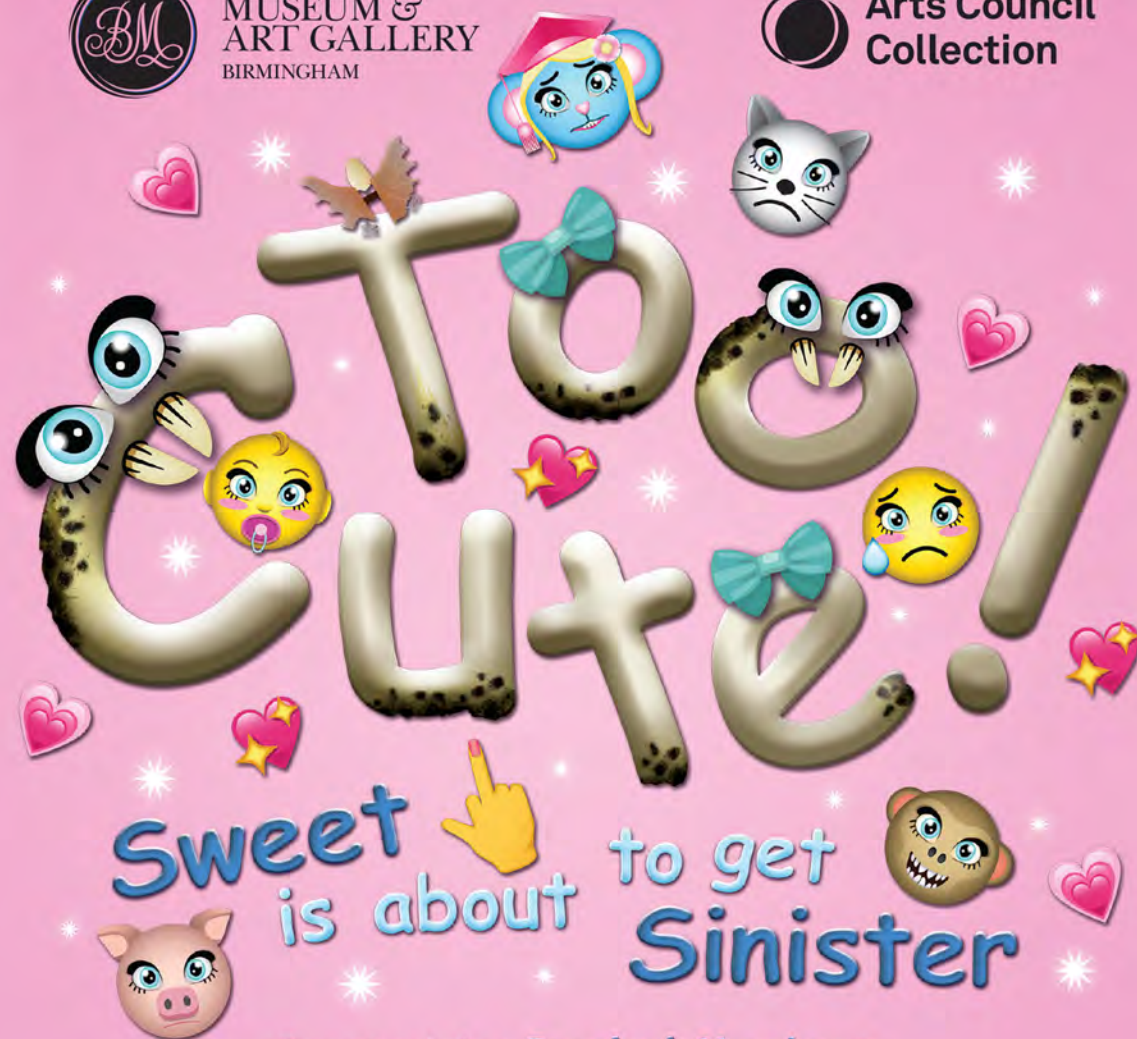




MUSEUM &
ART GALLERY
BIRMINGHAM



Arts Council
Collection



Curated by Rachel Maclean

26 January - 12 May 2019

Newcastle University REF 2021
Submission as a single item supported by
contextual information (portfolio)
Main Panel D, Unit of Assessment 32: Art
and Design: History, Practice and Theory



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Too Cute! (300-word statement)

Too Cute! Sweet is about to get Sinister was an exhibition of artworks and objects from the Birmingham Museums and Arts Council Collections designed and curated by Rachel Maclean.

The exhibition, (26 January to 12 May 2019), featured the film *Dr Cute*, a 5-min digital video written and directed by the artist as her response to the gallery's request for 'interpretive material'. The exhibition was commissioned by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in partnership with Arts Council Collection.

The impetus behind Maclean's project was an observation that despite cuteness being pervasive in advertising, television, and commodity culture, it is often considered frivolous and not deserving of proper analysis.

In developing the exhibition, Maclean investigated both what cuteness has meant to us historically and why contemporary society is fixated on the reproduction and sharing of cute objects and images.

The objects selected for display by Maclean varied significantly in age and intention: from contemporary politically-inspired sculptures (artworks by Helen Chadwick, John Isaacs, Gillian Wearing and others) to nineteenth-century paintings, taxidermy, and dolls. In researching the artworks, another facet of cuteness was uncovered: its ability to be simultaneously sweet and sinister.

The film accompanying the exhibition is presented by *Dr Cute*, a grotesque Care Bear-like professor. *Dr Cute* attempts to put forward an academic account of cuteness and its effects, but is hindered by sudden emotional responses, as artworks incite reflexes of love, repulsion, and fear. Objects from the exhibition appear in the film, manipulated and animated by the artist.

Fascinated by the illusive moment where cute objects and images seem to slip from inspiring care to inciting fear and disgust, Maclean's project set out to discover why cute things have the potential to be so creepy: why do the same things that make us go 'aww', also make us go 'aaah!'?



'Dr Cute' Video

Too Cute! Sweet is about to get Sinister - an exhibition of artworks and objects from the Birmingham Museums and Arts Council Collections designed and curated by Rachel Maclean - 26 January to 12 May 2019. The output exhibition incorporated a specially-commissioned film. View full-length video below:



Dr Cute
Digital video
Duration: 5 mins

Partnerships

Too Cute! Sweet is about to get Sinister was part of the Arts Council Collection National Partnership Programme which saw four major UK galleries working together to curate, host, and share a series of exciting and innovative new exhibitions with works drawn from the Arts Council Collection.

I worked with Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery who were selected as one of the Arts Council Collection's National Partners. Arts Council Collection is managed by Southbank Centre, London on behalf of Arts Council England.

Video Outline



See video above for more details on the exhibition and my thinking behind it.



Research Context

My research is a direct response to reading 'cuteness studies' and in particular the work of Jen Boyle and Wan-Chuan Kao in their book 'The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness' and Joshua Paul Dale in his book 'The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness'.

The exhibition was made up of artworks and objects in both the Birmingham and Arts Council Collection. So by virtue of that, my ideas and practice sat directly alongside pieces by contemporary artists who work with similar themes and mediums, such as Heather Phillipson, Glenn Brown, David Shrigley and Paula Rego. Further to that, the exhibition set out a more historical context, with work by painters such as Hermann Sondermann and Johann Zoffany, as well as objects such as an Egyptian toy dating from c.2000-1800 B.C.

Research Process

1. Birmingham Collection

I was originally invited to curate a show using the Birmingham Museum's and Arts Council Collection by the freelance curator Deborah Smith in late 2017. My research started when she, alongside colleagues at the Birmingham Museum, showed me around their collection and storerooms that winter, so I could decide on an approach to the project.

I was drawn to a number of objects in the collection that were originally designed to be 'cute', many from the Victorian era, such as China dolls. However, in their aged state and displayed in badly lit museum storerooms, they struck me as being less 'cute' and more 'creepy'. This got me thinking about why this was the case. For example, why are Victorian dolls 'creepy', when that was never their original purpose? Is it because of their association with ghost stories and the horror genre? Or does it go deeper, to explain something more fundamental about the contradictory power of cute objects?





2. Arts Council Collection

Using this question around 'cuteness' and 'creepiness' as a starting point, I began to research the expansive Arts Council Collection more deeply with Deborah in early 2018. We looked both online and visited their stores in London, to see if we could uncover modern and contemporary artists that dealt with this phenomenon. I found, despite the collection being subdivided into categories, there was no category for 'cute' or anything similar. And when I proposed the idea of curating a show around the subject, there was concern from the Collection that artists' might be offended if I described their work as such.

Despite this, going through the collection I found lots of fascinating work that to my mind tackled the power and intrigue of 'cuteness' head on, as well as unpacking some of the complexities and problems associated with it. I became convinced that many artists would welcome the 'cute' label rather than reject it, and that curating a show around this theme would bring a subject to the fore that was already present in much of the collection, but hadn't been highlighted in this way before. I talked with the Arts Council Collection about their concerns and we decided to move to the next stage of selecting works and asking for the artists' permission. Agreeing that if their fear was born out, and a number of artists refused to be in the show because of the 'cute' label, we would go back and rethink our approach.

3. Selecting Key Works

Following the decision to go ahead with the 'cute' theme, I spent time looking more deeply at the Arts Council and Birmingham Museums collections to select some key works, as well as a long-list of other pieces to include in the show.

Initially, I was particularly drawn to Andrew Manfield's painting 'Untitled No.130' (1995) from the Arts Council Collection, which shows a wide eye dog starting out of a dark, murky background. It combines a 'chocolate box' cuteness with a mood that is more sinister and eerie.

From the Birmingham Museum's collection, I found a series of paintings for Birds Custurd adverts by George Maynard Brown which were made as adverts for Alfred Bird & Sons Ltd around 1900. They show children crouched, illicitly eating custard under tables of sweets and puddings.

I was also drawn to a late 19th century Monkey Automata on a Barrel Organ, which was especially creepy in the context a badly lit store room.



Top left: Untitled No.130, Andrew Mansfield, 1995; Top right: Monkey Automata on a Barrel Organ, late 19th century; Bottom: George Maynard Brown, Advertisement design for Alfred Bird & Sons Ltd: The Marauders, 1900

4. Understanding Audience

I spent time with Birmingham Museum curators, learning team and invigilators to understand their approach and audience. I was really impressed by how accessible and open the Galleries were, and their desire for them be seen to be for and to represent the people of Birmingham. Whilst I was in the Museum, there were frequently groups of young school children being taken round by their teachers. Based on that, I felt it was necessary to approach the show in a way that could be accessible to both children and adults.

An interesting thing about 'cuteness' is that I don't know anyone who is immune to it's power, no matter how seriously you take yourself, there are moments in everyone's lives where we find ourselves taken under the spell of a cute object or image. It is a subject that we can all relate to, but that is infrequently taken seriously enough to be a focus for critique. However, I realised that if I wasn't careful, I could easily erase the fun and accessibility of the idea in an attempt to frame it more 'seriously', which could especially alienate a younger audience. So, I decided that I needed the whole approach to the show to be totally coherent with it's theme, and not conform to all the conventions of museum display. I started putting together drawings and ideas for both the install and design to accompany it, so that everything associated with the show reinforced the 'cute but creepy' theme.

More generally, I wanted to challenge the tendency for art to be taken less 'seriously' if it looks feminine. I found in the past that there has been a degree of pressure to remove 'feminine' references in my work, in order to appeal to a specific art audience, who sees those references as inherently frivolous and silly. With 'Too Cute!', I was keen to question this, and force the audience into a position where they have to take a 'feminine' aesthetic seriously, and by extension, resist the desire to write off imagery associated with women and children as of lesser importance.

5. Exhibition Design

I realised pretty quickly, that because of the complexity of designing structures that would support priceless objects and sculptures, that I needed some help with the exhibition design. So, I began working with architects Thomas Woodcock and Robin Ellis, who produced models and plans that we developed alongside consultation with Birmingham Museum and Arts Council Collection.



Above: Selection of dolls, early 18th - 19th century, Birmingham Museums Collection

6. Producing Contextual Video: 'Dr Cute'

I began to discuss with the Birmingham Museums and Deborah Smith how we were going to approach the wall text and accompanying material for the show. I was keen to say something in my voice that explained why I'd chosen to curate the exhibition and the ideas behind it. However, we got a bit tangled trying to write a text that both represented the voice of the museum and my voice at the same time. Further to that, it didn't feel natural to try and describe 'cuteness' in words, as it is such an inherently visual experience. So, instead we decided that the wall text should represent the Birmingham Museums voice and intention, and I would make an 'introductory video' that would explain my approach, to go alongside it.

I began working on the script for the video and came up with a simple format, where you see 'Dr Cute', a care bear style academic played by me, who lectures you on 'Cuteness and it's Affects'. However, she is constantly distracted by the 'cute' or 'creepy' imagery on her slides (made up of objects or images from the show), causing her to lose her place and composure. I was keen that the dialogue distilled some of what I'd learnt in reading about 'cuteness studies', but that the visuals added another layer, which highlighted the absurdity of trying to explain 'cuteness' in words. 'Dr Cute' is desperate to have control over her impulses and box 'cuteness' into a definition that means she is no longer subject to it's powers. However, like describing a joke, her unpacking of cuteness seems to miss something fundamental how it operates. No matter how hard she tries, there seems to be something volatile and uncontrollable about 'cute' objects, that prevent them from being pinned down and dissected.





Further Exhibitions

Following the initial exhibition at Birmingham Museums, I toured the film 'Dr Cute!' to several other venues, including:

- A solo show at Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Germany, between 15th February and 16th September 2020. I commissioned an essay by Joshua Paul Dale, an academic who specialises in 'cuteness studies' and who was influential in my approach to the show in Birmingham, to respond to 'Dr Cute'. The text was included in a publication by Hatje Cantz, which we produced to accompany the exhibition at Kunsthalle zu Kiel.
- '#cute. Islands of Happiness?' A cute themed group show at NRW-Forum Düsseldorf, showing between October 2020 until April 2021, with accompanying book '#cute', published by Kerber and with essays by Birgit Richard, Niklas von Reischach and Hannah Zipfel.
- 'Dr Cute' will also be part of an upcoming film programme exploring cultural theorist Sianne Ngai's three 'minor' contemporary aesthetic categories: the cute, the zany and the interesting. This will be at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia in April 2021.

Press and Public Response

"The total visitor number for 'Too Cute' was 94,076 - which was a fantastic figure that smashed the 60,000 audience target."

- Rebecca Bridgman, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery

[Visitor Research Document](#)

"In building an exhibition around cuteness, Maclean has created a show that is infinitely accessible... but inquiring and challenging too. Of course, our obsession with cute is, as Dr Cute points out, a 'coping strategy' and a 'distraction'. But with such uncertain times ahead, a jaunt around a colourful wonderland of pink and pets is probably what most of us need."

- Hannah Clugston, The Guardian

[The Guardian - Too Cute! Review](#)

Press Links

[Arts Council Collection](#)

[ART UK](#)

[Birmingham Live](#)

[Birmingham Museums Blog](#)

[DLUXE Magazine](#)

[Fused Magazine](#)

[I Choose Birmingham](#)

Transcription of video outline

RMc: Rachel Maclean

AC: Animated Character

RMc: 'Too Cute! Sweet is About to Get Sinister' was an exhibition that I curated at Birmingham Museums in 2019, and I was invited to curate using works from the Birmingham Museums Collection but also the Arts Council Collection. I decided to theme the show around the idea of cuteness, and I wanted to look very simply at the idea that cute objects very often have the potential for creepiness, so the same things that can be cute also can often be creepy. I guess a very obvious example is a, kind of, Victorian doll. So, I kind of wanted to start with that simple idea and sort of [s.l compact it 00:44]. The resulting exhibition contained about 70 different objects and artworks,

including pieces by John Isaacs, Julienne Wearing and Heather Phillips as well as Glenn Brown and I wanted the impression to be kind of overwhelming so that you couldn't take in one object at a time. It wasn't like putting these things in isolation, it was purposefully setting it up so that you had to make connections and you had to see things simultaneously.

In lots of instances, I wanted there to be just very clear often sort of funny visual links between one thing and another and instead of having a wall text I made this video, which sort of explains my ideas via this care bear academic called Doctor Cute. In the video, I've taken specific artworks from the exhibition and included them, and in some cases animated them. In the clip, I'm just about to show you, you see a late

nineteenth century monkey on a barrel organ wearing a dress from the Birmingham Museums Collection and an ancient Egyptian clay toy from 2000 BC as well as two works from the Arts Council Collection, James Riley's Object of Fun and Jordan Baseman's Up Up and Away. So, here is a clip from the video.

[Video plays 02:14 - 05:08]

AC: [Music 02:14 - 02:19]. What do we mean when we say, 'That's too cute'? The scholar Konrad Lorenz identifies the cute object as follows: a relatively large head. Predominance of the brain capsule. Large and low-lying eyes. Bulging cheek region. Short and thick extremities. A springy elastic consistency and clumsy movements. He proposes that the combination of these features activate a nurture reflex in adults. In short, they make us go,

"Ah...". This phenomenon can be traced through history from Ancient Egypt [gasps 02:56] "That's too cute!" to Victorian England. [Gasps 03:02] "Oh my god, I could die." But the fascination of the cute object is not simply its capacity to summon up pronouncements of aw, this reaction is complicated [screeching violin plays 03:18] by its capacity to make us go, 'Ah. That's too cute!'. The phenomenon can be explained as follows: cute objects have a latent potential for creepiness. The word 'cute' derives from acute meaning an unpleasant or unwelcome phenomenon. We don't trust cute objects because they are manipulative; we [gasps 03:47] just melt before them and are resentful of the power they have to weaken us.

Advertisers are masters at harnessing cute's ability to

Transcription of video outline

deceive and distract us from the... [character distracted by flying butterfly] distract from the... truth of [snatches butterfly 04:07] ... Oh, ugh... Er, where was I? Okay. So cute things, they're everywhere. Just think about it. Wide-eyed emoticons. Bunny eared photo-filters. Offices that are playgrounds. Adult onesies. Internet cat videos. [Phone rings and shows reminders for overdue rent 04:33 - 04:43]. Cuteness is everywhere. On search engine home pages. On planes, trains, buses. In newspapers. On the street. In your house. On TV. Adults are becoming children whilst children are becoming adults who can't move. There's a cuteness invasion. I can't move. It's a 21st century obsession with all things cute and it's too much, it's too much. It's too cute, it's too cute, it's too cute,

it's too cute, it's too cute.

RMc: Okay. So, that's just a shorter clip from a longer video but I think you'll get the idea. I was interested, when I started putting together this exhibition of my work but also loads of other artists' work that I think cuteness has always been a subject for art. When I was looking through the Arts Council Collection there were so many artists that dealt with this idea of cuteness but yet it's not really treated as a notionally serious subject for art, so I started thinking about, I suppose, why that was and what role cuteness has in our society. To me I feel like cuteness is everywhere and I think it plays a very big role in our lives and especially an increasing role with social media and the internet and all of us using emoticons all the time and all the rest of it. So, I

started thinking about what is it about this moment, and I guess the kind of social conditions of late capitalism that are a sort of futile ground for cute images and cute objects. I suppose I came up with some kind of theories or ideas or intrigues.

I suppose on the one hand, there's a sense of our lives, I suppose especially now being increasingly precarious in the sense of cuteness being this kind of reversion to childhood or something that's comforting or comfortable. And then also, I was thinking about the way that cuteness is often used as a kind of smoke screen. So, you log on to Google and they often have a cute, wee animation on the home page, and you think, 'oh, that's nice - isn't Google nice?' and you don't really think about the fact that they're stealing all your data and all the rest of it.

So it kind of provides this way for you to... I guess, prevent you from looking deeper or looking any further and then I suppose I also was thinking well maybe it's more complex than that, I think there's something in that idea of cute objects having the potential for creepiness that makes them much more complex than simply just this simply comforting soft and lovely thing. I think something I got intrigued by was this power dynamics of cuteness.

On the one hand cute objects are often these kind of infantilised kind of babies or animals or at least kind of referencing that in some way. And there's a sense of an implied power that you have over that object but at the same time there's something manipulative about cute things and there's a power that they have over you through the kind of manipulation

Transcription of video outline

of cuteness so you can't help but go, aww and sort of be emotionally sucked into it. So, I think there's a power play there that I quite like and I think there's something also in cute things, and maybe in my work at large, where there is an association with cuteness and femininity or women and children. I think, you know cuteness isn't necessarily taken very seriously and I think very often female experience isn't taken very seriously and I think these things are connected. For me, I like working in an aesthetic that's cute and that's saccharin because I think it challenges people because you're saying I'm talking about politics and serious ideas but I'm doing it in a feminine aesthetic.

I'm not going to start making work that looks masculine just so you'll take me seriously. I think

for me there's also this other potential that cute objects have. Let's say for example, a teddy bear that they can defy or deny an easy categorisation, especially in terms of gender, but I think also because of this kind of cute slipping into creepy tendency that these objects have they often can defy easy categorisations of right or wrong or good or bad. They allow you to inhabit a slightly more fluid space and I wonder also whether in culture that's why people are interested in them because they offer this potential to inhabit something a little bit more fluid and a little bit less binary and kind of rigid -

[End of Recording]