

Soft and Fuzzy:

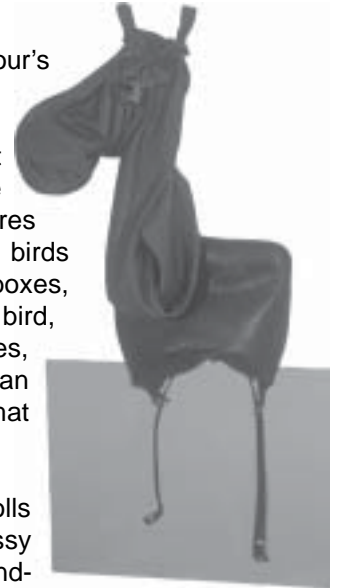
From the Common to the Beautiful, From the Innocent to the Suspect

a commentary on *Soft and Fuzzy Lies*, 13 February to 27 March 2004, Modern Fuel Gallery

by Jennifer Roche

Upon entering the exhibition *Soft and Fuzzy Lies*, one had the impression of walking into a neighbour's playroom before her kids had grasped the notion of 'toy box'.

The walls were home to the soft sculptures formed from found objects by Montréal-based artist Elisabeth Belliveau. Common objects, like purses, gloves, articles of clothing, are folded by the artist into striking forms whose clever and distinct lines and appropriate colours and textures combine to instantly suggest a child-familiar animal: ducks and fish and dogs and frogs and birds and guppies and horses. Many of the animal-forms are tightly housed in individual shadow boxes, sometimes with added props to elaborate on the illusion. A box containing a black bird, a red bird, and a blue bird, each formed to the same dimensions and pattern – suggesting a unity of species, was crowded with silk flowers, giving the impression that they were nesting in the branches of an exotic flowering tree. Belliveau's animal-forms, however, would be better suited to larger-format fine art framing. These rare and beautiful (re)creations deserve a more refined treatment.



Throughout the gallery space, on the floor and atop pedestals, were no fewer than 44 knitted dolls from the needles of Cindy Baker, a Saskatoon-based artist. What at first appeared as a messy playground of inanimate toys becomes an inventory of a familiar human type: the liar. Each hand-knit, hand-stuffed toy becomes its own unique and particular brand of this human phenomenon. The kind of liar they are is spelled out in stitches across the toys' bellies and backs. Parental guidance is advised.

A chubby, salmon-coloured teddy bear with a black nose and a standard smile has a label inscribed: *convincing liar*. A white lamby with black hooves and turquoise eyes on a lavender and green doily is a *devoted liar*. A yellow ducky with an orange beak is the *forgivable liar*, while his companion, a white ducky with a yellow beak, is the *forgettable liar*. A rotund, floppy-headed (neckless?) mouse is a *big fat liar*. A red, blobby bird with light blue eyes and a yellow beak is our proverbial *pathological liar*, with a protruding red tongue to show us what she's made of. A dolly with pale yellow hair, ivory skin, and blue eyes is our *little white liar*. But she's not alone. Her skirt is reversible; lift it up and you find another dolly, with beige skin, brown braids, and green eyes: the *little black liar*.

Sometimes the toys are the spitting image of their heinous inner character: the little, baby-pink teddy bear is the *lying cunt*, complete with swollen vulva. And sometimes their characteristics seem arbitrary: the green dinosaur is the *motherfucking liar*. Twin Santa dolls are each labelled *everybody's favourite liar*, the two of them standing as cruel testimony to the inauthenticity of the one true Santa. The brown knit bearskin rug, with a dopey head, white googly eyes, and floppy ears is the *passive-aggressive liar*. Watch out for his big black claws. As Cindy Baker herself warned me: *he lies like a rug*.

You might ask: What is it like to be Cindy Baker? Is the world so bleak? Are the liars organizing? Is there a Santa Claus, Cindy?



Cindy Baker's work takes us to a higher moral ground. In the Kingston performance, she tests us to see if we have the unconditional, uncomplicated openness to unquestioningly accept and return an expression of love from a stranger. In the Modern Fuel exhibition, made up of knitted doodads from her *No Word of a Lie* series, she forces us to confront the liar as a part of the human condition. She generates a vast archive of flawed human types, revealing a frightening anthropology of the liar, while at the same normalizing the phenomenon and turning it into just another thing to learn about in the sandbox. The effect of Cindy Baker's work is to strengthen our human understanding of what it is to love and what it is to lie.

