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Matthew Rolston Photos of Ventriloquist Dummies Have Much to Say

by Sharon Mizota

Perhaps the only thing more creepy than a clown is a ventriloquist's dummy. Made in our image but distinctly not human, dummies have left the safe confines of the puppet stage for our space, yet remain apart, giving voice to sentiments we dare not speak ourselves.



Matthew Rolston, *Irish Policeman*, from the series "Talking Heads."

At Diane Rosenstein Fine Art, celebrity photographer Matthew Rolston takes a closer look at these uncanny little doppelgangers in large, lucid portraits of 24 dummies from the collection of Kentucky's obscure Vent Haven Museum. The images are exceedingly consistent: frontal, evenly lighted and cropped. They also reveal their subjects to be as individual and vulnerable as real people.

Under Rolston's eye we see the dummies, which date from as early as 1890, as unique, handmade objects, roughly whittled and painted in broad, slapdash strokes. They also show the marks of time, weathering the humiliations of cracking skin, lost hair and poor

repair jobs that afflict all of us eventually. Some of them even have small holes near their eyes that look like mechanical tear ducts.

Yet despite this individuality, they are in the end representations, holding a mirror up to the ways in which we categorize and stereotype. There is more than one Sambo-esque figure with black, black skin and thick red lips, as well as a very simian-looking “Irish Policeman.” They remind us that it’s as easy to evoke humanity as it is to strip it away.