

# Mary Mary

Kelly, Julia; Oceania, Exhibition Text, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, December 2011

## Nick Evans: Oceania

'Oceania' immediately conjures up the mysterious and longed-for places of the surrealist imagination. An idea as much as an actual geographical region, it was a place of fantasy, glimpsed through extraordinary carved and decorated objects of the region, all of which reconfigured the human body in strange and unexpected ways. For the leader of the surrealists André Breton, 'Oceania' was 'one of the great lock-keepers of our hearts'. In his foreword to *Oceania* (1948), an exhibition of its artefacts, he wrote of the 'stupefying ill-assortedness' of its sculpture, adding that these objects are the 'most exuberant' products of the imagination, which, like 'sumptuous flowers', 'eclipse...the real world'.

Nick Evans' choice of this word for this new work is a knowing one, adding an extra-art historical layer to a sculpture-ensemble that is clearly all about the imaginative restaging and reconfiguration of the body. The composition here is decisively horizontal, evoking at once an imaginary place, a family group and a state of mind. The sculpture-protagonists of this set piece are both dispersed and united, as Evans brings together forms and images redolent of both modernist and non-western artworks in a deliberately awkward and uneasy mix. In doing so, he takes on and explores one of the key tropes of modern art critical, anthropological interpretation: namely the comparison between western artistic figuration and its non-western 'other'. This is characterised as a distinction between the twisting *contrapposto* of the European tradition and the symmetrical bodies and frontal viewpoints regularly found in non-western, tribal carvings.

The instabilities of such approaches and distinctions become evident as we take a closer look at 'Oceania'. We might recall the works of Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, Alberto Giacometti and Pablo Picasso, at the same time as we might read references to the geometric-figurative designs of Eastern European image-making traditions, non-western patterns, as well as repeated motifs of biological subjects such as tadpoles or spermatozoa. The ordered, largely symmetrical nature of this floor design contrasts strongly with the unruly plaster bodies and wooden bases above. The combination of little-legged, caryatid-like wooden bases with elements in another material recalls the work of Brancusi, where the wooden bases are objects in their own right as well as being plinth-like 'studio furniture'. Unlike Brancusi's, however, Evans' plaster bodies slump unpredictably over their bases, creating a kind of sculptural biomorphism that has no real 'inner life', no vitality nor growth. These swollen, limb-like forms seem to have no readily discernible bones or musculature beneath their skins. They show the scars of their multipartite configuration at the same time as they terminate in blank, cut-off stumps: growth arrested and denied.

Evans' 'Oceania' thus draws upon the dreams and nightmares of the modern sculptural imagination only to further unsettle its certainties and disturb its presumptions. It is a way of approaching sculpture-making today that turns the spotlight not only on the art of the recent past, but also in turn on the present and, to quote Breton on the 'stupefying ill-assortedness' of our own times.