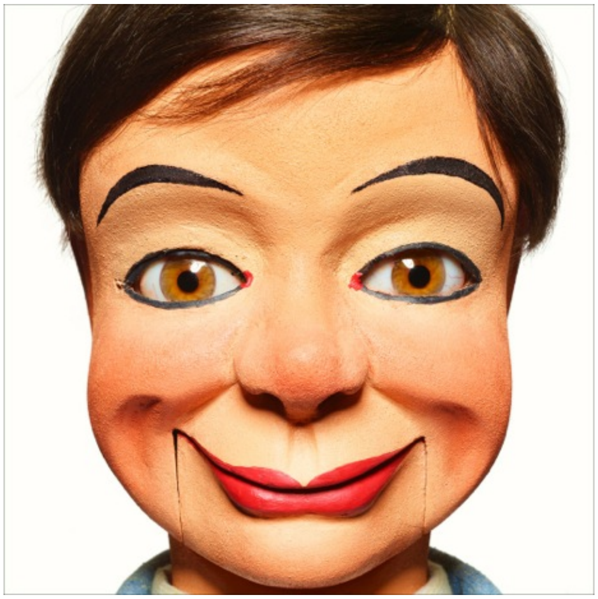
Talking Heads

by Matthew Rolston

If masks are, as Spanish philosopher and poet George Santayana wrote in the early 1920s, “arrested expressions and admirable echoes of feeling” then the Vent Haven Museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, must contain one of the world’s more unique and evocative collections. It is a place like no other.

After discovering Vent Haven through an article by Edward Rothstein that appeared in the *New York Times* in June 2009, I became deeply intrigued by its inhabitants. I knew nothing of ventriloquism then, and still know very little, but I have learned of the poetry of these figures and the ways in which they were brought to life as an expression of their creators—the figure-makers and ventriloquists.

I began by approaching my subjects because of how they look, not necessarily because of their historic or cultural value.The faces that spoke to me most had expressions that I found enigmatic, pleading, Sphinx-like, hilarious, and disturbing—all at once. To me, the greatest portraits are mostly about finding a connection with the subject’s eyes. There’s an expression of yearning and desire in these eyes that I find disturbing.



Matthew Rolston, *Joe Flip,* from the series “Talking Heads.”

Ventriloquism has ancient roots. Long before the music hall era, before vaudeville, radio, or television even existed, there was shamanism and there was ritual. When the shaman spoke to the tribe, channeling the voices of spirits—sometimes animist, sometimes divine—no doubt he or she used the same techniques as those used by modern ventriloquists. All forms of modern entertainment and storytelling come from the same primal beginnings.

What makes ventriloquism as an art form and culture all the more fascinating is that it embodies the “god complex.” A man (or a woman) gives birth to a lifelike, moving, speaking facsimile of another human. This is both primitive and miraculous. In performance, the ventriloquist literally has a hand inside the figure’s body and head, making it appear alive.

The dummies have moving parts: mouths of course, but eyes that can roll, eyebrows that can rise and fall in surprise, heads that turn, and sometimes more. They’re not puppets. There are no strings to animate them, they appear to move and speak—often mocking their creators (or some social convention)—and they seem to be as smart as their creators, in fact, usually smarter.

The bond shared by the human and their wondrous creation is the part of ventriloquism I find most gripping. It’s the space between. Just as in a classic two-man comedy act, a ventriloquist and his or her dummy are partners—each other’s yin and yang. It’s always a give-and-take. After all, what’s a joke without a punch line?

JIMMY NELSON
&
DANNY O'DAY
directional
Exclusive Management
WILLIAM MORRIS AGENCY

Ventriloquist Jimmy Nelson posed with his figure,
Danny O’Day, for a promotional

What time has wrought on the figures speaks volumes, in a language both satirical and tender. Their expressions evoke a sense of serenity, a melancholy that suggests a spiritual longing, authentically embodying three telling truths: nothing is perfect, nothing is ever finished, and nothing lasts.

Perhaps in their solitude today, separated from their makers, they represent a liberation from our materialistic world. No longer aided by the human voices that once spoke so magically through them, the Vent Haven figures now speak by the simple fact of their physical presence. To paraphrase American poet Helen Hay Whitney: these old lost stars rise and gleam once more. The dummies don't just channel humanity, they fetishize it. Human history is all over them. They are overwhelmingly, intensely human objects. They are my subjects.