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Fine Art For Dummies

by Alexandra Cheney

For the first time in his 30-year career, portrait photographer Matthew Rolston is dipping a toe in the world of fine art.

His new book and series of prints, "Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits" employs his signature lighting techniques, but rather than shooting celebrities or movie stars for which he is known, Rolston looked to dummies.



Matthew Rolston, *Tango Teddy*, from the series "Talking Heads."

Officially classified as ventriloquial figures, the 103 dummies that make up Rolston's book hail from the Vent Haven Museum, the sole museum dedicated to their preservation. It is located in Fort Mitchell, KT.

Sitting high above Sunset Boulevard in his pied-à-terre, Rolston flipped through the book, released in January, and spoke about its coming Los Angeles gallery debut, set for Friday night at JF Chen.

"This is a virgin experience for me," said Rolston, adding, "I'm really quite nervous."

Having built his reputation in portrait photography, Rolston said he's had his fair share of critics in the fine art world, especially considering his late entrance.

"To a dealer I'm not this young, fresh talent eager to pay my dues," said Rolston.

Nevertheless he's acquired some influential fans, including actress and art collector Diane Keaton who will co-host the Friday event, and the Museum of Contemporary Art's director and recent Los Angeles transplant Jeffrey Deitch.

"The art elite has become a very insular community," Deitch said. "But people are coming from different places into different mediums and that needs to be embraced and appreciated."

Rolston bankrolled this project personally, another first for him. Because he was not on assignment for a client, he also established a particular set of boundaries for himself.

He used only one light, one camera, one lens and one background during his shooting. He allowed himself fifteen to twenty minutes with each dummy, which range in age from the year 1820 to 1989.

The six five-foot square prints will not be available for purchase at the event Friday night, but the book, which retails for \$75, will be.

Rolston began his career at Andy Warhol's "Interview" magazine, hired by Warhol himself. He went on to shoot over 100 covers for "Rolling Stone" magazine. Rolston, a Los Angeles native, resides in Beverly Hills.