

Los Angeles Times

Matthew Rolston Turns Heads with 'Talking Heads' at JF Chen

by Craig Nakano

Matthew Rolston packed the cavernous JF Chen gallery in Hollywood on Friday night to introduce L.A. to his latest project, "Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits," a series of photographs featuring all-too-human ventriloquist dummies.



Matthew Rolston, *Hook Boy*, from the series "Talking Heads."

Much of the early coverage of the book has focused on the eerie and absurd qualities of the dummies (the Huffington Post declared them "creepy"), but through the 5-by-5-foot portraits on view at JF Chen, Rolston was able to reveal much more.

Most evident: The large format of the portraits emphasizes the human hand behind each doll face: the rosy cheeks, the bushy brows, the eyelashes brushed on, one by one.

Where skin has cracked, where painted makeup has chipped, where the 24/7 smiles yield to the realities of time, Rolston's subjects feel the most human. And when you take a step

back and consider the photographer first gained fame through celebrity portraiture, the work takes on another layer of humor.

Friday night Rolston signed books while fans circulated in a crowd that included Diane Keaton and John C. Reilly. A short film explained that the stars of the show live at the Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Ky., where the collection of ventriloquist dummies tops 700 and dates to the 19th century.

Rolston photographed his subjects on site and, given the outsized personalities with which he was working, deployed a relatively simple approach: one camera, one angle, one light source.

The results are mesmerizing. You can't help but root for dummies that spent their working lives under command of a master. Here they loom larger than life, in the spotlight, flying solo on a new stage.