

Valentina Palonen: Souvenirs from the Periphery

By Laura Skerlj

On the periphery of what we know to be true is a belief system that activates the still and the quiet. It stems from indigenous practices, where shamans communicate with spirits unseen, yet recurs in contemporary popular culture in the guise of the fantastical narrative. The impulse to escape our rational existence through stories that dare to step into this peripheral zone enables the milieu of objects we share space with to come to life. Rocks, trees, crystals, televisions, vegetables, charms and chairs all have the ability to participate and add to the world. It is this animistic understanding—where a soul or spirit can be contained in the inanimate—that can be unequivocally connected to the object-lust of consumerism: finding meaning in things that seem breathless is an act we are well accustomed to. Yet for artist, Valentina Palonen, the investigation of the animated object leads us to a world where the natural is super, and where the synthetic hints at the farcical.

Palonen's exhibition, *Stranger than Fiction (Souvenirs from the Periphery)*, ushers in an assembly of artifacts from another world. As in journeys through the back of wardrobes or down rabbit holes, the viewer ponders the conundrum of a separate universe, running perhaps in parallel to reality, where a new hierarchy of power and intelligence exist. Should the white gallery walls invert, would a forest appear (as implied by the folksy wallpaper)? The question of an alien space, that shares part of our history, yet relies not on human presence to imbue life, both frightens and intrigues. However in this case, the tantalising materiality coerces the viewer into a state of seduction, where Romantic visions of nature and ancient belief mingle with the sugary toxicity of the synthetic.

Let us first begin with the summoning. Seamlessly protruding from the wall, a white digit titled *Horn* evicts you from reality and beckons you to a space you can't quite reach. Organic, phallic and loose of skin, this finger-like protrusion conspires with your imagination and suspends your disbelief. Originally, *Horn* was a bitter melon that Palonen cast and resurrected. Now it is the doorway to the exhibition, assuring the viewer that there is a subjectivity in the non-human that, for your time here, cannot be avoided. In the next room, a shrouded figurine, scaled to human size, oozes gelatin coloured foam from head to toe. This work, *Everyday Alchemy*, is partnered by a procession of broccoli that appear to dance at the figure's feet; a fairy circle perhaps, or a sacred ring of talismans to keep this creature safe. Four feminine hands rest in meditative prayer by the figure's side, reminding us we are in the presence of the spiritual (Madonna, Buddha, Vishnu...). Climbing from the figure's head, two tangerine coloured horns, thin like smoke or stalagmites, reach skyward. It is undecided as to whether these are the horns of a forest creature, or the branches of a tree, yet the uncertainty to be human, animal or vegetable is fitting, and permeates the entire show. Palonen has cleverly amalgamated a plethora of spiritual and fictitious references to conjure this anthropomorphic deity. Haunting yet oddly maternal, borrowed from everywhere but belonging only to itself, a spirit inflates the body of material until the material becomes live.

Following this, *Jelly* (a lemon), *Stick/Staff/Wand* (a stick), and *Digitation* (a carrot), are hung from velveteen ribbons atop the fairy-tale, Euro-forest wallpaper. Palonen has used silicon-casting methods to recreate synthetic versions of vegetables, shifting the natural into something freakish, candied and crystalline. Effectively, the originals are transposed from a position of inanimate modesty (and even vulnerability as a possible consumable!), and elevated to prophetic prominence. Here, there is an acknowledgment of the heightened value of a meticulously recreated object; its past form, along with its original embodied presence, becomes encapsulated in this new incarnation. In this case, the partial binding in velvet ribbon, and the decision to hang these once-vegetables as

amulets from a wall, raises the objects to a position of mystical power. For the artist, it is in this moment that the work moves away from hybridization, and becomes 'aniconic'. Where the iconic has a need to reference the human body in order to conjure meaning for the viewer, the aniconic eliminates this human referent and instead privileges the object to contain this spiritual presence for itself. For Palonen, this embodied conceptualisation of nature pushes her practice past forms that draw literal relationships between the human, animal and vegetable spheres, and towards a capturing of an essential presence in whatever form she seeks to represent. Therefore, a recreated carrot hang from wall, has no need for human inference; its subjectivity and strength is its own.

Valentina Palonen's work sits in a liminal space between the natural and the synthetic. It is positioned in a moment when technology has begun to lose meaning, and the 'humanity' of nature is questioned in the wake of a series of disastrous global events. Consequently, it seems apt that Palonen might animate the inanimate in a time when we are seeking a new understanding of both nature and culture. Her decision to do so, acts in a similar manner to the contemporary fantasy narrative, encouraging us to reinvent the 'spiritual' parts of ourselves; ones that have long been lost to the doctrine of technology and progress. Perhaps, as mass consumers, our belief in objects can assist us to see an inherent meaning in the inanimate, the same way clothing, toys and collectables are fetishised in everyday 'hunting and gathering'. As narratives such as Harry Potter, Avatar and Twilight have recently gifted the popular consciousness with the right to see beyond the surface of things, Palonen seeks to indulge her audience with transmutations of human form and talismans that contain their own sense of power. Their presence, as simultaneously abject and ludicrous, invites us to sympathise with a shared ability for consciousness between this world and the next. However, in the name of the fantastical, never quite allows us to jump the periphery.

Valentina Palonen, Souvenirs from the Periphery, NO NO GALLERY, Melbourne, 6 - 22 October 2011

