

Slate

The Endearing, Funny, and Disturbing Faces of Ventriloquist Dummies

by David Rosenberg

Although photographer Matthew Rolston has built a career on entertainment portraiture, advertising, and music videos, he suddenly found himself looking for a different outlet in 2009.

“My professional work is subject to tremendous agendas; everything I do is mediated by a group of people, the creative work is usually mentioned in a contract,” Rolston said. “When I started this first-ever fine art project I wanted to have none of that; I went into it just wanting to take these pictures.”



Matthew Rolston, *Noisy Crachini*, from the series “Talking Heads.”

The project turned out to be a series about ventriloquist dummies from the Vent Haven Museum, now a 224-page book titled *Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits*, published by Pointed Leaf Press. Rolston mentioned that once he started thinking about tackling an independent project, he had a hard time focusing on anything else.

“I’m the kind of person, once my ‘antenna’ is up, I immediately start ‘receiving,’” he wrote recently, via email.

What perked the antenna this time was a New York Times story by Edward Rothstein about the Vent Haven Museum and in particular a photograph of one of the dummies he saw, and upon visiting, he felt a kind of kinship with the dolls.

Because many of the dummies are fragile, Rolston did the shooting on-site. Choosing which subjects to include was complicated since there are more than 700 figures on display. He photographed more than 250 and then edited those down to the 100 strongest, “many a Sophie’s Choice,” said Rolston.



Matthew Rolston, *Ayre Girl*, from the series “Talking Heads.”

“I wanted to photograph the figures that ‘spoke’ to me in a more personal way. This collection of portraits is not about recording the history of ventriloquism. Instead, it is a personal response to the emanations of humanity that come from these terribly evocative inanimate objects,” Rolston wrote.

Reaction to the project (Rolston is still looking for a gallery to show the work) has been overwhelmingly positive, though Rolston said many people still have negative reactions to dummies. “It seems that the image of the evil or demonized dummy is very much part of popular consciousness due to a number of rather clichéd books and films,” he explained.

Rolston mentioned that from his other work he is a “connoisseur of faces” and approached the portrait sessions similar to the way he would with human beings.

“It has been said that the eyes are the window to the soul; that is powerfully expressed by these figures,” Rolston wrote. “By employing the same techniques and emotional approach I would apply to a human subject, I believe I was able to portray these figures in much the same way. ... For me these figures have a yearning quality. They speak through their eyes, since their voices—voices of their ventriloquists—are now long silent. I found them to be endearing, hilarious, tragic, even disturbing— sometimes all at once.”