



FALLIS IN WONDERLAND



Abigail Fallis has pulled it all together in a stunning show called 'Fallis in Wonderland', her best show yet. It's great to see such a positive, well thought out and uplifting show in these troubled times, all the pieces work well singularly and as a group like all great art should. Well done Abigail, wot recession?

DAMIEN HIRST

*Dodo - Death
of The Author*
Steel & papier mâché
Series of 3
79 cm high



INTRODUCTION

Since the late 18th century, the demands of industry have progressively attacked three core areas of life: our relationship with nature, our innate need for fun and festivity and our intellectual lives. Instead of living in harmony with nature, we have attempted to subdue it, following, in Aldous Huxley's words, "an unfortunate passage in Genesis". Puffed up with a sense of his own cleverness, man has invented myriad ways to exploit the soil, the animals and other human beings. The result is suffering and a loss of beauty in our everyday lives.

Thank God, then for the artists who try to redress the balance. In the late 19th century, William Morris put a huge amount of energy into producing beautiful artefacts and creating meaningful work for people. He was appalled by what he called "shoddy"; the mountains of rubbish that were pouring out of the Victorian factories. In 1861, he founded the firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co, and produced wallpaper, furniture stained glass and textiles. He had a huge influence on the taste of his day. In common with other radicals of the time, he also advocated a "back to the land" approach, arguing that we were in danger of losing our connection with the green fields, the snorting pig, the clucking hen and the dirt under our fingernails.

Whilst Morris was going on anti-war marches and creating the Arts and Crafts movement, a maths don called Charles Dodgson was boating down the Cherwell with young Alice Liddell, daughter of the Dean of Christ Church. These trips turned into the two books, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865 and *Through the Looking Glass*, 1872. One hundred and fifty years later, the inventive absurdity of the books still delights and fascinates. It was also in 1865 that the eccentric French writer Lautréamont came up with a description that went on to become a working definition of surrealism: "the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table".

These then are the two key strands in Abigail Fallis's work: surrealism and craftsmanship. Here we have the spirit of Lewis Carroll made solid by William Morris, and a line that stretches back through Dada to that peculiar Victorian mix of order and oddness. There are more influences, of course; Fallis also brings the sardonic exuberance of Duchamp together with the interest in the relationship between man and animals of Meret Oppenheim. There is also a hint of the anatomical iconography that we find in Louise Bourgeois.



The result is an exhibition of sculptures that are startling in their collision of qualities: for here is wit, beauty and protest; here is life and passion; here is playfulness and fun; here also is awe and wonder; and here is a commentary on an unsustainable way of living.

Fallis's work is also a celebration of quality. She has worked closely with Pangolin Editions, the Gloucestershire-based foundry, to create the metal pieces in the show. In true William Morris style Pangolin have created a workshop where good craftsmanship is of the highest importance. A whole medley of materials and techniques have been used by Fallis and Pangolin, including stainless steel, bronze, silversmithing, the lost wax method and patination.

There are some excellent mice in the show. In *A Mouse's Tale*, Fallis plays with the line from Lewis Carroll spoken by the mouse: "Mine is a long and sad tail". In *Earmarked for Survival*, we see two studious-looking mice with ears grafted onto their backs by madcap scientists. One is reading the paper, while the other is sewing. *The Looking Glass* consists of one hundred glass diamonds, each looking at us admonishingly, like some enormous compound eye. Fallis has made a Dodo skeleton lovingly crafted from papier maché and that, along with her cabinet of curiosities, gives a Victorian flavour to the show; it was, of course, the great age for collecting, classifying and pinning down. Fallis' work

(ABOVE)
The Mouse's Tale
Mixed Media
Unique
70 cm high

(RIGHT)
Tuna Fish (with strings attached)
Bronze with
Steel strings
Unique
76.5 cm high





Urinal
Stainless Steel
& Ruby Red Neon
Edition of 6
50 cm high

with the playing cards reasserts Carroll's insistence on the illusory nature of man's constructs: "You're all just a pack of cards" says Alice at the end of *Through the Looking Glass* and that indeed has been the common observation made recently about our financial systems and their architects; these self-important posturers vanish into nothingness.

Abigail - boldly - has made a sculpture based on Duchamp's urinal. Her version is a lovingly-crafted object which shows the letters U R I N A L. The implication is that we are all going down the rabbit hole together.

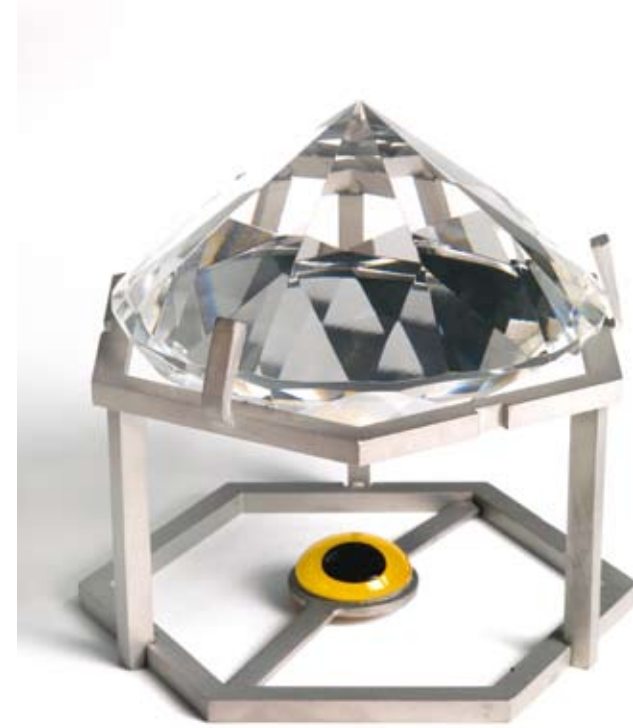
So we can trace a direct line here: from William Morris to Lewis Carroll, Duchamp to Dada. I don't think it's a line that has been traced before and that is where this stunning show is so original. Art should exalt, disturb and delight in equal measure. It should bring awe and wonder back into a dull mechanised world. It should harmonise previously separated elements and thereby follow E.M. Forster's well known command: "Only connect!... Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer."

There is a place for mystery *and* order, for nature *and* the intellect, for grave reflection *and* light-hearted merry-making. You can make a serious point with a light touch. The whole point of Dada was horror at the meaninglessness and mass destruction of the First World War but made the point with humour. Dada provided a criticism of contemporary society and also showed the door to another way of doing, living, being and thinking. It was anti-bourgeois and I think Fallis' work shares this desire to make a point but with humour. Dada though was not always uplifting; and it certainly put aesthetics on the back-burner in favour of the intellect. It was essentially nihilistic. But Abigail Fallis' work takes the fun, the wit and the radical political edge of Dada and combines it with beauty and gentleness and the result is a triumph.

TOM HODGKINSON

CATALOGUE





(ABOVE)
Eye Glass
 Glass Diamond,
 Glass Eye & Steel
 Series of 50
 9 cm high

(LEFT)
Looking Glass
 Glass Diamonds,
 Glass Eyes & Steel
 Series of 3
 120 cm wide

Queen of Hearts
Steel, Vinyl & Resin
Edition of 3
148 cm high





Shattered Head
Stainless Steel & Mirror
Series of 6
30 cm high



Stainless Head
Stainless Steel
Edition of 6
30 cm high



*Dodo - Death
of The Author*
Steel & papier mâché
Series of 3
79 cm high







*The Walrus &
The Carpenter*
Mixed Media
Unique
132 cm high





(ABOVE)
Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down
 Mixed Media
 Unique
 81.5cm high

(LEFT)
*White Rabbit - A Matter
 of Time*
 Painted MDF
 Unique
 81.5 cm high



*Baby Pig - Never Let
The Truth Get In The
Way Of A Good Story*
Victorian Doll,
papier mâché
& mixed media
Unique
50 cm high



Shoal de Lier
Bronze
Series of 3
80 cm high







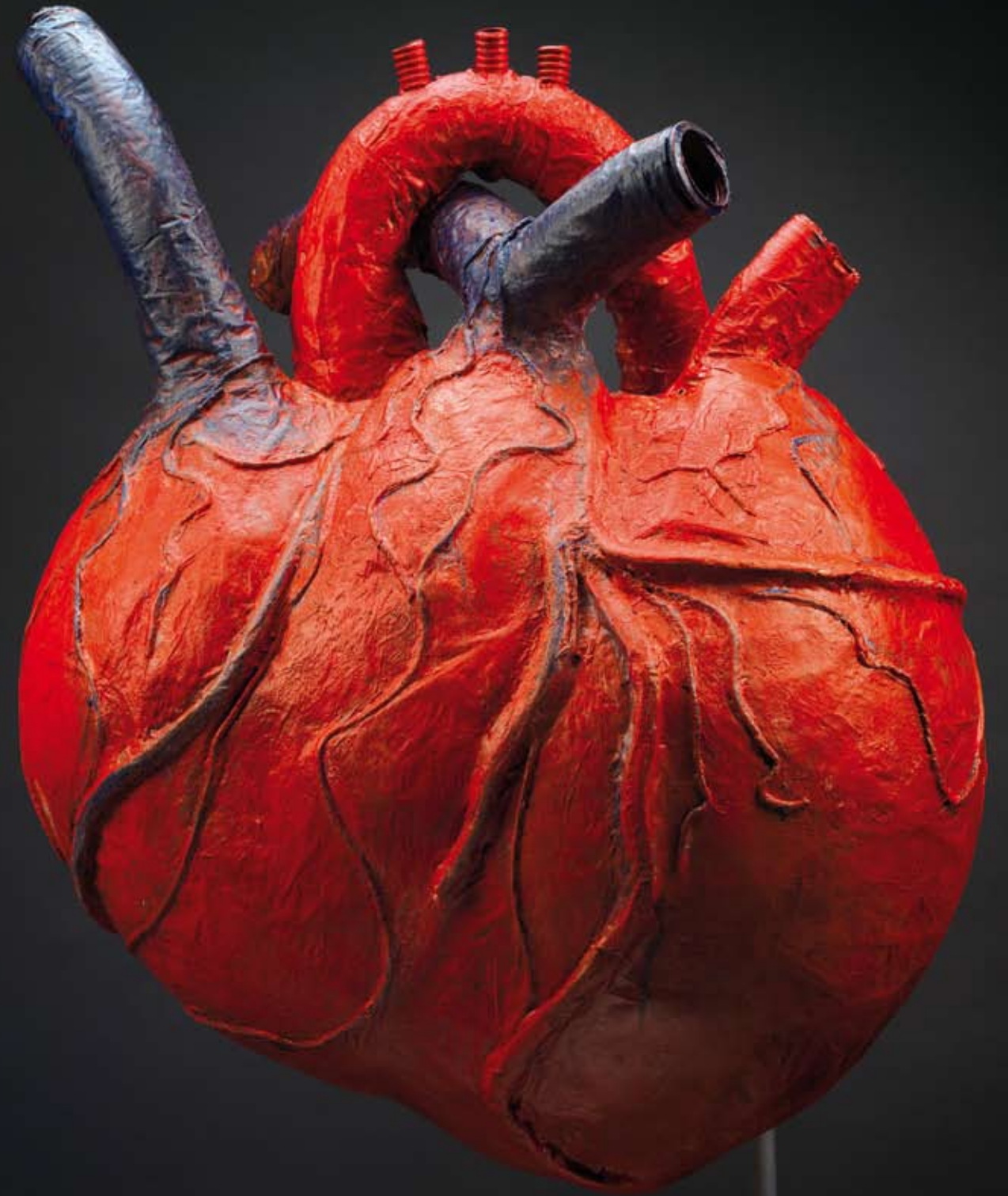
(ABOVE)
Earmarked for Survival I
 Bronze & Silver Wire
 Edition of 6
 15 cm high

(LEFT)
Earmarked for Survival II
 Bronze & Silver Wire
 Edition of 6
 15 cm high



The Mouse's Tale
Mixed Media
Unique
70 cm high

Red Queen
Papier mâché
& mixed media
Unique
64 cm high





Cabinet of Curiosities
Mixed Media
Unique
74 cm high





*Tuna Fish (with
strings attached)*
Bronze with
steel strings
Unique
76.5 cm high



King of Spades
Bronze
Series of 3
117.5 cm high



Holy Mackerel
Sterling Silver,
Ruby Red Neon
and Vanity Case
Series of 6
28 cm high in Case







(ABOVE)
Ant Mask
 Papier mâché
 & mixed media
 Unique
 42 cm high

(RIGHT)
Fly Mask
 Papier mâché
 & mixed media
 Unique
 73 cm high





(ABOVE)
Off With Her Head!
 Card & mixed media
 Series of 6
 30 cm high



(LEFT)
Dodo
 Painted papier mâché
 Unique
 50 cm high



Urinal
Stainless Steel
& Ruby Red Neon
Edition of 6
50 cm high





INTERVIEW

WITH ABIGAIL FALLIS & POLLY BIELECKA, APRIL 2010

PB: For those who do not know, could you outline what the Pangolin London Sculpture residency has involved and what you have been up to for the past year?

AF: Well, for the past year I have been busy working as Sculptor in Residence for Pangolin London, at Kings Place, Kings Cross. It's been a really exciting and challenging year in which I have learnt a great deal about myself. I've been provided with a large studio in the basement of Kings Place where I have been able to concentrate on a new body of sculptural works which form the basis of my solo show *Fallis in Wonderland*.

In addition to making my own work, part of the residency has involved organising outreach projects in two local schools to Kings Cross. For this, I worked with children over a term to create Papier mâché masks made from found junk and rubbish. I gave them the subject of endangered species of the British Isles as it's a subject close to my heart and has inspired a number of works for *Fallis in Wonderland* such as the Dodo and the insect masks. The children's work was then shown at Kings Place over the summer and they were thrilled to have their work displayed in a professional gallery setting.

PB: Apart from endangered species have there been any other particularly strong inspirations for the show?

AF: Yes, many of the new works created during my residency have been inspired by Lewis Carroll's classic Victorian novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* which was first published in 1865. What intrigued me most was Carroll's humour and love of nonsense language and the absurd, surrealist distortion we experience through dreams and nightmares which is so beautifully illustrated by John Tenniel throughout the book. As well as Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, I've also drawn on the Surrealists for visual inspiration. Whilst Lewis Carroll, preceded the Dadaists and surrealists of the early 20th century they shared an intimate link between liberating imagination and the mind and using their subconscious dreams and nightmares to create their fantastic works.

PB: How does your work relate to the title of the show?

AF: I feel strongly that when we consider our planet and its entire species, we really are living in a 'wonderland'. It's this idea of a wonderland that I'm confronting and highlighting through these works as well as the growing separation between human kind and nature as we continue to progress. I also feel that it's only by showing what is there that we can get any understanding of what is not. We consider ourselves part of the animal world yet since Man's descent we have continued to separate ourselves, through domination and power, over all other living species sometimes forgetting we share ninety-nine percent of our DNA with the other inhabitants of this planet. I suppose what I'm trying to communicate is the relationship between Nature's wonderland versus a mass consumer lifestyle. Are we living in a Surrealist dream or a Post Modern nightmare?

PB: Can you give us a few examples of particular works that highlight these issues?

AF: Sure. I suppose the question that forms the basis for many of the works in the show really focuses on whether our quest to have everything at the push of a button, live younger and longer lives etc means that we turn a blind eye to what is really happening around us and destroy our fellow earthlings in the process. To highlight this I've taken species we know and love that are both close to extinction and extinct. For example the famous Dodo and the Doormouse, Owl and Eagle all present in *The Mouse's Tale*. Then there's the *Cod Heads, Holy Mackerel, Tuna Fish (with Strings Attached)* and *Shoal de Lier* all of which comment on concerns about over-fishing. *Red Queen, Earmarked for Survival*, and *Baby Pig* comment more on the scientific advances of our generation.

PB: A number of the works take a direct reference from Carroll's novel can you tell us bit more about these works and how you've developed them to highlight the issues we've talked about?

AF: Yes. *The Mouse's Tale* refers to the Mouse who tells Alice and a crowd of animals about 'his long and sad tale'. When one considers the genetic testing on animals and the ethical issues associated, this work is particularly topical and poignant. This led me to wonder whether Darwin ever envisaged man 'playing God' when he wrote the *Origin of Species*?

Dodo - Death of The Author refers to the Dodo who was intended as caricature of Carroll himself - his stammer is said to have had him pronounce his name "Dodo-Dodgson". Tenniel, the illustrator, decided to draw hands onto the Dodo so that he could take a sweet from Alice.

With the piece *The Walrus and The Carpenter* – another species nearing extinction – Man's presence is represented by the carpenter's bench. On the one hand we are creative and on the other, destructive to the point of causing extinction. The seven vices below represent our human foibles or grand cock-ups. I've nicknamed the large vice 'the Bishop' and it ties in with Carroll's theme of cards and chess as well as the sins or the Capital Vices and comments on the whole paedophile church cover-up that's been going on. The other vices are covered with appropriate text relating to the banking scandal and the recession. I've used gold leaf that's tarnishing and rusting away just like these super structures that are supposed to be the bastions of society! I suppose there is an element of dualism or conflict within this work, good vs. evil, truth vs. reality and then there's another side, a reversing of truth, where you know but you pretend not to; the vice of sloth.

PB: What has been the highlight of your residency?

AF: The highlight of the residency has been the opportunity to experiment and play with ideas, materials and processes. Some of the works have an element of 'sculptural puzzles' about them which has developed from the making process itself. *Queen of Hearts* is a good example of this and involved having my head cast at the foundry, sliced into pieces, and turned into interlinking cards to produce a five foot version in mild steel. This work for me is the embodiment of thinking about states of minds and life being a game of chance.

Another highlight was having the honour of meeting Professor James Watson who co-discovered the double helix structure of DNA. Both he and Professor Matt Ridley, author of *Genome*, cut the ribbon at the opening of my sculpture *DNA DL90* at its new home outside the Arts Council North East offices in Newcastle.

PB: You mention working processes. How have these developed, if at all, during the past year?

AF: During my training at Camberwell College of Arts in craft and metalwork I was taught to question every element of each piece from the drawing to the making of a work. So often when I'm working out the sculptures from my drawings I make up a maquette in paper and cardboard so that I can understand how it will translate into hard materials such as metal or plastic. I've always found these paper versions appealing because of their fragility and easy access to materials. Working closely with Pangolin Editions has been a crucial part of this residency and has allowed me the precious opportunity to realise sculptures that would have been difficult to make alone and the confidence to be braver

DNA DL90
Stainless Steel
& Trolleys
Edition of 3
9.3 m high
Photo: Keith Paisley



and more ambitious in the execution of works such as *Shoal De Lier* and *The Looking Glass*. *The Looking Glass* started as an individual large glass diamond bought from a trinket shop and has been developed into a dome of 100 glass diamonds built into a honeycomb or insect eye type structure with 100 replica endangered mammal, reptile, bird and fish eyes all watching us. At first glance this work appears like a large jewel in the room but upon closer inspection you see the individual eyes staring at you through multi faceted glass diamonds.

PB: There are a couple of works in the show that seem less connected to the issues we’ve talked about. Can you tell us a little bit about them?

AF: Yes. The final strand of work in the show references Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Readymades’ particularly his *Fountain*, 1917 and the *Bicycle Wheel*, 1951, both of which I find compelling as both aesthetic and functional objects. *Urinal* is an *homage* to Duchamp’s ability to change the meaning of objects by pushing through cultural and aesthetic boundaries. My version however is hung at head height so that the highly polished steel acts as a kind of ‘looking glass’ and *Holy Mackerel* takes a common object and gives it a new sense of meaning in its material and surroundings.

PB: There seems to be a strong dialogue between the Victorian and the present day in your work, would you agree?

AF: Absolutely. By referencing other eras I hoped my work would show a glimpse of the past, present and future and I’ve done this by referencing both the literary and artistic achievements of Victorian culture as well as today’s immensely powerful genetic and medical breakthroughs. I suppose working in the shadow of St Pancras which has recently been restored to its Victorian Neo-Gothic glory and the world class Wellcome Trust which supports and documents contemporary medical and scientific breakthroughs, these connections have been highlighted in a physical sense as well as an historical one.

PB: What would you like viewers of the show to take away with them?

AF: In essence I feel that humans seem to be taking the domination of the natural world to a place that could be said to be teetering on the point of our own extinction. We still live in a beautiful world, and what happens to our ‘wonderland’ is up to us. I don’t think we will end up like the Dodo because we have such creative powers at our disposal and an extraordinary ability to adapt and change. I hope the show goes someway to highlight this dilemma in a humourous and unusual way and that it encourages us to improve our situation whilst also considering the other creatures that inhabit this planet.

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A.F

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