

# Size matters: sculpture scale speaks volumes

Deborah Stone

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In the Alice-in-Wonderland world of contemporary sculpture, scale is distorted to give us giant cartoon characters and miniature nudes, a powerful counterpoint to traditional monumentalism.



Gill Gatfield, x, 73 x 73 x 10cm, Granite, Sculpture by the Sea, Bondi 2013.  
Photo Samantha Burns

Ours is not an age of gods or heroes so what we choose to place on a pedestal – literally and figuratively – is monument to our sense of self.

The largest standing figures at Melbourne Now, the massive survey exhibition of contemporary art now at the National Gallery of Victoria, are the giant cartoon characters by Christopher Langton.

In brightly coloured acrylics and resins, Langton's huge Manga characters and superheroes are at once anodyne and intimidating, bringing the single-dimensionality of the children's world that spawned them into dialogue with the multi-dimensionality of gallery art.

By contrast, among the most modest works in the exhibition are Stephen Benwell's exquisite ceramic figurines, roughly-modelled male nudes standing little more than 50cm tall and easily passed over, as they huddle unceremoniously in clusters - like nerds at a party.



Christopher Langton, *Away with the Fairies* (detail), 227 x 114 x 50 cm, polyvinyl chloride, polyester and epoxy resins, glass fibre, pigments and acrylic, Melbourne Now, National Gallery of Victoria

Aesthetically these works are most striking in their differences. Langton's sculptures are loud and bright, both grandiose and cheeky. Langton, of course, is no pioneer to placing his figures just far enough outside the norms of human scale as to be overbearing. The early mannerism of Michelangelo's *David* used the same technique to image the superhero of another age.

But in social context and visual impact, Langton's work is more Roy Lichtenstein than Renaissance, pop cultural parodies that laugh at us before we can laugh at them. Langton scoops his figures of the page where, as Manga they are graphic images, probably derived from the flattened perspective of Japanese woodcut and early scroll painting. Plumped into plasticised and oversized dolls their blandness and shallow features beg us to ask what fills them: hot air, perhaps?

The strong-jawed *Double Agents* may be many times the size of the superheroes they mimic but their capacity is strangely lesser, marooned in their solid form. The cutesy *Betty Boop-meets-Japanese-schoolgirls* in *Away with the Fairies* lose their charm and sexiness to confront us with the grotesqueness of pornographic blow-up dolls. Our media obsessions are parodied but so too are our beliefs about size, power and supremacy.

Stephen Benwell, *Statue, arm raised*, 2011, 54 x 12 x 12 cm, earthenware, Melbourne Now, National Gallery of Victoria

At the other end of the scale, Benwell's statues are deliberately understated: pitted and textured clay with splashes of colour recalling the blotchiness of an unhealthy pallor. Their aesthetics are handmade and unpretentious, requiring investment from the viewer and making no aggressive claims for attention. Features emerge through careful examination until each work has a remarkable individuality. Though their bodies are lumpy and drooping, these men are anything but caricature.

Benwell and Langton appear very different artists but are both responding to the same sculptural traditions in their retelling of the figure through the distortion of scale. Both have created radical departures from the traditional human-scale sculpture and the ancient evolutionary hierarchy that equates size with importance. In doing so, both ask us to rethink ourselves in relation to the constructed figure.

Langton makes the small and single-dimensioned image voluminous; Benwell turns the human form into a smaller and less perfect specimen. Both are in dialogue with the idealisation of the human body in its classical forms.

Benwell's *Statue, Arm Raised* depicts a plump and poignant middle-aged man, aware of his own ridiculous figure as he mimics the expressive elegance of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, some fourteen times his size.

In our post-heroic age where monuments of divine perfection or military prowess have been replaced by an interest in the ordinary, this reworking of scale is perspective-changing, perhaps more powerfully so in the case of the unassuming Benwells.

Sculpture, of course, has its origins in the figure and its striving for noble beauty. But the drive for perfection which underwrote Greco-Roman statuary and its Renaissance imitators is now more the province of fashion than of art. Both Langton and Benwell have created works that show perfection as an inhuman quality, neither achievable nor aspirational.

While Benwell's imperfect figures become more knowable and beautiful the longer we spend with them, the charm of the shiny Langton's becomes eerie with intent gaze. In both cases we are left less desirous of flawlessness, more willing to accept that we are not supermen or superwomen and do not need to be.

In very different ways, both artists give dignity to the human condition by distorting the scale of our expectations. This distortion of scale for the purposes of realigning our sensibilities is more simply achieved in a number of recent works which present over-sized children. Matt Calvert's *Girl Pointing in the 2013 Bondi Sculpture by the Sea* is a case in point, privileging the child's perspective and suggesting a naïve wisdom emphasised by simplified form.

But perhaps the best, and certainly most unusual, example addressing the question of human scale is a work from the same exhibition which does not even include a figure, Gill Gatfield's *x* (image at top).

*x* consists of a simple black granite cross, a mere 73cm in height x 73cm width x 10cm depth. Gatfield had originally planned to place it on the beach, where it would easily have become covered in sand but, fearing damage to visitors who literally stumbled over it, *Sculpture by the Sea* chose a rock, where it is a little more obvious but nevertheless dwarfed by the world around it.

It is essential to this work that it be easily lost in the landscape. Among dozens of dramatic and whimsical works vying for attention in the *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibition, *x* is a mere dot on the landscape. It refuses to compete either with other sculptures or with the coastal surroundings.

The *x* on a map which marks 'the spot' is usually oversized and often embellished with the practical but utterly egotistical 'You are here'. But Gatfield's *x* signifies insignificance, marking wherever it is placed with the randomness of the spot within the whole.

Like Langton, Gatfield makes a two-dimensional concept into three-dimensions but, like Benwell, she reduces the scale and in doing so pricks our ego and places us in a new and meaningful, relationship with our environment.

Many of Gatfield's works are concerned with framing the view or shaping the void. In x, she brings a more abstract and subtle reading to the same endeavour requiring us to think of the landscape in relation to the way we capture it and the signification we use to contain or own it. By reducing her x in scale, to the point where we barely notice it, Gatfield reduces us too and places us back in proper relationship with the world.

But there is a double reading here too: just as our presence is needed to make sense of 'You are Here', x is only meaningful when it is seen. We are at once the centre of our own worlds and insignificant in the wider universe. Like Alice-in-Wonderland shrinking and growing, what we imbibe in our viewing changes our size and with it what we can see. Size matters.

**Melbourne Now is at the National Gallery of Victoria until 23 March, 2014.**

**The next Sculpture by the Sea exhibition will be held at Cottesloe Beach, Perth from 7 to 24 March 2014.**

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