

Susannah Zucker

Avian

A Review by Dr Jerry Cullum

SUSANNAH ZÜCKER'S LIFE-SIZE CERAMIC representations of human figures with connections to the sky in her *Avian* series, exhibited at Bill Lowe Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia, US communicate a longing for transcendence combined with a sense of vulnerability – a need for flight perhaps in more than one sense of the word. Zucker, who earned her BFA from California College of Arts and Crafts in 1994 and her MFA from the University of Georgia in 2007, produces ceramic figures that fully enter the 'uncanny valley' more often associated with robots (the figures contain glass eyes and wear singularly realistic facial expressions) but the meticulously coloured skin textures are, on close inspection, disturbingly uneven, and the overall impact of this not-quite-embodiment is discomfiture.

The huddled naked figure of *Avian* is sprouting or being penetrated by (actual) feathers, but not in

any form suited for wings. She gazes beseechingly or fearfully at the viewer, and represents one pole of the dialectic between freedom and fragility that this Asheville-based artist proposes. She seems in some ways the polar opposite of the exposed figure in *Crouch*, except that this woman is not exactly poised for takeoff. She wears steel prosthetic legs and what sprouts from her armless shoulders are not feathered wings but elk antlers.

Wearing an antique leather aviator's helmet, the standing figure of *Amelia* would seem a confident avatar of aviation (even her nakedness is covered with a photo-transferred map). But the title and the visual imagery itself constitute an allusion to a classic case of successful exploration ending in traumatic disaster.

Zucker has indicated that many of her works represent junctures of eroticism and trauma, and

Below: Avian. 2014. Ceramic, ostrich feathers, prosthetic eyes and sheepskin. 36 x 65 x 32 in.

Facing page: Blue Crouch. 2013. Ceramic, steel, elk antlers and concrete. 62 x 32 x 47 in.



Clutch is a particularly unnerving case in point, in which a cross-legged woman with peculiarly upswept hair lovingly touches a cache of bird skulls cradled in her lap. As in all of Zucker's figures, the facial expression and bodily posture are precisely realistic and less than readily interpretable.

One of Zucker's few male figures, the shaven or bald headed *Roost* stands stiffly upside down, arms folded and head firmly ensconced in a metal sculpture suggesting a bird's nest. The literally precarious balancing act evokes a reaction in the viewer as immediately visceral as is elicited by the



more emotionally tinged dramas being enacted in the remainder of the series.

Zucker describes her practice as exploring moments in which “beauty rubs right up against the edge of the grotesque”. This may be an understatement,

but in the end it is the impossibility of imposing a story on these distinctly individual sculptures that creates the greatest sense of unease in the viewer. Figures this seemingly self-possessed in ways that render each of them a definable character ought to

Right: Amelia. 2014. Ceramic, photo prints, prosthetic eyes, steel and teak. 62 x 18 x 10 in.

Below: Suzannah Zucker and her Signature.

Photo of the artist by Matt Rose.

Facing page, below: Clutch. 2014. Ceramic, prosthetic eyes, sheepskin and gilded bird skulls. 67 x 26 x 22 in.

Facing page, inset: Roost. 2013. Ceramic, steel and wood. 102 x 32 x 36 in.



possess a myth, if not quite a biography. But instead each constitutes an impossible image, a moment that cannot exist in history or even as a literary allegory.

Susannah Zucker has, in definable fact, achieved her stated goal of suggesting "our potential to exceed the limitations of conventional physicality" without quite defining what that potential might comprise. The *oeuvre* expresses, as she claims, "a yearning for mystery, flight, power and magic", but also embodies a persistent failure to fulfil that yearning. In that gap between wish and realisation, *Avian* combines power and pathos.

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