

Hagfish, bears and polly-waffles  
Victoria Wynne-Jones

I really need a laugh at the moment.

What is humour? Tickling a funny bone. The tickling of a bone that isn't really a bone, it's a nerve.

There are around thirteen logs crafted by Lucy Meyle from recycled cardboard and packing tape. Some are as tall as a high-stud room, one is as wide as your shoulders. The rings on the end have been drawn in black marker pen.

The logs are pleasing. Piled unevenly, they are inviting, they seem ready to be set alight, to form part of a cabin wall, or ready for sitting upon, providing a moment of rest.

They remind me of American summer camps as described in young adult novels and also of Jellystone Park, the home of Hanna-Barbera's cartoon character Yogi Bear who first appeared with Huckleberry Hound in 1958. In my mind he is always surrounded by pastel green forests, pale lakes, pic-a-nic baskets and artfully scattered logs. When I was a small child I always thought that Hanna-Barbera was a wonderfully talented woman, a cartoon-making genius. Only recently I learned that she is actually two men.

During lockdown, when things got pretty dark, I was heartened by a story of rare Andean bears coming together to feast on wild avocados in the Maquipucuna cloud forest in Ecuador. These so-called spectacled bears were the model for another fictional character: Paddington Bear.

Surfacing from lockdown was strange, it came in fits and starts. An emergence from hibernation that felt a little backwards as we went from piercing blue-golden autumn days to misty winter mornings. To be honest, I felt exhausted. I could have hibernated right through the winter. This week, another story of bears emerged. In *Yellowstone* Park in the US, a grizzly bear known as "399" emerged from her winter slumber with four bear cubs in tow. The matriarch is photographed standing on her hind legs, looking out, sniffing the air, her young gambolling about at her feet in the long, spring grass.

There's something about logs that makes me think of bears.

-

In *caddyshacklemenot* (2008) a work by Australian artist Matthew Griffin, a green plastic bucket is filled with water. Upon the surface floats a gnarled chocolate log which is in fact a Polly Waffle, a specific kind of beloved Australian confectionary. [1] For some reason Griffin's polly-waffle has become indelibly entangled in my mind with Meyle's *Logs*. Griffin's installation reminds me that a log can be read as a turd.

-

I guess what I'm trying to say is that Meyle's work just tickles my funny bone. Her installations are knowingly comic, playful and incongruous. She has constructed grass-green coloured *Duck and snail ramps* (2018) in plywood. Aren't ducks and snails sworn enemies? By carefully creating these apparatus of elevation for both creatures the artist shows she doesn't discriminate. Though the ramps have been exhibited at the St Paul St Gallery and Wallace Arts Centre, Meyle also documented them at work in her mum's backyard and at a friend's house. The snail ramp acts as a kind of feeder with petals, leaves and twigs. At the top centre of the structure is a decorative, incised snail-shape which the snails obligingly crawl through. The ducks merely stand around and act insolent. The duck ramp is a failure.

The common garden snail makes another appearance in the time-based work *Loaf* (2020) a video documenting sparrows eating a snail-shaped loaf of bread. [2] The loaf itself is quite spectacular, it has a lovely golden crust and includes details like dimples, grooves and long, tentacular antennae which resemble grissini. The discrepancy in size is significant, the doughy snail dwarves the sparrows who approach it, quizzical at first. Seemingly well-mannered they choose to merely peck at the "shell" leaving its body intact.

There is something child-like about feeding snails and sparrows, these acts feel relatable and the subject-matter of Meyle's work is often so. She deals with common and endemic species introduced to Aotearoa, creatures and materials that are familiar. Similar to her ramps, often these sculptural objects seek to fulfil a function that is somewhat superfluous. In her recent exhibition *Soft Spot* at Enjoy Contemporary Art Space in Wellington an augmented peanut in fibreglass is suspended from the wall so that it acts as a sign, a sign of what exactly? Over-sized snacks or a warning of allergens? Giant chicken boots lie propped up by a gallery wall, they are made of straw and calico complete with eyelets and shoelaces. *Snake's Dress* is a long thin garment of silver-plated chains and rings enclosing a series of real and fake foods: a baguette, a lemon, a bulb of garlic, apples. There are no snakes in New Zealand.

A sense of surfeit or being surplus to requirements is extended to *Covered bench (Kermit)*, a sculpture made of fleece fabric, plywood, elastic, toggles and thread. It is the same green as Meyle's ramps, like the logs it invites an act of sitting yet it also sort of resists this. The chair/bench entity is all ruffled and gathered, almost smocked. It is oddly clothed to the extent that it seems body-like, creature-ly. Perhaps this is why it bears the appellation *Kermit*. Meyle departs from the common and familiar and moves towards the awkward, ill-fitting and uncanny. In her recent writing the artist has described the hagfish as a chosen mascot. This ungainly and exceptional creature is a jaw-less, spineless, eel-like fish. It has many ungainly, exceptional, sculptural qualities that appeal to Meyle. Their skin is saggy, they can tie themselves into knots and eject proteins that turn surrounding seawater into jelly so they can evade predators.

More Jellystone than Yellowstone, Meyle's logs are funny and cartoony, they wouldn't be out of place alongside Yogi and Boo-Boo. They appear wood-like but not seriously so, I feel as though if I really were to sit on them they would slowly sag and deflate until I was left merely sitting on the gallery floor. There is a play between softness and sagginess, the crackle of packing-tape and thrust of corrugated cardboard. As a sculptural proposition they demonstrate a scattered mass, various extensions, and for me personally, allusions to hagfish, bears and polly-waffles.

[1] Matthew Griffin *caddyshacklemenot* (2008) was exhibited as part of "Angels and Demons" at Michael Lett from 14 October to 21 November 2009.

[2] *Loaf* (2020) can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/422047660>

VICTORIA WYNNE-JONES is an Auckland-based art historian, curator and writer. She currently lectures in the disciplinary areas of Art History, Fine Arts and Dance Studies. Her research focuses on the intersections between dance studies and performance art as well as curatorial practice, feminisms, contemporary art theory and philosophy. Her monograph "Choreographing Intersubjectivity in Contemporary Art" will be a forthcoming publication from Palgrave MacMillan as part of their series "New World Choreographies."