

frieze

Keith Farquhar

Antony Reynolds Gallery

Like choosing a piece of knitwear, making art is all about getting the proper fit. Marcel Duchamp obviously understood this: although the rubber tyre of his stool-top Bicycle Wheel (1913) uselessly treads thin air, it nevertheless makes a certain kind of visual sense. Sometimes objects feel just right, and that makes them beautiful. Keith Farquhar's Roadmaps (all works 2001) is such an object. A discarded department store display case, its cartographic moniker is carved into the base with chunky, confident letters. Each of its glass shelves supports the disembodied sleeve of a woolly jumper, amputated at the shoulder. Articulated mannequins' hands nestle snugly in the cuffs, three of them holding a lump of crumbly hash between forefinger and thumb, the fourth cupping its stash in a pale palm. There's a funny feeling of predestination in the way the bright woollen sleeves fit so perfectly along the length of the shelves, as if the map case anticipated a second life as a reliquary for the severed limbs of stoners. This material agreement slips into a conceptual accord when we consider escape routes: a pullover keeps the day-tripping motorist and the stay-at-home smoker equally cosy.

There's a totemic quality to Farquhar's 'Pringle' pieces, a sense that they are contemporary objects of faith. The spear-wielding sweaters in his earlier Community Hot Spots are a case in point. Half Lascaux cave painting, half a coded reference to the sleeve of Roxy Music's Flesh and Blood (1980), they're a shamanistic invocation of football casuals, up-for-it aggression and slick art school cool. For this show Farquhar exhibited what might be the remains of those hunters' quarry. Untitled (Too Sexy in a Bad Way) hangs on a dressmaker's dummy like a poncho made from flayed skin. Above the right nipple the shop-fresh woollen hide is splashed with candle wax. This shiny stain at once conceals - and stands in for - a gloopy deposit of seminal fluid absorbed by the porous fibres. The fuck-it-'n'-eat-it viciousness of the violated pullover is softened by the earnest preservation of the money shot. Who keeps such things for posterity? Untitled may hold the answer. A blown-glass cast of the

artist's left arm becomes a nobbly beaker filled with watery orange squash. Buzzing on sucrose and E-numbers, we can imagine Farquhar wanking himself into art history alongside the 20th century's great masturbators: Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp and Vito Acconci. The combination of callow youthfulness and audacity is nicely judged, an off-the-cuff gesture that seeps deeper and deeper into the imagination.

In Madame Bovary (1856) Gustave Flaubert describes a dismal fireworks display, in which damp squibs splutter and the burghers of Yonville smooch under the cover of darkness. The dumb spectacle isn't the point. Rather, it's the tempo of the 'ooh's and 'aah's, the stolen moments of escape happening under the exploding sky. Farquhar is no more impressed by Edinburgh Council's pyrotechnic displays, the 'idiotic need for permanent, cultural celebration that's safe, neutered and sanitized'. A black hexagon stamped with firework-shaped holes, Nightster reinigorates civic sky-scorching. With its sexy T-Rexish title and long-term sparkle, Nightster's lo-tech rocket trails feel like paths to a better world. Like Farquhar's Moths, cut from his grandmother's musquash coat, it is about dragging the stuff that surrounds you into a place that you find beautiful.

Entitled 'Mintview', Farquhar's show is partly a question of learning how to see. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince (1943) famously begins with an argument about perception. The narrator remembers showing a lumpy line drawing to his parents, claiming that it represents a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. 'It's a hat!', observe the parents, and send their son packing. This Snake has Swallowed a Woman Whole, the artist's collaboration with his mother, plays with this interfamilial confusion. A ten-foot draught-excluder with a lolling scarf of a tongue, a woman's shape ripples along the snake's corduroy length. Marooned in a defunct shop cabinet stuck with peeling credit-card logos, it's got that curious anti-aesthetic that art and design training moulds into something more consumable. The piece reminds us that style's a luxury, that the beau monde's way of seeing is a privileged perspective. Farquhar's ripped the felt scales from his mother's creation, leaving it looking pretty careworn. Perhaps he thought it looked better that way, that the trailing threads and scraps of material are what press the beauty button. Maybe, though, he was just trying to get the right fit, between himself and his mother, between the art world and the other place.

Tom Morton

