

Steve Carr

According to the *Encyclopedia Popcornia*¹ Native American tribal folklore told the story of spirits who live within each kernel of popcorn, quiet and content to live life alone inside their little home. However these spirits grew angry when their homes were heated, and as they became hotter and hotter and angrier and angrier, they would burst from their homes as a puff of hot air.

In the Carr home the story was a little different. It goes that the Native Americans had a tradition of wearing corn kernels as part of their body adornment. One day, a beautiful young princess was wearing her corn-kernel necklace and danced too close to the fire. POP! The heat caused the kernels to jump and dance until they burst and turned themselves inside-out and every which way, and henceforth popcorn as we know it began.

Personal mythologies and a sense of family and shared history form the basis for these two works by artist Steve Carr. Both works draw from the notion of family, and the artist's position as both a member and observer. *Cowboy and Indians* presents the artist playing sheriff to four young Indians, throwing himself into the character with childlike enthusiasm. As a viewer, one is struck by the ambiguity of the situation. There is a clear impression of the artist as leader, director, and controller – his 'Indians' are presented with previously unattainable power, opportunity, and means. The piece reaches its climax at a point where the balance of power shifts. The adult, role-playing as victim, finds himself in a situation where he has compromised his ability to take control. The children react to this in a primal way, working themselves up into a frenzy of excitement; seizing power from the adult an unexpected perk of this happy Sunday afternoon entertainment. The piece explores the dynamics of the relationship and interaction of child and adult and prompts consideration of the fine balance between innocence and something more subversive.

Popcorn Mountain extends the artists interest in the differing view of adult and child. 20kgs of popped-corn, approximately the weight of a small child, creates a pleasingly large pile within the space of the window. This is a work that on first impression engages the 'childs-eye view'. Through innocent eyes the sheer delight of even being in close proximity to so much snack-food provokes a feeling of wonder verging on worship. Immediately the inner child is reduced to Charlie entering the holy grail of Willy Wonka's chocolate garden. The act of enshrining this popcorn within a gallery vitrine immediately increases its desirability to its adult audience. What was formerly accessible and of no particular value has suddenly

become sought after and remote. And so they play right into the artist's hand. Manipulating the value one offers the object is a key intention of the piece.

This work also relates back to an earlier video work *Hayfight* depicting the artist drawn into the game of a group of young girls playing with a large pile of hay – piling up and then digging through, on a continuous loop. *Popcorn Mountain*, in its format as a static sculpture, repositions the nature of the search. The automatic response when faced with a large and undisturbed pile is to find out what is underneath. Where in *Hayfight* the search was manifested, in *Popcorn Mountain* it is denied. This gives the work a sense of conflict, as if the artist is intentionally removing the viewer's ability to satisfy a need to find what is hidden with this pile of corn.

The innocent family story of the Native American princess and her popcorn jewels leads to an awareness as an adult of the way in which traditions and values colour our view. Carr's work is preoccupied with reconstructing stories from his past. He does so in an earnest way, remaining deadpan in the face of what appears far-fetched outside the privacy of the family unit. There is a sense of both giving and withholding which underpins his practice. With one hand the viewer is presented with a sincere and innocent scenario, yet the works provide no answers to satisfy the incongruities that arise on reflection. This slightly unsettling quality is key to the success of the work, and leaves the viewer wondering if things really are as they seem or if it is all a product of the artist's love of a good yarn.

Lucy Hammonds

References

1. <http://www.popcorn.org/encyclopedia/eppop1.cfm>

Popcorn Mountain courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett

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