

WIRED

Creepy Portraits of Ventriloquist Dummies From a Master Photographer

by Liz Stinson

Matthew Rolston has made a career of taking photos of famous peoples' faces. He's shot Michael Jackson, Taylor Swift, Johnny Depp, Lady Gaga – you get the picture. But his favorite portrait subjects have no clout at all. In fact, they don't even have a heartbeat.



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

In *Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits*, Rolston turns his camera from done-up celebs to the unsettling faces of ventriloquist dummies. It might seem like a strange choice, but the project was a long time coming, says Rolston, who for years has been a staple in the world of commercial photography. "It got to a point where I thought to myself, 'Oh, so this is my legacy, a bunch of great looking photos for L'Oreal and 100 Rolling Stone covers,'" he laughs. "And there's nothing wrong with those things, I'm proud of those things, but it was clearly time for me to make a whole new personal statement."

He found his inspiration in a New York Times article from 2009 that profiled a strange little museum in Vent Haven, Ky. The museum, well-known among ventriloquism enthusiasts, or “vents,” is filled with more than 700 dummies, dating back over 100 years.

Rolston was intrigued, so much so that he took a trip down to Vent Haven to check out the museum firsthand. “I walked in the door and was instantly hooked,” he recalls. “It was some of the best hair, make-up and wardrobe I’d ever seen.”

He knows those things well. Much of his work is glossy, loud, and laboriously styled. When you see the simplicity of the Vent Haven portraits, it’s hard to believe you’re looking at the work of the same photographer who turned in a candy-colored portrait of Nicki Minaj, fractured like a kaleidoscope.

To shoot the dummies, Rolston used just a plain white background, a single light source, one camera and one lens. He didn’t need much else. “It wasn’t hard to shoot,” he says. “I could feel their personalities and presence. I was seeking some kind of life force and connection in the same way I do in every portrait that I shoot.”

Rolston chose his favorites from the bunch, which tended to be the roughed up dummies that looked like they had a story. His favorite, Hook Boy, is a wide-faced doll with lavender eyebrows and a mop of orange hair nailed into place. “Those aren’t his original colors, but they’re so expressive,” Rolston says. “He was so beautiful and strange.”

Some might find Hook Boy creepy, but Rolston disagrees. He finds their energy childlike and sweet. “People tend to have a negative reaction to dummies,” says Rolston. “But they’re filled with some kind of human energy because of what they were created to do.”