

# Kathy Dalwood's Plaster Busts

by Hettie Judah

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Five hours, (and who can do it less in?)  
By haughty Celia spent in dressing;  
The goddess from her chamber issues,  
Arrayed in lace, brocades and tissues.

Jonathan Swift, *The Lady's Dressing Room*

There's a suggestion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century haberdasher's shop to Kathy Dalwood's studio. Every wall is racked with discreet containers - shelves, drawers, boxes and files - each neatly labelled and in its proper place. While some will indeed disgorge a haberdasher's bouquet of ribbons and braiding, others have more esoteric contents - vintage children's toys, plastic plumbing fixtures, corrugated cardboard, concrete miniatures and cheap souvenirs, paper cups, drinking straws, packaging, anodized steel components - between them building up a library of textures and forms that provide the raw base for Dalwood's plaster busts.

The bare boards of the floor have been stained an ashy grey with the accretion of dripped plaster. In the run up to Dalwood's show at Pitzhanger Manor a mounting army of velvety white faces stares down from high shelves at the drip-covered floor and tables, and at the stacked silicone moulds that bore them. With their complexions of haute bourgeois stucco, their impassive stares suggest mild disapproval, or at least a desire to distance themselves from their humble origins. With their extravagant headgear and highly structured garb, the plaster busts looked more suitably outfitted for an avant-garde soirée or fashionable party than hanging out in a dusty artist's studio.

Arranged in a throng on shelves higher up are the ancestors - the working models that gave the plaster busts their forms. Their peaceful, passive faces - each a moulded facsimile of a junk shop original - peep out from a gaudy array of carnival-coloured props. Here the fruits of those well-ordered containers appear; wigs fashioned from drinking straws or rolls of fabric wrapped in brown parcel tape, extravagant collars folded from the pliable foil wrapping of a coffee packet, a bust fronted by a polythene carrier bag tethered to tautness between two buttons.

Very fanciful ladies they were; none of them would keep to the same materials for a day. One would begin with some pebbles; then she would stick on a piece of green wood; then she found a shell, and stuck it on too; and the poor shell was alive, and did not like at all being taken to build houses with: but the caddis did not let him have any voice in the matter, being rude and selfish, as vain people are apt to be; then she stuck on a piece of rotten wood, then a very smart pink stone, and so on, till she was patched all over [...]

Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies*, chapter 3 (1863)

Far from the superficially posh prettiness of the finished busts, these working models have an air of ingenious self-invention about them. Their fabulous costumes suggest a party of decadents fallen on

hard times that have scabbled through the detritus of civilisation to confect a facade of magnificence. At its most interesting, fashion is a tool for reinvention, the means to create a persona - while Dalwood would perhaps shrink from the notion, on a certain level her work with the plaster busts is that of a concrete costumier, building characters through her fantastical wardrobe of catalogued odds and ends.

Dalwood's background as an artist and designer is far from the world of pretty costume. The daughter of the eminent British sculptor Hubert Dalwood, she grew up with a passion for the structural arts of architecture and engineering (indeed she admits that had she had more patience, she would have loved to have been an architect). Her aesthetic grounding is sturdily modernist - prior to the plaster busts series, her work was more abstract and monumental, rooted in an appreciation for hardworking structures like barns and silos. While her father's work entered into dialogue with the natural landscape, Dalwood's earlier concrete planters and friezes relate strongly to the built environment, and indeed, with their inverted reliefs and manipulations of scale, riff pointedly on their own artificiality.

Discussing her passion for functional and vernacular architecture, Dalwood pulls a copy of Bernard Radofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* (1964) off the shelf; a volume that she first looked through with her father. A study of traditional and non-academic architecture, had Radofsky assembled the book today, almost fifty years later, one imagines that it might also have made space for images of the inventive *bricolage* that characterises the informal structures of the modern barrio or shantytown. So influential on the work of acclaimed contemporary designers, most notably Fernando and Humberto Campana, this opportunistic, magpie-like approach to construction and decoration has a surprising common language with Dalwood's plaster busts. As with Dalwood's work on the busts, the artists of such structures look again at rejected and broken objects, they refuse to read items only for their intended purpose, flooding them instead with fresh potential via abuse and manipulation.

For Dalwood, there is a particular attraction with the busts in taking materials that have literally been rejected by society- be they crumpled paper cups, packaging materials, broken toys or construction site off-cuts - and transforming them into objects that communicate a certain hauteur and luxury. There is a subversive thrill in taking an object whose construction was inspired by tarpaulin tethered on a skip or poorly made gift-shop tat and placing it in an immaculate niche in John Soane's Pitzhanger Manor.

I wiped the dust from my mother's face.  
Indeed, dust covered everything; it seemed to me the persistent  
haze of nostalgia that protects all relics of childhood.

[...]  
Freshly polished and glittering-  
that was the world. Dust  
had not yet erupted on the surface of things.

Louise Glück, *A Summer Garden*

Whiteness is a great leveller. From the white ash of Pompeii, to the snow blanketing the blood and dirty ground in Pieter Breugel's *Massacre of Innocents* (1565), to the white house paint monumentalising Cy Twombly's sculptural assemblages and Absalon's

abstract architectural propositions, the clean blankness of white elevates the humble and cloaks the fine; it draws attention to pure form and composition.

Plaster itself is a demotic material, historically the medium for reproductions or working models rather than fine artworks. Plaster busts and statuary were an early form of mass production, rising to great popularity in the UK in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries - itinerant plaster figure makers would travel through Europe with their moulds, casting figures from locally purchased plaster to satisfy each market before moving on. Dalwood's interest in plaster busts was stimulated by the collection of pieces in the Soane Museum which include casts of works by Donatello and Michelangelo, a portion of the Elgin Marbles and more than 90 casts from Canova's workshop.

As part of her on-going interest in details of the built environment Dalwood had become fascinated by public sculptures - monuments to military glory or personal achievement that now stand overlooked in town squares and junctions, still bearing lovingly realised details of costume and textiles. Dalwood was interested in this particular illusion of statuary - the ability to take something that appeared soft and fragile and to render it solid and impassive. It was from an investigation into this that her first busts emerged. Once given an impervious coat of PVA, the faithful, fine-grained plaster diligently reproduced every detail of the fabric and trimmings, the moulding process creating the immediate illusion of softness in a solid material.

The first few busts quite directly show Dalwood's interest in costume of the time, decorated with frogging and fringes that reference Napoleonic uniforms. Through its whiteness, the cast plaster wedded all the disparate elements of the original model, creating unified compositions that she feared might become alarmingly polite, or, god-forbid, tasteful. With each subsequent composition, she went further into the illusion; rather than creating the appearance of billowing fabric, hair or lace by casting from the real thing, she created structures that were suggestive of such materials, using perhaps crumpled paper or plastic netting. She used the forgiving homogeneity of the white plaster to combine multiple references in a flowing whole.

Returning to her interest in the structural arts, Dalwood started considering elements of costume, including ruffs, collars and hats, as a kind of architecture for the body; tools with which to render a dynamic composition. She started studying the work of Japanese fashion designers such as Junya Watanabe, as well as that of Victor & Rolf and the late Alexander McQueen, who shared her playful fascination for historical costume. It is possible to spot portions of familiar pieces from these designers' collections if you know where to look - the extravagant ruching across one half of *Josephine* comes from Victor&Rolf, *Gold Digger* has a magnificent high-collared and pleated Alexander McQueen jacket, *Infanta* is dressed in jigsaw puzzle pieces, also a tribute to McQueen. Perhaps the most ambitious sortie into architectural fashion is the tribute to Junya Watanabe's gravity-defying veiled headpieces for his Autumn Winter 2008 collection that tops off Dalwood's *Zoro*.

For his hat was a hundred and two feet wide,  
With ribbons and bibbons on every side  
And bells, and buttons, and loops, and lace,  
So that nobody ever could see the face  
Of the Quangle Wangle Quee.

A reference, perhaps, to her passion for engineering, from early on in the series Dalwood topped off the plaster busts with casts of manmade objects - vehicles, agricultural machinery and buildings - that again acted as an incongruous counterpoint to the suggestion of feminine prettiness that the busts naturally conveyed. The vehicles in particular undermine the historical aspect of the busts, though the original inspiration was the tale of an extravagant wig worn by Marie Antoinette topped off with a model galleon in full sail. The asymmetrical angularity of technical machines such as combine harvesters and cranes appeals to Dalwood. Placing such objects 'centre stage' on the hats also offers them up for formal examination - transforming them from purely functional objects into purely aesthetic ones.

The parallel is unintentional, but in positioning the fruits of human genius on top of the seat of wisdom, such compositions relate back to another genre of plaster busts, the phrenological head. Popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, phrenology related the shape of the skull to personality and intelligence - here, ingenious inventions take the place of the lumps and bumps that would have provided clues to the mysteries of intellect.

While they are never intended as 'joke' objects, it is hard not to be touched by the humour that runs through the plaster busts series. Dalwood often refers to her desire to 'subvert' things; perhaps as a result this whole series is an exercise in fanciful and disconcerting juxtapositions; *Miss London Town's* amalgamation of punk rock, Lord Nelson and mass-produced souvenirs, *Infanta's* marriage of Velásquez, with hints of Cubism topped off with a tip-up truck. There is also a basic absurdity of scale - while the buildings and vehicles may be miniature, they are still vast in relation to the size of the heads. Recognisable elements, such as the outsized Lego pieces on *Bricklayer*, would become hopelessly unwieldy if they were scaled up. Dalwood conceives the works in 3 dimensions. Rather than working from sketches she builds each one up directly on the model as a couturier would work on a Stockman mannequin. (It is, for this reason, alas rather difficult to get a full idea of the busts from photographs alone). As the series has progressed, her compositions have become increasingly dynamic, evolving to become closer in spirit to her earlier, modernist-inflected works. The drama of the outsized headpieces has become a means to increasingly outrageous experiments in cantilevering. Particularly in the larger busts like *Tom Cat* and *Tank Girl*, the headpieces look positively perilous in their composition, with the Tomcat fighter jet of the former looking poised to launch, and the tank of the latter balanced improbably on a precipice.

The one in the upper-left-hand corner  
is giving me a look  
that says I know you are here  
and I have nothing better to do  
for the remainder of human time  
than return your persistent but engaging stare.

Billy Collins, *Victoria's Secret*

Although all based on the same few basic mannequins, each bust does seem to take on distinct personalities and expression; according to Dalwood, people respond to them very much as individual characters. Sometimes the composition will emerge organically, at other times she'll work with a theme, slowly developing an appropriate 'language' of objects to make up the piece; tubing and superstructures for

*Astronaut*, mikes and headsets for *Tank Girl*, straps and webbing for the Olympic-inspired *Miss Get-set-go*.

As the cast of characters expands, so the series is working its way back round to Dalwood's preference for abstraction; slowly the faces are becoming obscured, consumed by lace or machinery. The plinths on the new, larger busts are monumental to the point of industrial, emphasising the rough-and-ready, concrete-inspired finish of the busts themselves.

The Secret Society banquet at Pitzhanger Manor, with its plaster plates and dipped utensils, is perhaps a moment of farewell - a spectacular last supper for the plaster busts, frozen in time. These are ladies with much on their mind: an imaginary army of engineers and intellectuals, resourceful and elegant, joined for dinner by the Architect, Dalwood's Sir John Soane. It will be a long meal, but one imagines that they have a great deal to talk about.

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