

ARTnews

Dummy Types

by Lamar Anderson

When photographer Matthew Rolston walked into the Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, in 2009, the crowds of huddled ventriloquist dummies on display reminded him of retired performers still awaiting a cue. “It was the best casting call I’ve ever seen,” he recalls.

Rolston, who usually photographs entertainers such as Madonna and Beyoncé, was moved by the pathos of these antique wiseacres, toffs, and geezers. “To me, they were amazing abstractions of humanity, and because of the mileage on them, they have all kinds of issues of mortality attached,” he says. Rolston made about 200 large-format portraits of dummies dating from the 1820s to the 1980s. Around half are collected in the book *Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits*, published by Pointed Leaf Press.



Matthew Rolston's photographic portraits of ventriloquist dummies (clockwise from the top left): *Jonathan Jones*, *Powers Girl*, *Jasper*, and *Hook Boy*, all 2010.

Producing an artist's book is a first for the photographer, who got his start shooting for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine in the 1970s. But aside from the bug-eyed blonde dummy in *Powers Girl* (all works 2010), whose wide mouth and glued-on eye-brows suggest a simpleton version of Warhol's Marilyn, most of Rolston's subjects aren't very glamorous. With wide, weary eyes and limp hair, *Pancho* suggests a hapless Willy Loman type posing for his driver's license, and *Hook Boy* "looks like he was knocked down, drowned, left for dead, put back together - maybe by somebody's child - and repainted," Rolston says.

"His wig is nailed back into his skull."

To help the photographer get the right expression for each portrait, Vent Haven curator Jennifer Dawson stood just outside the frame with her arm inside each dummy. Working the rows of keys in the puppets' heads, Dawson focused eyes, protruded teeth, and made hair stand on end. "I was always looking for this dimension moment," says Rolston, "when they seem to bloom as if they're alive."