

The riddle of being Gregor Kregar

I know that I exist: the question is, what is this "I" that I know?
Descartes 1641.

Gregor Kregar enjoys stirring up trouble – object trouble. He relishes the chance to question and mix up existing meanings when dealing with familiar objects – be they domestic rubbish, piggy banks, wine bottles, garden gnomes or television sets. He strips away ingrained habitual knowledge, exposes surprising histories and elevates the insignificant object to new heights, even to the extent of revealing people's domestic obsessions such as gardening, pet and car ownership as examples of religious fervor. In an early series, he (anti-)heroically immortalised himself in bronze, posed in miniature on high plinths in the style of Rodin and Michaelangelo.

His work and interests are wide reaching – scanning across medium, subject matter, scale and intent. Linking it all together is the potential for an adventurous exploration of ideas through objects.

He delights in finding unlikely and surprising connections between objects that initially seem to share little in common. For example, in the exhibition *Between the ridiculous and the sublime*, 2005, delicate glass figurines of gnomes were installed with an intricately detailed yet large scale steel and glass sculptural orb. While the orb was influenced in its construction by complex mathematical, chemical and scientific principles, the gnomes referenced European history, Disney story telling and secular object worship. Kregar challenged us to work out the riddle of connections between the objects.

The links are to be found in both mythological and object making histories. Through ancient myths, gnomes have become regarded as guardians of the earth's treasures, with skills in alchemy, magic, gem cutting and mining. In Kregar's installation, glass gnomes were installed so as to encircle and protect the large planet-like orb centred on the gallery floor. Gnomes also have links to the history of ceramics and craft production, with the first garden gnome introduced to England from Germany in the mid- 1800's. Kregar's treatment of a collection of small glass gnomes transformed them from their object-origins as garden-centre kitsch to a fresh iconic status.

The transformation of the New Zealand wine industry from almost non-existent to legendary status, with its history linked to the immigrant Dalmatian communities around the country, inspired the major sculpture *OKO 2*, in 2001. It incorporated wine bottles, steel and lights in a huge luminous planetary sphere. In a public square in Wellington in 2002, Kregar constructed *Archie*, a giant red arch which looked more like the Arc de Triomphe or the heroic scaffold ramparts from the French Revolution. It was in fact constructed from truck loads of inorganic rubbish transported from Auckland to Wellington for the project. It was an act of 'eco ego' – a trashy monument to the shifting status of objects.

The shifting status of the ego itself is surely a subject without limits and in recent years Kregar has tackled notions of self with an intensity that has propelled him through several major series of works that take his own image, and indeed his own body, as subject matter. As the artist has said, "...the riddle of the self is upon *me*."

In *I Appear and Disappear* from 2003/4 and *I Disappear* from 2005, viewers are surrounded by replicating clay versions of Gregor Kregar, ranging in scale from adult to child height in the first series and from child to doll height in the second. They are sequential self portraits presented in large numbers and clustered in brightly coloured and varying groups directly on the gallery floor. Kregar literally repeats himself time and time again. There is not, however, perfectibility in this repetition. Kregar's production methods result in a gradual reduction of the size of the figure as each new work is created from the mould of the last. The resulting shrinkage determines the outcome of the new object. ('I *shrink* therefore I am'?)

Could it be possible to experience a kind of reverse-narcissism? Where the more you look at yourself, the less you see? Certainly, Kregar's process initially signals a removal of self or a denial of the artistic ego. Facing the realisation of his own disappearance, one wonders if the artist sees himself vanishing from the art process altogether through the patterning of endless repetition. After all, the interplay between appearing and disappearing, absence and presence has captivated many contemporary artists.

Writer Matthew Teitelbaum once wrote about American photographer Francesca Woodman, saying 'it is as if, by making herself a subject to be looked at, she makes herself disappear...conveying a tension between bodily presence and bodily absence.'ⁱ Rosalind Krauss has described a video work, *Boomerang*, by artist Richard Serra that featured Nancy Holt being presented with live recordings of her own voice over and over again as she tried to read aloud. It was a disorientating experience that led her to comment, 'I am surrounded by me and my mind surrounds me.'ⁱⁱ This sense of being surrounded is strong in Kregar's self portrait works and is accentuated when the artist 'himself' appears amongst the figures as he did for publicity images that accompanied the *I Appear and Disappear* exhibitions in both the Dunedin and Auckland venues.

But repetition need not equate with reduction and disappearance and in Kregar's case there is a sense, as artist Daniel Buren has described and writer Craig Owens explores further, of a repetition of differences with a view to a same (thing).ⁱⁱⁱ

The very nature of work itself, the casting and recasting, combined with the hand-modeling and colouring that takes place emphasises this repetition of difference in Kregar's multiple works. Reflecting the transformative power of repetition, the *I Disappear* series features eighty figures in total while *Roke 3*, shown at the Auckland Art Gallery in 2000, featured a heart-wrenching, crowded cluster of Kregar's outreaching clay hands. The work seemed to bear witness to the artist's own existence but also expressed the collective body.

The honouring and love of materials, the working of the earthy gritty surface of each sculpture, the physical experimentation and a commitment of time and labour are important elements in his practice. Indeed, the choice of clothing in the self-portraits reflects a working man's attire. As curator Justin Paton points out, "the choice of costume is pointed. Kregar has often stated his admiration for the Russian Constructivists of the early twentieth century, who cast the artist not as an outsider, remote and aloof, but a worker and technician. His orange overalls are an early-twenty-first century variation on the worker's costumes designed by those early twentieth century artists."^{iv}

Many have perceived the changes in scale in the two self portrait series as a strategy of multiplication rather than reduction, perceiving the works to be increasing rather than decreasing in size. Experiencing the clusters of figures as a continual renewal of the artist's image, the works can then operate as acts of becoming – inflating, multiplying, populating, crowding, cloning.

As the viewer instinctively moves around the gallery, we experience the progression of shifting viewpoints. Our sensory systems respond automatically to the changing scale of the installation, adapting our own physical movements – crouching to see the small works, raising up on toes to look into the eyes of the taller figures. With the smaller figures in *I Disappear*, it is uncomfortable to find yourself looking down on the artist. In *I Appear and Disappear*, there is the sense of finality or completion, when you reach the figure that meets you at your own eye level. It is then we feel the artist is looking back at us, as we look, with a tinge of self-consciousness, at 'him'. After all, one cannot see without being aware of being seen.

This active relationship between the work of art and its viewer is important to Kregar. He once said, "I try to make a shape or form which engages the viewer and gets a reaction from them, even if the viewer cannot explain what they are seeing."^v In the large-scale steel and glass sculpture, *One More Round*, from 2005, viewers put their heads inside a massive glass dome in order to trigger and listen to the sound components. As the sounds mimic explosions and heighten a feeling of potential danger, the experience is an act of trust for both parties.

For the series of small glass figures made in 2003 Kregar set out to bring the everyday person into the gallery by taking them as his subjects. "They will be the epitome of normality," he wrote in his project proposal. "These figures will not look like towering titans, aloof from the concerns of mortals. As a 'Mr. Everyman', they will be clothed, average looking and much smaller than life. The figure will not be hyper-realistic but will capture a moment...perhaps it even looks like you."

In his works using animal subjects such as sheep in *Matthew 12:12* from 2003 and dogs in *Mongrel Mob*, 2005 there is an immediate, humourous and delightful appeal of recognition from the viewing public. As the artist has experienced, objects taken out of their usual context have the ability to trigger a transference of emotions from viewer to artwork that at times seem irrational and are not always positive. The act is embedded in

the artistic strategy of making the comfortable uncomfortable, the important unimportant and the familiar unfamiliar.

Nothing is more familiar to New Zealanders than the ubiquitous sheep. Their place as agricultural, even national icons is firmly on the farm and as kitsch souvenirs on the shelves of the duty free stores. They may earn the farmers and the retailers millions, and may have established New Zealand as a viable trading nation in the early twentieth century but in everyday life they are accorded little or no value, hardly a second thought. They rarely appear in an art context so when Kregar presented *Matthew 12:12* in 2003, placing an unprecedented emphasis upon the usually neglected sheep, their role was challenged. As Jesus proclaims in Matthew 12:12 “surely Man is worth far more than sheep!”

The project began with the installation of 12 live and dressed sheep at an outdoor sculptural event, and progressed to a large scale photographic portraiture series and the colourful creation of 144 (12 x 12) cast clay sheep. Reflecting a kind of insecure mob mentality, the small-scale clay sheep were huddled together, looking like strange souvenirs or migrants from the country who were accidentally herded into the gallery. An enterprising project, it was rich in associations relevant to an understanding of a New Zealand identity – from the colonial history of farming to the links with the number 12. At the time, there were 12 sheep per head of population in New Zealand and 12 teams in a well-known sporting tournament. There was also a wider examination of the history and status of the portrait photograph as Kregar dealt with the elevation of the usually invisible to the ‘quasi-important.’

The humble piggy bank is the subject of a new series being developed which plays further with mixed up hierarchies – this time engaging the art and craft debate and real or fictional histories. While the piggy bank is a sought after pottery collectable as well as a useful repository for coins, its origins are contested – there are a number of differing stories that either centre around the accumulation of wealth, the payment of wages or the accidents of language. In his work, Kregar takes the (now very fat) piggy bank off the shelf and returns it to the quagmire – multiplying them as he goes. He mixes up a recipe of economic decadence, value and privilege adding in a hint of capital gain and a slice of kitsch. You can almost hear the piggy banks chanting a line from Dutch designer, Anton Beeke: “Art breaks your heart, only kitsch makes you rich.”^{vi}

For the art viewer, the riddle of ambiguity continues while for the artist, the chance to stir up more object trouble continues to be irresistible.

ⁱ Sundell, Margaret, “Vanishing Points: The Photography of Francesca Woodman”, 1996, in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr, London, Phaidon, 2000, pg 283

ⁱⁱ Krauss, Rosalind, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism”, 1976, in *ibid*, pg 277.

ⁱⁱⁱ Owens, Craig, “Allan McCollum: Repetition & Difference”, from *Beyond recognition: representation, power, and culture*, University of California Press, 1992,
http://home.att.net/~allanmcnyc/Craig_Owens.html

^{iv} Paton, Justin, *I Appear and Disappear* exhibition wall text, 13 March – 16 May 2004, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand

^v Kregar, Gregor, quoted in Webster, Kathryn, “Sketches”, *Art News New Zealand*, 2000, pg 30

^{vi} Beeke, Anton, in “Taste”, *The Art of Looking Sideways*, ed. Alan Fletcher, Phaidon, 1994, pg 314