

Nick Renshaw

'Panoply'

20 December 2008 to 4 February 2009

Nick Renshaw's moving new exhibition *Panoply* asks us to look beyond the surface and reflect on what it is to be human.

The exhibition title has a number of meanings central to Renshaw's work. 'Panoply' refers to a full suit of armour, a complete defense and protective covering, or to an impressive array or collection. These ideas, individually and collectively, are significantly connected to his sculptures.

The figurative themes in Renshaw's previous work reappear in *Panoply*. On one level they seem symbolic of our evolution from primitive to modern times. Some are formed with few, if any, features apart from a hand painted glaze. Others possess sculpted thick locks of hair cascading down and around their faces, recalling images of cavemen or the mythological yeti. Oblong prosthetics jut out of bodies which seem to comment on our relationships with the machine age and new technologies. A series of smaller full-body figures are given a textural shell of vertical grooves and look like they have emerged from the natural world, with skin reminiscent of tree bark or jagged rock surfaces.

Earlier this year Renshaw visited China as part of his residency at the FuLe International Ceramic Art Museum and created an installation for their permanent collection. As well as visiting other historic sites during this trip, Renshaw witnessed the Terracotta Warriors near Xian, giving him new perspectives on his own work. 'These sculptures, made thousands of years ago, still have much power and relevance today. They too were made using similar moulds and techniques, so not much has changed. It makes you wonder: how much more advanced are we really?' says Renshaw, and you feel like he is not just talking about the ceramic arts.

The human experience, our past and future, can be found in Renshaw's sculptures. These familiar figures, with their ambiguous forms and telling expressions are ideal objects on which to project one's own emotions. Consequently, to share a space with these works is a highly personal and affecting encounter. It can also be an amusing one, humour imbuing many of the figures. The hairy humanoids evoke the cursed male protagonist from *Beauty and the Beast*. Others recall *Monkey Magic* emerging from his egg on a mountain top. The seemingly impaled figures are simultaneously tragic and comic.

'The ambiguities and contradictions in people, and in life, are what I'm trying to express through my work,' the artist explains. It is Renshaw's ability to capture these complexities in his sculptures, which make them so intriguing.

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