

Valentina Palonen | Shape Shifter

Counihan Gallery in Brunswick Feb 25 – Mar 20 2011

I remember a conversation with my best friend in grade three in which she was telling me that she treats her possessions, such as her toothbrush, with loving care because she was sure that they came to life when she was not in the room. Her fear was that handling her things roughly would lead to them conspiring against her to retaliate. Everything had an independent life and consciousness. I recalled this memory while considering Valentina Palonen's *Shape Shifter*, and the way that her inanimate sculptural objects, such as root vegetables cast in resin, become subjects – with personality and feeling – through her embellishment and display of them.

For example, one wall is studded with little pink creatures arranged in a circle formation (*Swarm*, 2011). They appear to be in an early developmental stage, fetal-like and just moments away from coming to life. Another wall is adorned with root vegetable 'effigies' – some with ordinary human names like 'Sam' and 'Katie,' and others with more exotic ones such as 'Satu' and 'Sequoia'. These vegetables bring to mind mandrakes, from the nightshade family, which have long been used in myth and magical rituals due to their hallucinogenic properties and their resemblance to humans because of the bifurcations of their roots. The mandrake has been thought to be the embodiment of a demon or evil spirit, or to possess protective powers. In medieval Germany the mandrake was known as Alraun, dressed in a robe, kept in its own box and even bathed each Friday. The fear was that if it were ignored it would shriek out until it was tended to. The strength of the mandrake's lungs was also cited in the film *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when a class learning to repot mandrakes is told that because the mandrake's cry is fatal they must wear earmuffs. The recent resurgence of vampires, shape shifters, wizards and witches in popular culture for the young and old alike is quite remarkable. Old myths and folklore have been re-imagined in contemporary Western contexts. In HBO's *True Blood* series, vampires have become a persecuted minority group attempting to co-exist with the populace by surviving on synthetic blood. Palonen's *Shamanista* (2011) could be seen to mirror this re-conceptualization in that the deer subject sits in a plastic clamshell on a bed of pastel expanding foam. 'Nature' is adorned in artifice – fake flowers, glitter, and gloss. The creature carries a dagger and its regal pose suggests that it is not a servant to a hunter, but perhaps a hunter itself. Or perhaps it is somewhere in between: a shape shifter that has taken an animal form, like *True Blood*'s Sam when he turns into a dog? *Shamanista*, and the conspicuously artificial natural world it inhabits, exists between normative categories of classification such as 'animal' or 'human,' 'fantasy' or 'reality,' and 'nature' or 'culture.' By escaping categorization, Palonen's subjects pose a threat to the hierarchy: indeed, if a vegetable is worshipped and considered to possess human qualities, how can humans continue to preside comfortably over animals? If our fantasy of nature is colonized by the artificial, and the artificial starts to look more natural than the real natural, how will we tell the difference? When such distinctions start to collapse, there becomes need for alternative views of the natural world. My primary school friend's belief meant that she treated everything in her environment – even plastic things – with respect. Palonen's consciously-embodied natural world, where such implicit hierarchies give way to something more surreal, demands and deserves the same.

-Anusha Kenny is a Melbourne-based curator and writer