

Ron Mueck
25 Years of Sculpture
1996—2021

13 October—13 November 2021



Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg Seoul

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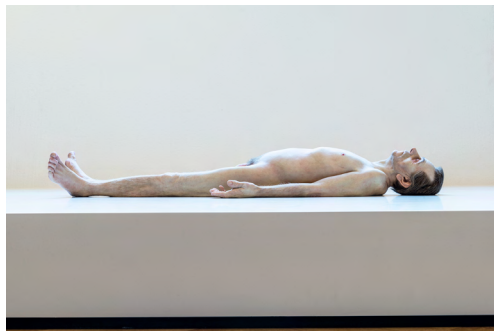
Ron Mueck

Jasper Sharp

Towards the end of the second act of William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the banished Duke and his faithful lords are gathered around a campfire in the forest eating their evening meal. The Duke laments his exile, but reminds his men that they are not alone in their unhappiness; there is much strife in the world. The observation prompts Jaques, a reliably melancholy nobleman, to offer his own view of things:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.*

He goes on to describe each of the seven ages from infancy to decrepitude. In doing so, he points out the difference between the roles that he and his fellow actors perform, assigned to them by the playwright, and the roles that each of us is assigned in life, either through happenstance or our own individual choosing.



Dead Dad (1996–97)

he who assigned the roles to his subjects. Shortly before his fortieth birthday, Mueck exhibited his first work as an artist. The sculpture *Dead Dad*

The son of German-born toymakers living and working in Australia, Ron Mueck grew up making puppets and models. He went on to have a successful career producing more sophisticated and elaborate versions for television and film productions, and later for the advertising industry. Like the playwright, it was

(1996–97), a depiction of his own father, was shown in the exhibition *Sensation* at the Royal Academy in London. From that moment on, the figures that he made were presented in galleries and museums rather than on screen. They came from his own thought, careful observation, and meticulous craftsmanship rather than as commissions for someone else. And while he continued to assign them roles, they were no longer the theatrical roles of film and television. They were the roles that each of us is assigned in life, the 'parts' of which Jaques spoke: infant, child, teenager, youth, parent, old age and death.

On the occasion of his first exhibition at Thaddaeus Ropac, a survey of sculptures produced over the last quarter-century, this passage through the seven ages can be a helpful way to think about Mueck's work.

*At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms*

Mueck has long been fascinated by infancy. Since *Baby* (1996), he has produced at least ten works dealing with pregnancy, birth, and early childhood. *Mother and Child* (2003) is among the most remarkable of them. It was created during a two-year residency as Associate Artist at the National Gallery, London, for which he was given studio space within the museum and invited to respond to its historical collection. Mueck proceeded to do just that, challenging the traditional, flawless depictions of the Madonna and Child that hang on the gallery's walls with his own interpretation. Approximately half life-size, the work captures the moment immediately after a baby has been born. It crouches warily on its mother's chest, peering up at her through squinted eyes. The mother stares back, fists clenched, apparently uncertain what to do next. The umbilical cord remains attached, but a connection is still to be made. The atmosphere is deliberately ambiguous. Until this point, Mueck had only ever produced single figures – or, better put, solitary figures. *Mother and Child* was his first attempt to depict two figures set in relationship to one another. And yet the solitariness remains. When one



Mother and Child (2003)

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learns that the two figures were cast separately and then placed together, it seems to make sense. The artist reminds us – as he will again in works such as *Spooning Couple* or *Two Women* (both 2005) – that physical proximity to another person is very different from companionship.

*And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school.*



Youth (2009/2011)

The schoolboy. A difficult age of competing dreams and tensions. *Youth* (2009/2011) personifies both with tragic candidness, depicting a young boy calmly lifting his white T-shirt to look at a bloody wound in his side. Unlike many of Mueck's figures that retain a certain timelessness, this one is unquestionably of our time. We think immediately of knife crime, that dreadful plague of recent years among younger generations. It is no wonder that he goes unwillingly to school. We are also reminded of the story of Christ and his ordeal on the cross, during which he sustained a wound in the very same place. In that instance it was the disciple Thomas who cast doubt on its veracity. In Mueck's work it is the boy himself who cannot believe what he is seeing. His fate, and what remains of his childhood, is left open-ended.

*And then the lover,
Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow.*

The lovestruck teenager, a Shakespearian favourite. *Young Couple* (2013, not in the exhibition) appears to be a pair of teenagers like any other. Huddled together with their heads leaning in towards one another, they could be sharing a tender confidence. Walk around the work and the atmosphere suddenly changes. Behind their backs his left hand firmly clasps her wrist in a possessive, controlling manner, as if warning her off some course of action.

Her own hand instinctively jerks back rigidly in response. There is little romance here. It is unsettling. Again we have two figures placed together but seemingly alone. And again, as is often the case in Mueck's work, we have questions that will remain unanswered; we are left to complete the encounter in our own minds and imagine how it might play out.

*Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth.*

The fourth age is the young man. Or, as Shakespeare would have it, the soldier. *Woman with Shopping* (2014) might seem an unlikely choice, but ask any



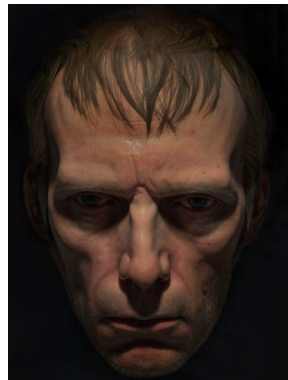
Woman with Shopping (2014)

sleep-deprived young mother and they will assure you that the comparison is appropriate. Produced for an exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, this work was inspired by a person that Mueck saw standing on a street in North London close to his former studio. It can be read as the third in a group of works that began with *Pregnant Woman* (2002) and continued with *Mother and Child* (2003). Ten years on, he provides us with a glimpse, perhaps, of how that squinting newborn has developed. Strapped to her chest and kept warm under a long overcoat, its eyes still look for its mother's. But this time those eyes do not look back; instead

her gaze tails off into the near distance. Standing with heavy bags of supermarket groceries in each hand, she is visibly exhausted. Mueck offers us yet another honest and unvarnished portrayal of early parenthood, and the physical and emotional states that it induces. The forager, the hunter-gatherer, the provider to her family, soldiering on.

*And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part.*

Middle age is in many ways the most difficult to represent. Jaques offers us a vain judge with a bulging waist and a voice that he is rather too fond of. The reality is, of course, far more nuanced. While for some it is an age of personal fulfillment, for others it can be a time of deep crisis. *Dark Place* (2018), on display for the first time in this exhibition, offers this alternative view. Mueck's original plan had been to update the first mask that he made back in 1997 – a large, wall-mounted self-portrait – as a means to trace his own physical development. He asked a member of his extended family, a photographer, to come to his studio to take a suitable portrait. When his visitor arrived, Mueck was so taken aback by his distraught and broken appearance that he decided to create a mask of him instead. He began work on the maquette in 2011 but put it aside to concentrate on more urgent projects. He returned to the work several times over the years, finally completing it in 2018. The subject's emotional turmoil is laid bare; there is no vanity here. Exhibited in low light as the artist intends, he becomes ghostly, almost skeletal. A portent of things to come.



Dark Place (2018)

The sixth age shifts

*Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound.*

Old age has been a subject of interest for artists and writers for as long as anyone can remember. Their depictions of physical and mental decline extend from the withering and satirical to the tender and compassionate. Jaques opts for the former, sketching an unsparing image of a toothless and hollow-voiced old man whose clothes hang loose from his shrunken frame. *Couple Under an Umbrella* (2013/2015) offers its own particular interpretation, one of ennui and lives that have drifted apart. Among the largest works that Mueck has produced, at twice life-size, it depicts an elderly couple resting beneath a coloured beach umbrella. Writing in the catalogue for the Fondation Cartier exhibition where the work was first shown, Justin Paton observes their vulnerability, describing the couple as 'sheltering... from weather, time, and whatever else might shorten their late-in-life idyll'. What might at first appear idyllic – her support of his head on her thigh, his gentle clutch of her arm – can also be read as boredom. The expressions on their faces convey no discernible pleasure or sense of togetherness. Two more people occupying different spaces.

Last scene of all,

*That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion...*



Man In Blankets (2000)

Jaques separates the final age into two: first dotage, and then death. The idea of a 'second childishness', a return to infancy in which we are dependent on others for our basic functions, is perfectly embodied in *Man in Blankets* (2000). One of the earliest works that Mueck produced during his residency at the National Gallery, it depicts a man curled up asleep inside felt blankets. It is hard not to feel instantaneously protective, as we would with a newborn child. Like *Swaddled Baby* (2002), the figure is bundled up inside layers of warming, protective fabric. His position is fetal, his hands clasped and pulled in tightly to his chest. He could almost be in the womb; birth to near-death in a single gesture. And then there is his size, an

unmistakable shift in scale that renders him closer to a child than an adult. The more we look at him, the more we realise that he is not of this world. Along with other characters such as *Man in a Boat* (2000–02) and *Woman with Sticks* (2009), he seems to come from a strange dream or a fairytale. The last scene of all.

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

The final line of Jacques' monologue. Death. Oblivion. Everything gone. Our minds wander back to where we began: *Dead Dad* (1996–97). Those of us who saw it lying there in the cavernous galleries of the Royal Academy, wretchedly still, will not forget it. People stared silently as if it was the first dead 'person' they had ever seen, somehow ignoring the fact that it measures barely a metre in length from head to toe. The minutiae of detail can do that; the eyes doubt what the brain is telling us. Because this dead body is not 'sans everything'. Yes, his appendages hang loose, colour has drained from his flesh and the eyes are closed (those extraordinary, handmade eyes that give life to so many of Mueck's works). But everything else is there: the hair, the veins, the fingernails and toenails, the calluses, the folds of weathered skin. All of it. A similarly remarkable level of detail can be found in *Still Life* (2009), a dead chicken the size of a grown man, plucked of its feathers and strung up by its bound feet. A stilled life, motionless and uncannily human.



Still Life (2009)



Dead Weight (2021)

The spectre of death is taken one step further in the most recent work in the exhibition, *Dead Weight* (2021), a human skull so large that it seems at first glance to be that of an elephant. Cast in iron, it weighs more than a tonne. Most astonishing of all though is its appearance. Unlike every other work in the exhibition –

and in Mueck's entire oeuvre to date – very little effort has been made to create a naturalistic appearance. We can see all the marks of its production, the seam lines, the scars from channels into which liquid iron was poured, and the imperfections of casting that Mueck would normally spend many hours to remove or obscure. It is clearly not a real skull and yet, like the dead father, we sense the presence of a soul.

The nine works in the exhibition each have their own distinct characteristics, and also a certain amount in common. They share an unfamiliar scale, prompting us to look more closely at people and objects around us; a meticulous craftsmanship, which eschews spectacle in favour of intimacy and understatement; and an awkwardness, being neither perfect nor ideal. They share a vulnerability, not only with each other but also with Mueck himself, who draws on his own intensely personal thoughts, emotions and life experiences to produce a register of universal emotions and experiences to which we can all relate. And they share a sense of life, and death, and all that happens in between.

About the Artist

Ron Mueck was born to German parents in Melbourne, Australia, in 1958, and now lives and works in the UK. Having begun his career in the world of film and television, his move into fine art was initiated by a collaboration with Paula Rego at the Hayward Gallery in 1996. A year later, *Dead Dad* became a highlight of the era-defining *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. In 2000, he was invited to spend two years as artist-in-residence at the National Gallery in London, followed by an exhibition of the sculptures he created in response to their permanent collection. More recently, his work has been shown in solo exhibitions at prominent institutions, including the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (2018); Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2017); Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere, Finland (2016); Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (2016); Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (2014); and National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2010).

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