

Over the Hills and Far Away Furrries Come to Play

Harriet Turnbull

Seventh
9 – 20 November 2004
by Lily Hibberd



Right: Harriet Turnbull
Over the hills and far away the
furrries come to play, 2004
Installation: DVD, wrapping paper
& boxes
Dimensions variable
Image courtesy the artist

Sometimes you have to work hard to understand an exhibition. Although artworks aren't always produced for obvious reasons, it's normal for the artist to have clandestine expectations and ways of quantifying the work's merit. Furthermore, the artist's motivations are not often made evident in contemporary practice, which features the shrewd layering of potential ironic interpretations, perhaps as armour against criticism. Accordingly, visitors must make their own way through the pretexts and layers of insincerity. Like many post-modern strategies of artistic production, it is more than probable that this tactic is self-defeating.

Harriet Turnbull's show at Seventh, *Over the Hills and Far Away Furrries Come to Play*, wobbled on a tightrope between success and failure. Turnbull seemingly had specific intentions for the *Furrries* show; it was conceptually tidy, the title, invitation and installation making a coherent package. The invitation was one of those party cards that get sent out for a three-year-old's birthday, on it were brightly coloured balloons and in big shiny lettering the word, 'Party!' The gallery contained stacks of large boxes,

gift-wrapped in silver foil and embellished with balloons of a similar style to the invitation. For a few moments it appeared as if this gaudy, tacky pile of gifts was all that the show could offer, but in doing the 'appreciating sculpture' wander around the boxes I discovered two televisions cleverly concealed inside the pressies, with the wrapping ripped away to reveal the screens.

On the first TV was a chat room scenario unfolding between two characters: 'Squirrel' and 'Bunny'. As there was no reason to engage with these anonymous dialogues I didn't bother reading the scrolling lines very closely, but apparently they were part of an exchange made in a real chat room that Turnbull had created. She used the chat name 'Bunny' and the person behind 'Squirrel' proceeded to use their – let's assume his – personae to get smutty and use animal-type innuendo.

Around the other side of the pile of boxes, video footage was showing on a second screen. This component was clearly the show's central motif and instantly the other stuff became mere popcorn. Not to be harsh, because



*Above: Harriet Turnbull
Over the hills and far away the furries come to play (detail: digital still) 2004
Installation: DVD, wrapping paper & boxes
Dimensions variable
Image courtesy the artist*

Turnbull had come up with a clever solution to the problem of how to display video. It was just that the extra elements made the route to the most rousing element of the show more arduous.

It was easy to become engrossed in the video and I watched the unbroken footage for several minutes. A camera had been plonked in a lovely patch of the Royal Botanic Gardens, facing a neo-classical rotunda on an idyllic mound of grass. Before the lens, a group of performers in animal suits romped on the lawn. Typical of television characters like Fat Cat they were dumb, yet there was some kind of audio playing... a big band instrumental version of the Teddy Bears' Picnic. The performers – dressed in panda, rabbit, lion and dog costumes – looked like they were improvising, except there wasn't a moment where they didn't know what they were doing. In this accomplished production, Turnbull had written a script and spent lots of time getting the performance right. No editing or cuts were evident, and at this juncture it reminded me of the silent film genre more than Fat Cat. In keeping with the style of the talkies,

Furries Come to Play had a fixed camera with melodramatic acting and a theatrical setting. The performers seemed oblivious to the camera, as if they were unaware of any audience. The more I watched, the more ridiculous it became. No plot emerged and the animals continuously played like children in the sun. The silliness of it all made me laugh out loud.

Over the Hills and Far Away Furries Come to Play was an exhibition made up of inane manifestations but, like all childish things made by adults, it had dark undertones. The dramatic sequences of animals at play included violent scenarios. All the shiny superficiality was kind of sick, just a bit too much, whereby the innocence became tarnished. Who can truly know what Turnbull's intentions were for the show? We can be sure, surface appearances aside, that not all was as simple as child's play.