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THE TAILOR'S DUMMY

Sue Roe

One

Wild Bird

I had made a wild bird. My bird, feathered of head, with a red crest, its body made of bits of driftwood I had picked up while beachcombing, stood on a thick, scarlet-painted stand, its long legs straight, body arrested in almost-flight, its feathers flecked with brown and pink. My bird stood ready to fly, or to pick its way across the sand or through stones or long grass. My bird held its head at a sure angle for hearing and seeing, my bird picked its wooden way.

In a group exhibition at the Red Tile Gallery in Sure Street, my bird stood alone among pieces of metal and stone, ceramics gilded with gold and scrawled with images, a black metal chimney, a Chinaman and a half-built wall. On low shelves around the room of the gallery were a small, intentionally smashed receptacle signifying a ruined utensil, a little heap of distressed rings for slender hands, decorated with hieroglyphics, a baby Buddha, a tiny prayer book made of old red velvet with a bald patch in the middle and a tiny tassel for marking the place, draped with miniature rosary beads (actually book weights for use in archives, and out of scale). A heap of crisp, gold leaves was actually made of paper. A little doll wore dark glasses and a bandage on its arm. Small tin cars were heaped in a mock crash, buckled and melted into car free-form. A ventriloquist's dummy sat with its mouth wide open, red lips – a small ledge – agape, and next to

it its partner, its gaping back showing the space for a man's missing hand. No sound, no movement. Just the laughing eyes. In room two, the far wall was a door, a green-panelled door with an elegant scrolled handle. But the door was painted, as was the handle, and there was nothing to open. The actual exit was behind a screen masquerading as a wall. Just in front of it was a grand piano, its lid propped open with a ladder, the keyboard entirely missing.

My bird was in room one, next to a pile of metal junk made of rusted cans sprayed red and gold, which from the distance of the entry door caught the light from the spotlight ceiling and shone out in a razzle of glint and glow, like the hectic embers of a nearly extinguished fire suddenly aglow one last time, or the sparkly lights of a November bonfire. My bird seemed to me too tame and calm to take its place amongst the pieces of the imaginary that made up the exhibition, too put together with bits of real wood, still smelling faintly of damp sand, too closely simulating the natural world, and too much *of* the natural world. But my bird was bought. My bird, on its solid piece of scarlet-painted driftwood, its pointed scarlet crest an elegant feathered breath, had a red spot on its head from the first day. The day following the exhibition I had no need to collect, parcel up and remove my bird, my bird had flown.

The Red Tile gallerist, Peter Frame, an old friend of mine from our college days, advised me what to do next. He said my star was rising again. After those few years of beginner's luck when my paintings had caught the attention of viewers and reviewers, after the following years when one sale from time to time had kept me going, things had really dwindled but now, look, my star was on the rise again. He said, what about a flock of birds?

A flock, I said, a flock? I told him my bird was individual, unique, a sole piece, signifying originality and survival. I explained that my bird meant solitude

and independence, the ability to pick my way – one’s way – alone. It was not of a piece, I told him, it even looked out of place in the group exhibition, which was surely why it had been singled out. Birds in flight are freedom incarnate, aren’t they? It was unique, signalling complete self-sufficiency and ingenuity – wasn’t that why it had been selected?

No, said Peter, that was not the reason. The reason was to do with my sensing the zeitgeist. I have no idea what the zeitgeist is, but I know my bird was not of it. However, Peter was of one accord with himself on this, he knew he wanted a group installation and that this time I could be the artist and not of one piece only but of the entire, cohesive group.

The night of the last day of the exhibition, when my bird was not there anymore, nor back in my studio, nor safely home with me, but flown, I thought about the idea of a group installation. I thought about the simulated Egyptian rings, the pile of buckled cans, the melted cars. I thought about the ceramic pots decorated with gold leaf, the piano without a keyboard and the *tromp l’oeuil* door. I thought mostly about the ventriloquists’ dummies, and how exposed and peculiar they looked two by two, the two of them impotently there, one with the red mouth hanging open, the other with its back agape. I thought how dead they were, how dead and mutilated, how tinny and tawdry, and how utterly dependent they were on the human voice to make them fully uncanny. I thought how damaged, disabled and war-torn a large group of ventriloquists’ dummies would be, and what a pile-up a smaller group would seem. I thought and thought about them, their scary open mouths and shiny hair, their dreadful paralyzed legs, bent at the knees for perpetual sitting, their holey backs, their sad, shabby suits. I thought about their shabby suits some more. Their heads, their legs, were sad and limp, despite their red smiles; their torsos’ gaping holes, from the back, though not from the front. I thought about what bachelors tailors’ dummies were, how oddly executed they were, in their profound attachment. I thought about their wide mouths, their

bewildered but still oddly knowing eyes, swiftly rotating heads and their haunting voices, faithful and muted, soft-sounding round the edges, worn and plangent and frail. I thought about their trust, their truthfulness, their odd, uncanny fusion of innocence and experience. I thought about their makers, and what an odd thing it must be, to make something in the image of a person, with mock real hair, mock real eyes, long legs, jointed knees, real clothes, with such potential for animation, and a hole, a hole big enough for a human hand to reach into, in place of the spine, a hole big enough to accommodate a hand which would take the place of its entire nervous system. I wondered about cutting the hole, whether that was the last thing the maker did, and how hard it would feel. I imagined the maker's hand reaching and pulling out all the organs, lifting out the spine, but of course there would be no need for that, the dummy, in its shabby suit, its curious eyes wide-open and watchful, would actually be empty.

On the way home from the exhibition, walking home without my bird, I passed a tailor's shop. In the window was a tailor's dummy, its stiff, upholstered calico torso speared with a black spike, its bust corseted within itself, its invisible neck ramrod straight, invisible head strict and far-seeing. There was a small tape measure slung around its armless shoulders. How nearly-alive it was in its rigidity. What a wife it would make for a ventriloquist's dummy, the two of them presiding over a post office, a library, a petrol station or a cemetery.

It was a rainy night with a purplish sky. The wind was just beginning to get up. I let myself in and shook the great, black, folded wings of my umbrella, then ballooned it out again and set it on the floor, splayed out as if prepared and waiting for a scaled-down photographer and model – a crow metamorphosed into a backdrop. I went to bed late that night and lay with the curtains undrawn, watching black rain stream in broken beaded lines down the windowpanes. I could hear the wind, pushing the trees, brushing against them, shouldering them about. I must have drifted off to sleep, because when I woke it was four-thirty and the rain had

stopped. In the strangely luminous space between sleep and waking, the nightly nothingness on the margins of being, when the body is still given over to the unconscious and its strange mechanisms but the mind is tipped into a dimension it thinks is clear, I saw – that is to say, envisaged – something very precise. I saw myself in my studio with a tailor's dummy, its stiff torso scrawled with a number, seared with a black metal rod like an upright pig on a spit, but headless and legless, and I thought about smearing the calico with glue. Then, still without fully waking, I imagined sticking on feathers, swatches of fabric, coarse wool, fine silk and velvet soft as a baby rabbit's first fur. I could feel the sensation of harshness then softness in my finger tips as I applied one snippet of fabric after another, layering up this piece of my installation, stiff and headless on its metal rod, its metal stand. I could imagine a collection of dummies, tarred, feathered and adorned as I could not have imagined a flock of wooden painted birds. I got up, drew the curtains shut and got back into bed, closing my eyes on an oddly nauseous feeling, green and twisted: the excitement of this new vision, occasioned by a moment of truth and gelled in the mind so quickly, fixed in the magic of dream so soon, then I closed my eyes.

Two weeks later my dummies were delivered to my studio. My bird had flown and now, out of a white van parked at the kerbside downstairs, six tailor's dummies were carried in, brought in over the two shoulders of two men, the van doors swinging open. I went down to the street and watched as they were carried out, two by two, leaving the rest still packed in there like so many shapely sides of pork. Each was wrapped in brown paper. The deliverymen swung them over their shoulders and stumped up the stairs of the disused factory, now artists' studios, to my studio, no 24. I unwrapped them one by one and stood them upright, wondering if I had made the right decision when I ordered them without little hard, black, inanimate faceless heads. Just the torsos, on a metal stem and stand, upholstered in calico, each numbered, was what I had ordered. They seemed to

arrive and be carried up the stairs in a matter of minutes, seconds even; the two men, each with a dummy over each shoulder, running down the stairs and up again, with six dummies and two spares, which as an after-thought I had ordered straight after the others. All but one were traditional calico dummies, the kind you see in tailors' shops, each amputated and decapitated, with a number etched into her torso; and the one beautiful, shiny black one, which I did not remember ordering, but which, when I saw it, I decided to keep and incorporate into the group.

Making tea with my old, battered kettle which stood on the floor in the corner by the socket, dropping my teabag in my old pink mug, waiting for the water to boil, I looked at my seven inanimate dummies, lifeless and ramrod straight. I thought about their incorporeal uncanniness and about the suggestion I had wanted to evoke in each of them of something magical, something half- asleep but on the point of being unleashed. I thought about them sewn, amputated, upholstered in human form and in some strange way reincarnated. I contemplated the sense of freaky, arresting embodiment they all contained: life modelled after the human form, then curtailed, arrested, having something of the school mistress, ballet teacher or indeed seamstress – silent, inanimate mistress of the workroom – something defunct but still present, arresting, powerful and strange.

I worked by first spreading glue over the entire dummy, then layering each one up differently – with feathers, green and gold, little bits of lace and tulle, tartan here, on dummy 66, moulded across the bust then decorated with a strip of red velvet and contrasting tartan. For dummy 249 I made a mess of pale green net, scrunched loosely into a bustle at the back. For 118, I made an epaulette of gold, softened by a scrunch of petals on the bodice, made from raw Thai silk. I embroidered no 568 in a repeated motif of fleur-de-lys patterns and then draped a cascade of seed pearl buttons round the stalk which stood for a neck. I made dummy no 24 a single scar, etched in red stitching, an uneven diagonal in two

tones of red below the waist, and I tattooed number 587 in red ink, etching angels and clasped hands into the calico, then pieced bits of fabric which I layered up onto the basic form, like a sculptor thumbing on pieces of clay. I bound no 7, the polished black dummy, in broad bands of cream and gold brocade. There would be no possibility of making a regular shape, of course. I wanted them asymmetrical, irregular, with decorative gestures, so that each ornament challenges the form of the body. I have heard that when they sew human flesh and skin after surgery they make the scar diagonal, because if they made a vertical scar from neck to pelvis the scar would be less flexible and the person less able to bend, stretch or even walk. I have made a diagonal scar for no 24 even though she will never bend, stretch or walk. That is the kind of thing I was aiming for: subversion and decorative ornament, but still allowing rhythm, articulation over the installation as a whole, determined by introducing little hints of rhythm into each piece.

I layered them up like words in a poem, building up ornament upon ornament to make texture, wanting to establish the feeling of blueprint, something in progress merely, leaving very visible the structure and texture of the dummies – their ghostly atmosphere, their uncanny power.
