

Perfect scale of exhibition for model artist

Ron Mueck's extraordinary work has a chance to shine in a well-chosen show, says **Mark Hudson**

EXHIBITION
RON MUECK;
ANDY HOPE 1930

HAUSER AND WIRTH, LONDON W1

Ron Mueck sprang to prominence via *Dead Dad*, his father's pallid, naked corpse recreated in silicone, with every last micro-blade of stubble rendered in unnerving hyper-real detail. What made the piece particularly disconcerting was the fact that it was, at 3ft, roughly half life-size; the sense of looking at an old man's body on the scale of a small child's inducing mixed feelings of vulnerability, compassion and a kind of shamed revulsion.

Seen alongside Damien Hirst's dead shark in *Sensation*, the exhibition that launched the YBA generation amid an orgy of publicity in 1997, *Dead Dad* felt all of a piece with that group's preoccupation with mortality and macabre spectacle.

Yet over the intervening years, the fiercely private Mueck's relationship to the publicity-hungry YBAs has come to be seen as largely accidental.

Slightly older than them at 53, Mueck has gone on playing with scale, creating figures either creepily small or overbearingly large: a pair of goblin-like cronies in immaculately sewn overcoats, a massive, wild-eyed naked tramp seated in a chair, an ordinary mum in bed turned into a room-filling giantess.

Mueck began as a model-maker in his native Australia, and the how-does-he-do-it factor of his extraordinary creations tends to go before whatever it is he is trying to say, to the extent it has been questioned whether he is really an artist at all. A landmark show at the Royal Scottish Academy in 2006 strained after profundity in attempting to show the various stages of life, from gauche teenager to ceiling-scraping granny. Yet the astonishing realism of these figures rendered them paradoxically illustrative, even cartoon-like. A vast newborn baby, still coated in blood and mucus, would, you felt, have been better seen in the Natural History Museum than in an art gallery.

In this small selection of works, all from 2009, but seen in London for the first time, the hint towards the sacred – always discernible in Mueck's work – is more overt than before. Yet the modest scale makes for a more satisfying experience than some of his larger showings.

The murky lit first room is empty save for *Drift*, a man, about two-thirds life-size, in sunglasses and Bermuda shorts lying on an airbed spotlit against the blue-painted far wall. He's seen apparently from above, as though floating in some Californian swimming pool, but upended, so that his arms, stretching over the side of the bed, create an immediate echo of the Crucifixion.

Anyone who saw *The Sacred Made Real*, the National Gallery's exhibition of Spanish religious sculpture, will be taken back to



its anguished, super-real saints and Christ figures. There's something eerily devotional in the taciturnity of the hair on Mueck's figure's legs, the gleam of sweat and suntan oil on his narrow torso. Yet the work is saved from portentousness by the faintest hint of humour: the expression of weary serenity on this clapped-out Bruce Willis figure's face.

Woman with Sticks shows a fleshy, naked, middle-aged woman, again about half life-size, bent backwards beneath a bundle of real sticks that are rendered gigantic by her smallness. She looks back at us with a rather pinched expression that's difficult to read. But whether she's a woodcutter's wife from some Freudian fairytale or a discomfited social worker, what matters here is the way her scale is set in counterpoint with *Still Life*, a plucked chicken seven feet high, hanging from a butcher's hook in the opposite corner of the room.

The bound talons are scarily enormous, the mass of fat around the cut neck horribly convincing. The fact that the broad expanses of the breast look all too much like masses of painted rubber doesn't really matter. Indeed, it's a relief to find an area of

Lifelike: Mueck's realistic works include (clockwise from top left) 'Drift', 'Still Life' and 'Woman with Sticks'

Mueck's work that doesn't seek to impress with an overload of message-bearing detail.

That's something that certainly can't be said of *Youth*, a 2ft-high figure of a black teenager pulling up his T-shirt to reveal a bleeding wound in his side. As always, the detail is extraordinary: the hair, the low-riding jeans revealing the boy's underpants – and if the clothes would have been the easiest things to make here, the small scale and attention to detail create their own sense of pathos.

Yet if the scene sounds like one from the London street, the classical poise of the boy's posture brings to mind Christ's wounds at the Crucifixion. Indeed, the blurb tells us that the youth's look of puzzlement as he stares at his bleeding flesh is designed to evoke Doubting Thomas – an inference that would have been better left unstated. The piece already feels as though it is trying to carry too much meaning. It is difficult to imagine anyone managing to be throwaway in works that require such intensive labour, but Mueck's art is at its best, as in *Drift* and *Still Life*, when it achieves a degree of nonchalance.

There's nonchalance aplenty, but little sign of labour in the work of German artist

Andreas Hofer. Styling himself Andy Hope 1930 – a reference to the year when Stalin suppressed modernism in the Soviet Union and comic books took off in America – he mixes popular imagery from *Superman* to *Beavis & Butt-head* with neo-modernist elements in a gleefully cack-handed way that has become typical of German painting over the past three decades.

The use of colour and pattern suggest he isn't quite the slouch with the brush he'd have us believe, and if none of the paintings has the substance to stand as a work in its own right that is part of the point. These canvases are intended to be seen as parts of an installation involving some grey and indeterminate wall projections. If the aim remains opaque, the feel is very familiar. Hofer/Hope is a post-punk prankster in the tradition of the late, great Martin Kippenberger, but on this showing there isn't enough to differentiate him from many other artists around the world working in a very similar vein.

Until May 26

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Ⓙ RATING ★★★★★ Hope

