

## Reviewed

## Edwina Ashton:

## Midnight at the Watering Hole

Edwina Ashton, *Midnight at the Watering Hole*. (2013)

**WORKS|PROJECTS, Bristol**  
15 June - 27 July

A garish pink sunset sky surrounds an arid nature spot. Curious creatures draw towards the watering hole, for respite and perhaps a little socialising. A boulder here, a puddle of water there. Over yonder is the 'Midnight Snax' bar, a simple wooden shack, where a shady character (a vacant pointy-nosed thing) is waiting to sell his wares to absent customers. A barely legible scrawl on a menu board adjacent indicates the rather unappealing and limited array of refreshments he has to offer. What will it be? 'Disappointing biscuits' which bear a likeness to murky mud patties, or maybe a cup of some unspecified liquid to wash down the dry pretzels. Perhaps you will just pick up your fishing permit and be on your way...

The scene just described is an approximation of British artist Edwina Ashton's recent sculptural installation *Midnight at the Watering Hole* at Works|Projects in Bristol. Not overly constructed, her arrangement of crudely made objects; puppets, props and backdrops, provided just enough of a magical concoction of material and form to allow for imagination to fill in the gaps and conjure a vivid scene populated by a motley cast of curious animal-like characters.

Ashton's bizarre and wonderful work, which encompasses sculpture, installation, video, drawing and performance, is like the best, or at least the most

eccentric children's story book brought to life, but gone slightly awry. Her signature creatures, made from socks, filled stockings, papier-mâché, draped material, buttons and other everyday materials that were likely to hand in her studio, are not immediately recognisable as specific animals, but are instead more improvisational. They have a mix of different qualities; snouts, big eyes and ears, elongated limbs, and their brightly coloured bodies and exaggerated features bear cartoon-like associations. Each of these hybrid creatures seems to have its own personality; some are rather cute, others just a bit weird.

Recently relocating from London, Ashton now lives in Bristol and has joined the cohort of studio holders at Spike Island. This move continues the artist's ongoing relationship with the south west; as well as being represented by Works|Projects (also based at Spike Island) and a solo exhibition at Exeter Phoenix Gallery in 2011, she produced perhaps her most ambitious work to date *Who's drinking your tea Sir? You Sir!* as part of Foreground's Independent State project in Frome, Somerset back in 2009. Merging sculpture and performance, this took the form of a 30-foot long float which paraded through the streets of Frome as part of its annual carnival. On the float, a cast of collaborators in bug costumes designed by Ashton ran riot among a sculptural set based on a Victorian naturalist's study, complete with oversized books, tea cup and cake. The carnival (a celebrated phenomenon distinct to the south west) provided an apt context for her idiosyncratic creatures to thrive in.

There is an interesting relationship between object, costume and performance in Ashton's practice. In *Midnight at the Watering Hole*, her potent sculptural arrangement begged for animation and stories to be spun, like a theatrical set waiting for multiple narratives to play out. The overriding pathos of her half-baked scenario was fortunately alleviated by the incorporation of intermittent live performance. On my visit, a motionless human-size lizard was sat on a bench in the scene, then after a while it was lurking behind me, suspiciously following my path around the gallery. The lizard attempted to interact with me but would then be overcome by shyness or disinterest and would go about its own ways making swirly patterns on the floor, as its cloth feet dragged through puddles of water. On a hot day, like the one in which I visited, the poor actor within Ashton's bulky, sweat-inducing costume must have felt discomfort and frustration – perhaps exacerbating its mischievousness (the lizard later came and stole my cycle helmet). The lizard's character was constructed partly by instructions from the artist, partly by its improvised interaction with the props and objects in the space and partly by the physical limitations of the awkward costume made by Ashton.

A series of Ashton's small watercolour sketches was also included in this most recent solo exhibition. With quivering black pen lines full of energy, tempered by casual washes of pastel hues, they show the immediacy of their making and bring to mind the illustrations of Quentin Blake; or at least the characters depicted in the drawings might be called Quentin. A cast of anthropomorphic creatures sparsely populate them and again there is an air of melancholy surrounding her odd-looking figures. They are intimate and subdued, perhaps due to their small-scale or even more restrained economy of means.

Much like in children's literature, there is a sense of safeguarding in Ashton's method of projecting human emotion and social expectation on to animals and other fictitious creatures. With all of the characters she constructs, there is a quintessentially 'British' sensibility; politeness coupled with eccentricity, a healthy dose of awkwardness and an underlying sense of unfulfillment. Precariously balanced between wondrous fantasy and an ultimately dissatisfying reality, she thinly veils failure and disappointment with brightly coloured fabric and paint to conjure a range of characters and scenarios which tenderly reveal the universal vulnerability of the human condition.

**Leela Clarke**