



Banker 1 2009 from 'A Walk In The Park', plaster (to be cast in bronze), 40.5 x 35.5 x 18 cm
Photography © Paul Tucker

Nicola Hicks

A Walk In The Park

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FLOWERS 21 CORK STREET LONDON W1S 3LZ +44(0)20 7439 7766

Nicola Hicks' visual vocabulary moves between figure and fauna with a mercurial sensibility owing as much to contemporary sculpture as it does to modern mythmaking.

During a seven-year sabbatical from the city that saw Hicks relocate to Cumbria, animals increasingly became the focus of her work. Returning to London this year, her critical attentions shifted in accord with her changing environment. With a perpetually metamorphosing landscape replaced by a fabricated score of urban semaphores, Hicks developed a body of work attuned to a different set of earthly creatures.

Within the cosmopolitan pageant of maquettes and sculptures shown here, there are both beasts – in the Cartesian sense – and a horde of human animals. An intriguingly monikered 'Monkey Lady', complete with powdered wig and fan, sits in the company of a top-hatted urban 'gentleman' who is paired somewhat unnervingly with a pet lion, the latter of which holds the viewer in its gaze. We witness as a male figure punctuated by the details of affluence transmogrifies from maquette to human-sized sculpture, his proudly protruding nose and rotund belly achieving their full, obscene effect in this sculptural amplification. A recurring character in Hicks' visual arsenal, the Minotaur, is also present within this scene of dilettantish modernity. The mythical creature's co-option as the metonym for a generic race of bull-headed monsters within 20th century literature is not insignificant here. Taking in the titles of these two works, it becomes clear that bankers, the lambasted perpetrators of contemporary downturns symbolic and economic, are the latest protagonists in Hicks' bestiary.

What is fascinating about these works is how they confound and destabilise our understanding of the order of things. Just as Hicks' two life-sized sculptures capture the same sense of immediacy achieved in the smaller works (she has talked about being 'liberated' by working on a small scale, and the instantaneous drama of *Banker I* and *II* are testament to her success in translating this onto a grand scale), so too are her human subjects somehow more consummately savage than their beastly counterparts.

Hicks describes this motley cast of characters as her very own 'Battersea Figures', and traces their lineage from the early figurines produced by the Chelsea porcelain factory in the mid-eighteenth century, via the ceramics of Pablo Picasso emerging two centuries later. The common thread linking these apparently disparate sources lies, for Hicks, in a shared language of 'exquisite looseness'. Hicks describes the earliest Chelsea Figures, which were decorated with a maximum of three colours applied with a broad brush, as "less tight, but not more naïve, more touching" than the high Rococo coterie produced by the factory following two decades of French-influenced refinement. Picasso's ceramics, like his graphics, convey a sense of spontaneity resulting from a gestural disinhibition. His zoomorphic pieces, comprising combinations of thrown forms spliced together, are perhaps the best-known of his work in this medium, but his early explorations simply entailed his adding glazed images to traditional clay forms thrown by the potters at Madoura.

Hicks revels in the subversive combination of 'standard' contours and wildly worked-upon surfaces, though it must be noted that the notion of 'standard form', in Hicks' sculpture, is not about recourse to archetypal anatomies or figurative restraints. These works are as loose and raw-edged as any she has produced. Where the 'standard' comes in, and is promptly subverted, is in the artist's appeal to the icons of civilisation – the Banker, the Gentleman, the Lady – in producing a visual spectacle that amounts to a potent social critique. The title of this exhibition, 'A Walk In The Park', may be evocative of the ease of luxury (and the luxury of ease), but we are left in no doubt that, for Hicks, the appellation is as artful as the work itself.

Nicola Hicks was born in London in 1960. She studied at Chelsea School of Art and completed postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art. She has had several major solo shows in leading museums and galleries in Britain, most recently at the prestigious Abbot Hall Gallery in Kendal.

For further information or images please contact Ellie Harrison-Read on 020 7920 7777 or email ellie@flowerseast.com

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