



## Nick Renshaw Native Procreation in Eboracum

Article by Siobhan Wall

*Earthings*. 2004. Ceramic, multiple firings. 78 cm/ht.

NICK RENSRAW'S SOLO EXHIBITION AT DE WITTE Voet Gallery in Amsterdam shows work that has evolved from his earlier preoccupations. His interest in using images from the past is clearly evident in his recent figurative sculptures.

Instead of the suggestion of Cromwellian armor found in his former mat black headpieces, we see pastel-coloured humanoid arranged in rows. These ambiguous characters, reminiscent of the Chinese terracotta army of Qin Shi Hung, seem innocent rather than warrior-like. Some of the faces are also similar to those belonging to the ominous cybermen seen in the British television series *Doctor Who*. This makes their uncomprehending anonymity both nostalgic and compelling because we are unsure whether they are benign or threatening.

Not only do Renshaw's ceramic people seem both gentle and potentially hostile, even their gender is ambiguous. What is appealing, however, is their simplicity. They stand as still as cherished objects in a nursery, their faces as uncomplicated as a child's drawing with unseeing blank eyes, a simple triangle for the nose and a slit for the mouth. They are as

endearing as snowmen and invite the same tenderness and delight that we feel about these familiar garden effigies. In fact, Renshaw's sculptures seem both protected and protective. Thick pale blue and green glazes cover each of the waist-high figures and this seems to offer a comforting layer which implies that they have been lovingly created. At the same time, the fact that they are arranged in close proximity to one another suggests that they are like patient bodyguards, constantly standing to attention. Unlike real people they are never demanding or insistent and Renshaw's sculptures are engaging and visually inventive.

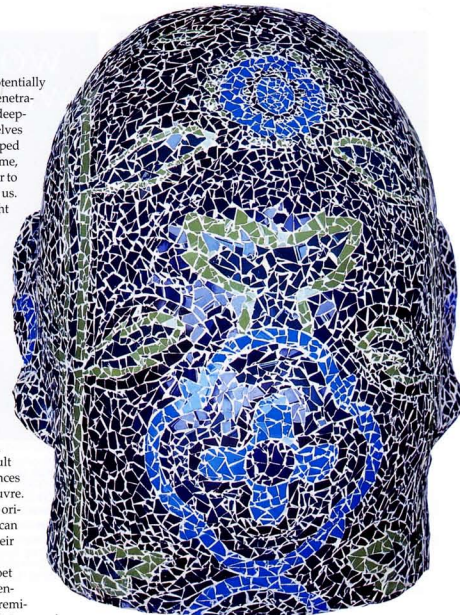
Many of Renshaw's larger figures are covered in what look like fantastic costumes. His recently commissioned *Earthings* have brightly-coloured mosaic carapaces. They have been covered in designs derived from garish 1970 style wallpaper. Such surface decoration might make Renshaw's figures seem less affectionate, but the references to popular culture – in particular TV and the domestic environment – connect these pieces to recent shared histories. His *Native Earthing (Head)*, a huge floor piece, has also been covered in mosaic patterns. This piece has no eyes, ears,

nostrils or mouth which has a potentially unsettling effect. The mask is impenetrable, thereby hinting at one of our deepest fears – that we may find ourselves unable to utter a single word, trapped inside our own body. At the same time, Renshaw's intriguing figures appear to be wanting to communicate with us. They wait passively for the right moment to come to life. Another interpretation could be that this work is about how we project our thoughts on to others. Due to the absence of facial clues the viewer can only imagine what is going on in this massive head.

Avoiding prosaic depictions, Renshaw has covered his sculpture with blue flowers, symmetrical petals and leaf patterns. Although this piece doesn't explicitly refer to non-Western cultures, it does show the influence of Islamic architectural detail. In some ways, his pieces remind us that it is difficult to know the many cultural influences that subtly influence an artist's oeuvre. Just as we can't know the historical origins of ancient sculptures, neither can artists always locate from where their visual ideas emerge.

The owner of the De Witte Voet Galerie, Annemie Boissevain, mentioned that this large sculpture is reminiscent of Easter Island effigies and Renshaw's work does seem to bear an affinity with these mysterious objects, partly because the function of the 1300-year-old pieces still remains unknown. If we were to find Renshaw's *Native Earthing* in an isolated field many thousands of years from now, it would probably be similarly mystifying.

It is not only ancient history, however, that interests him, but also the attempts to unearth our own past lives. Renshaw is fascinated by historical connections and the title of his recent show refers to where he grew up. *Eboracum* is the Latin word for York, the renowned Northern British town where many ancient artifacts have been unearthed. His mysterious otherworldly figures invite us to consider how the past impacts on all of us, whether we are beguiled by the significance of 17th century battles or the dubious entertainments conveyed through our TV screens in our own lifetime. Renshaw's sculptures seem to appear as if from another place and time, which makes their origins seem uncertain and potentially unfathomable. What connects the large mosaic head with the smaller figures is that both seem to be about loneliness.



*Native Earthing*. 2004. Ceramic, various techniques. 95 cm/ht.

The exhibition of Easter Island art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York was titled *Splendid Isolation*, and these words also seem appropriate when used to describe Renshaw's inscrutable sculptures. Like creatures from another planet or bodies found encased in tombs, his images seem to hold fascinating secrets. Looking at these quiet figurative pieces makes us wonder about the relation between private and public histories. Nick Renshaw encourages us to examine where particular memories overlap with shared experience, thus providing an opportunity to reflect on the significance of childhood. At the same time, his work instigates potent questions about whether benign forces will manage to save mankind; and this makes these enigmatic figures therefore seem infinitely hopeful.

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