

A hobo's paradise: Popcorn Mountain, Sausages on Sticks and a Cigarette Tree

Approaching Steve Carr's works can elicit a similar trepidation to what you can experience approaching a stray dog; it looks inviting, friendly and innocent, but boy can it pack an unsettling and surprising growl. Steve Carr has played with the tensions between the sweet and the malevolent, particularly in relation to objects or images that take us back to our childhoods, through sculpture, film and photography.

Popcorn Mountain is, as its title suggests, a mountainous pile of popcorn stacked into a cone in the gallery (equalling the artist's own weight). But there are more obscure references at play here as well. Popcorn has a rich history in folklore and urban legends. Writing about an earlier version of the work, writer Lucy Hammonds made reference to Native American tribal folklore, in particular a story where spirits live happily inside each popcorn kernel. When their homes were heated, they grew angry and they would eventually burst out as a puff of hot air. Whether we find the mound of popcorn tempting or repulsive, Carr's sculpture has an undeniable humour to it. We can't help but smile at the ludicrous 'super-duper-size' of the pile on the floor, while retaining a healthy unease at what might be lurking underneath.

You get the sense that the party's over when you look at Carr's Sausages on Sticks each carved from single pieces of cherry wood. This work recalls his earlier food works Cherries and Marshmallows on Sticks and trigger memories of summer barbecues and being in the great outdoors. We imagine an old codger sitting on a stool whittling away to make these folksy objects; the knife marks on the wood a reminder of the hours of careful labour that went into each one.

Carr's film work Cigarette Tree reflects an action of a much shorter duration, but with the same sense of consideration and attention to detail. Over approximately four minutes an elaborate and contemplative performance unfolds from a cigarette packet (Peter Stuyvesant Lights – the brand smoked by Carr's mother and mums and aunties across New Zealand). The magic of this trick is in its resourcefulness and simple beauty, the smoke filling the plastic cavity and dropping to its base, eventually transforming the shape of the structure from a square/rectangle into a semicircle. The work's title is taken from the lyrics of the blue grass song 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' – a song about a hobo's paradise:

*In the Big Rock Candy Mountains there's a land that's fair and bright
Where the handouts grow on bushes and you sleep out every night
Where the boxcars are all empty and the sun shines every day
On the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees
Where the lemonade springs where the bluebird sings
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains*

Sarah Farrar