

Cousin Beast

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One thing I've always liked about Shaun Kirby's work is its literary quality. By this I don't mean that he makes extensive use of text, which he doesn't [compare with Ruark Lewis, also featured in *Interesting Times*, who turns texts into austere spatial arrangements]. Instead, Kirby's sculptural assemblages work like cryptic crosswords or picture puzzles, packed with allusions and associations, puns and ambiguities: at first sight baffling or obscure, often conveying little more than an enigmatic sense of menace, they require effort to uncover their secret architectures of meaning.

In this they resemble, quite precisely, the contents of dreams as analysed by Freud. Every object is doubled by the dream-work, becoming both signified and signifier, both itself and the sign of something else that may not be named, and perhaps not even thought. Thus when familiar objects are brought into unfamiliar constellations—what Freud described as *das Unheimliche* or the uncanny—everyday things become enigmatic, sinister, weighted with obscure portent, or feverish with neurotic black humour. Though Freud's dream analyses are often far-fetched and even bizarre, they are also strangely compelling in their supposition of a network of unconscious and unacknowledged conflicts and desires beneath the surface of everyday life.

At first sight, *Cousin Beast* looks a little more straightforward than some of Kirby's previous work. In the middle of a bare room you see a large, low, square white table, from the underside of which protrudes a shiny, brownish leg. If you bend to look under the table, you discover a giant white-tailed spider, probably a good two metres across, rendered with meticulous attention to detail, especially with its repulsive furry head and eight inhuman eyes. On the walls are three archival photographs of stockmen displaying dead snakes as trophies—two of them hold the snakes proudly in front of them; a third shows the snakes neatly coiled in circles.

The metaphor here seems pretty clear—the home as a site of insecurity and fear. Snakes and spiders, like sharks, are Aussie icons exaggerated for effect in tourist anecdotes, but they are also vermin energetically exterminated anywhere they can be found,



whether they pose a threat to humans or not. As Wendy Walker's essay in the *Interesting Times* catalogue points out, the white-tailed spider featured here, *Lampona Murina*, is unusual in that it preys on other spiders, and therefore could conceivably be a useful spider to have around. What Kirby's installation demonstrates, however, is how *fear magnifies*—there can be no doubt that this giant spider, whether harmless or not, requires immediate extermination, even by rushing 'shoot to kill' legislation through parliament if necessary. It's an appropriate metaphor for the climate of paranoia and xenophobia so successfully managed and exploited by Australia's politicians and media, and seemingly so uncritically accepted by a significant part of the general population.

A first literary point of reference noted by Walker is Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and particularly its evocation of larger-than-life childhood fears, such as "the fear that a small woollen thread sticking out of the hem of my blanket may be hard, hard and sharp as a steel needle".

There are also allusions to Kafka, to Gregor Samsa's transformation into a giant insect in *Metamorphosis* [I kept thinking of Kafka's pedantic phrase "as it were, armour-plated" to describe Samsa's bewilderment at his recalcitrant insect body] and perhaps also to *The Burrow*. In *Metamorphosis*, Samsa's

beastly transformation estranges him from his family, first as an object of horror, then of shame and finally of indifference and neglect, until he dies an ignominious insect death and the family can breathe freely once more.

In *The Burrow* a small furry animal attempts to increase its sense of security by extending its network of tunnels, only to create an elaborate architecture of holes such that the animal's paralysing fear penetrates and permeates every inch of its 'home'. Kafka's story is entirely appropriate at a moment where Australia's overseas war on terror has morphed into a domestic war on civil liberties and human rights, where detention without trial and the possibility of extra-judicial executions has multiplied rather than diminished the legitimate fears of the so-called innocent citizen.

The allusion in the work's title, *Cousin Beast*, is a multilingual pun on the title of one of Honoré de Balzac's novels from the vast *La Comédie Humaine* series, *La Cousine Bette*. "Beast" in French is bête, pronounced the same as Bette. With the following novel *Le Cousin Pons*, *La Cousine Bette* forms a duo of novels known as *The Poor Relations*. In *La Cousine Bette*, a beautiful young peasant girl Adeline Fischer marries the wealthy and highly-regarded army officer Baron Hulot and remains obediently faithful to him to her deathbed, despite his many cruelties and infidelities. However, her

cousin Lisbeth Fischer, known as "Cousin Bette", is a bitter, vindictive peasant woman who is intensely jealous of her beautiful cousin's apparent good fortune. Cousin Bette secretly devotes herself to the destruction of Baron Hulot's family and the dissipation of its fortune, while successfully posing as the family's saviour throughout the series of disasters brought about by her intrigues. *La Cousine Bette* is a deeply cynical tale of an innocent and virtuous woman ruined by the selfishness of her naïve and impulsive husband and the vindictive cruelty of her cousin.

The allusion to Balzac's novel might suggest many things—the fear prompted by sexual unions across social and cultural boundaries; the fear of the family or the community becoming a site of internal conflict, subterfuge and sabotage; the fear of the repressed or unacknowledged kinship between respectable humans and their excluded others; the fear of the entrenched resentment of an oppressed underclass, the "poor relations" who pose a threat to middle-class respectability even as they are the foundation of its economic prosperity. Kirby's work might suggest all of these things, or none of them. Like fear, interpretation is potentially limitless.