Another material is Balata, a rare, wild rubber that is ethically and ecologically harvested from the Amazon rain forest and that is known to give off a strong odour. Francis gets her balata from a man named Darlindo De Oliveira Pinto, who she first met at a craft market when she was on a residency in Brazil. Francis admired the figures he had made from the substance:

"I thought they were so charming and I asked him if I could come and have a lesson. And so he's my dealer now. I'm the only person, according to him, outside of the Brazilian rainforest working with this material."

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