



Vancouver artist and butoh dancer Thomas Anfield's simian stuffed toys often stand in for human figures in Monkeyland paintings like *Theory* (above).

Sock monkeys swing their way into fine art

Thomas Anfield has found a perfect mix of tragicomedy and playfulness in a subject he's painted for 20 years

> BY ALEXANDER VARTY

They come singly and in groups, posing alone in their best dress-up clothes or clustered together like tourists on a busy street. Some spin through the air as if caught up in a Kansas twister; others slump, exhausted, like children at the end of a hot summer afternoon. Some seem oddly noble, as if thinking Great Thoughts. Others are frankly cartoonish, with the garish red lips and beady black eyes of sock monkeys—for that, in fact, is what they are.

But sock monkeys have never looked as good as they do in the paintings of Thomas Anfield, on view at the Petley Jones Gallery until next Thursday (November 12).

Homemade toys might seem like an odd topic for a visual artist, but, as Anfield tells the *Straight* in a telephone conversation, his floppy subjects often stand in for human figures. "You just can't get away from their human quality, and their anthropomorphism," he says, reached at his Vancouver home.

In his Monkeyland show, however, the inherently ludicrous qualities of these stuffed, simian sock puppets allow Anfield to tackle topics that are almost off-limits to the contemporary figure painter. Were the creatures in *Couple Holding Hands* or *Kissing Monkeys* human, the effect would be excruciatingly sentimental. These monkeys aren't mawkish, however. Enacting a weird parody of human romance, they're absurd, awkward, and oddly moving.

"There's this lovely, tragicomic quality to them—but they're celebratory, too," says Anfield.

Indeed, some of these small to medium-size acrylics are almost giddily physical. *Wave*, for instance, finds four monkeys dancing an elegant arabesque; it's possible that they're being carried along by an

ocean roller, but it looks more like they're being lifted by forces unseen, as if in *fin-du-monde* rapture.

Anfield explains that he spends a lot of time posing his ever-growing collection of sock-monkey models. "I prop them up a little bit, of course, but only just enough that the natural pull of gravity is on them, because I think that's when they read the most honest.

"I like when they have this sort of natural weight, the natural pull of gravity," he continues. "That's something we respond to as people, because our lives are like that; we get pulled around by the ebbs and flows and the forces that surround us."

Anfield's own artistic path pays tribute to going with the flow. Sock monkeys are a rare constant in his oeuvre: he's been painting them for 20 years. But during that period he's also ventured into improvised music as a guitarist and explored butoh as a dancer, and his experiences on-stage have definitely spilled over into his studio.

"Butoh was quite a logical extension of working as a figure artist, you know, working with your body in a theatre," says Anfield, who has performed with Kokoro Dance and his own Butoh-A-GO-GO company. "And then from that experience, I feel that with the monkeys I can get a lot of figurative qualities in the way they're arranged, but also a theatrical quality in the way they take up space, and in the way they're lit. Without wanting to sound too corny, having had that experience of being on a stage and inside those lights does inform this work."

This suggests that there's more to Anfield's monkeys than might immediately meet the eye. Even so, he stresses, play and pleasure are a big part of their appeal.

"The number one thing for me is how full of life they are," he says. "It's a good time to be alive in the world, so let's get on with it." ♦

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