



Angela Kingston, *A Fantastic Fermentation of Matter*

Angela Kingston is a contemporary art curator and writer. She has curated exhibitions including *3am: Wonder, Paranoia and the Restless Night*, touring from Bluecoat, Liverpool (2013-14), *The First Humans*, touring from Pump House, London (2015-16 and *Is This Planet Earth?* touring from Tŷ Pawb, Wrexham (2018-19).



Kim L Pace *Cactaceae 1* 2017
glazed ceramic and bristles 33 x 25 cm

The Vegetational Brotherhood (2017) is a group of tiny, part-vegetable, part-human, ceramic figures. They appear to have been thrown to the ground and have startled expressions on their faces. Have they been shaken out of a shopping bag or vegetable box? Or have they been floored by some great disaster, like the humans struck down in Pompeii?

One ceramic carrot-brother—his tuber-body separating into limbs, fingers and toes—has been catapulted onto his back. His pinky-orange skin is mottled with a blue that is exactly the colour of mould, and his deep blue eye-sockets seem to be decomposing. By contrast, another of the brothers is re-sprouting, in the manner of a sliced-off carrot-top in a saucer of water; but it's more extravagant than that, for he sports a lavish pink, orchid-like bloom. These carrots are, it seems, at the point of rotting or 'going over', but the latter is doing it in style.

The Vegetational Brotherhood is part of a recent group of ceramics, drawings and prints by Kim L Pace, in which several types of vegetable, one or two fruits and also some cacti have taken on human characteristics. Her inspiration is the everyday: what's in the fridge, the plants on her windowsill. She also cites the 'character manifestations of early advertisements', admiring their 'charm and lack of sophistication for contemporary sensibilities.' There's the Green Giant of canned and frozen food fame, the monocled and top-hatted Planters' peanut figure, and so on. Stirred into this mix are 'fancy dress parades, the whole country fairs revival, being on a carnival float as a child, pumpkin jack-o'-lanterns—all the folk-art memes.'

It's all informed by her strong interest in the writings of the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, in particular his discussions about the grotesque and the carnival in his scholarly work *Rabelais and His World*, published in 1965. She explains that for him, 'the grotesque is hybrid, transgressive and always in motion, and part of his sense of the material world being in a constant state of decay and regeneration. Life itself, underneath the social hierarchies that seek to control it, is an energetic process of constant deformation and renewal. In the carnivalesque, the unexpected happens and values and expectations get upturned.'

In Pace's work *Entities* (2018), several ceramic heads resemble cooked and mushy pumpkin segments. Of all the fruit and vegetable figures in this exhibition, they are the closest to the clay in its raw and unformed state. A few squishes and prods, a cut here and there for eyes and mouths, and—following two or three glazings and firings to get the colours and surfaces right—these grotesque pumpkin characters came into being. 'I've been freewheeling, trying things out. It's been a kind of letting go, allowing the material qualities to convey my ideas, seeing what they could do,' the artist explains.

First and foremost, Pace is interested in allowing things to emerge from her unconscious: 'my work balances figurative aspects with material qualities, echoing the subjects of my ongoing fascination—that of transformation and metamorphosis in both physical and psychological dimensions.' In *Couple* (2018), a pair of pale and slender ceramic figures that resemble mooli or daikon radish seem to be sidling up to each other. It's a comedy of awkwardness familiar to us all. The figure on the right has limbs that contort both towards and away from the bashful, stiff figure on the left, whose torso leans in while his or her feet shy away. *Mask 2* (2018) is a lone head of peeled avocado flesh in exactly the right kind of green but turning black and becoming a bit nasty. It's 'perhaps going into decay, and coming into its own,' the artist suggests.

Few artists in history have used vegetables as subject matter. There's the sixteenth century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, who created novelty portrait heads made entirely of fruit, flowers, fish, books and one or two with vegetables. And the seventeenth century Flemish school of painters, with their still-lives of fruits, flowers, plants, dead animals, shells and (a few) vegetables. And, notably, from the nineteenth century, van Gogh's paintings of baskets of potatoes. In terms of contemporary art, there are Yayoi Kusama's winsome pumpkin sculptures. But these diffuse examples could be said to be the exceptions that prove the rule.

Vegetables occur relatively rarely in literature, too. Where they do appear, it is often for the sake of their homeliness and potential for humour. For example, in Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, a man seeking

to win his neighbour's affections lobs vegetables over his fence: first a marrow, then some cucumbers, and so on until 'the air was darkened by a shower of onions, turnip-radishes, and other small vegetables, which fell rolling and scattering, and bumping about, in all directions.' Or, vegetables might in another context express a love of life that's coupled with humility (on reflection, perhaps not so very far from Dickens' sentiments), as in this haiku by seventeenth century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho:

'Just washed,
How chill
The white leeks!'

Almost all of this art and literature plays in some way on the mundane nature of vegetables: they are a touchstone of ordinariness that stretches back in time and across continents. In *Cinderella*, it is a pumpkin of all things that is transformed into a magnificent coach (and note that vermin – namely mice and a rat – are later magicked into fine horses and a coachman): 'Her godmother scooped out all the inside of it, having left nothing but the rind; when done, she struck it with her wand, and the pumpkin was instantly turned into a fine coach.' So, there is modesty and mischief and magic in Pace's vegetable character sculptures. It's about 'disordering the hierarchies of high and low, folk culture and canonical art, vulgarity and refinement.' As she's said, this work is a 'letting go' – in the context, it should be added, of the highly self-conscious world of contemporary art.

All this notwithstanding, excitement about 'vegetal philosophy' was stirred up in the seventies by Deleuze and Guattari. They developed what they called an 'image of thought' that was based on the botanical rhizome and its impressive multi-directional connectedness: a 'rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo.' But this philosophising and admiration was at the expense of anything with a simple taproot, which 'looks for the original source of "things" and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those "things".' How dare it, indeed! And so, once again, this flurry of interest served, in philosophical quarters at least, to disparage the humble root vegetable.

By contrast, it's the relaxed multiculturalism of fruit and vegetables in day-to-day life that pleases Pace. 'I'm aware of the inference of cultural hybridity in this work but I'm sceptical about art that tries to tell you what to think. I like how these things quietly come into our lives, and it's about no longer noticing them. It's not about flag-waving.' She agrees that a similar point could be made, but in an equally low-key way, about fruit and veg being social levellers. In the streets around Danielle Arnaud Gallery, small shops sell all kinds of them to all-comers.

Most of Pace's characters' eyes and mouths have been punctured outwards. Instead of having these marks inscribed into them from outside, it's as if some kind of force of personality has burst from within. This striking feature resonates with the radical argument of food writer and campaigner Michael Pollan that certain plantstuffs have *agency*. Plants have, he asserts, used humans as much as, if not more than, we have used them: 'About ten thousand years ago the world witnessed a second flowering of plant diversity that we would come to call, somewhat self-centredly, "the invention of agriculture". A group of angiosperms refined their basic put-the-animals-to-work strategy to take advantage of one particular animal... These plants hit on a remarkably clever strategy: getting us to move and think for them. Now came edible grasses (such as wheat and corn) that incited humans to cut down vast forests to make more room for them; flowers whose beauty would transfix whole cultures; plants so compelling and useful and tasty they would inspire human beings to seed, transport, extol, and even write books about them.'

So, according to this scheme of things, Pace's vegetables and fruits – instilled as they are with some kind of inner life – might be looking out at us (in Pollan's words) as 'a willing, slightly credulous animal' that they've put to work in order to spread their carrot, or pumpkin, or avocado DNA throughout the world.

A group of ceramic cactus figures seem to enter further into Pollan's ideas. The back-story of cacti is that, having evolved over millions of years in the sandy soils of the Americas, they were sufficiently novel and appealing to be uprooted by us and traded throughout

the world. They then lived quietly on our windowsills for many generations, often in various states of neglect. 'Cacti are quite good at looking after themselves,' Pace observes. And, in her fantasy tableau, a cluster of them appear to have risen from their pots, grown legs and become mobile: one toddler-cactus is seen mid-totter towards a watchful guardian-cactus, while another seems to be waving a bit unsteadily, or perhaps dad-dancing.

These cacti figures are part of a whole agitation or excitement that's alluded to in the word 'fermentation' in the title of this exhibition. In Pace's fantasy of the everyday, something is astir.

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Kim L Pace would especially like to thank ceramic artist Tony Bennett.

Cover: Kim L Pace *Couple* 2018
glazed ceramic 48 x 23 cm