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## Massive art, massive controversy

By Paul Gessell

*Ron Mueck portrays life as it is, only huge. People love it, but as Paul Gessell writes, the critics don't.*



This giant sculpture, titled *A Girl*, is part of a show opening Friday at the National Gallery. The works of its creator, Australian-born Ron Mueck, are often immense and immensely popular, much to the chagrin of many art experts. Sixteen works will be shown in Ottawa. Photograph by: Timothy A. Clary, Getty Images

The art world cannot decide whether high-flying Australian artist Ron Mueck is a genius or a fraud. But the masses -- including former governor general Adrienne Clarkson -- definitely love him and definitely love his giant babies, naked old men and gossiping old biddies.

Strong opinions surround the camera-shy Mr. Mueck, whose globe-trotting solo show opens Friday at the National Gallery of Canada, because he knows how to attract a crowd with his creepy, unsettling sculptures of extraordinarily lifelike, but not life-sized, people.

Images of Mr. Mueck's work are pirated and circulated endlessly on such popular websites as Flickr and YouTube. Fans surreptitiously wander galleries videotaping and photographing his shows. He is blogged about ad nauseam. His celebrity is such that he simply cannot be ignored, whether or not you like him.

Mr. Mueck is "accessible," which means people "get" his art. Galleries are forced to extend their hours as visitors line up to see his silicone and fibreglass creations marking the stages of life from birth, to adolescence and, finally, to death.

Mr. Mueck's popularity, of course, represents an unforgivable sin to the segment of the art world that believes great art must be unfathomable to the great unwashed. And, to these elites, Mr. Mueck's art is no more unfathomable than an unclothed department store mannequin with an angry look and flabby bottom.

The works are not classical beauties. Instead, they are too human, you might say, because of the wrinkles, moles, varicose veins and other flaws on these creations, which range from pygmies to seven-metre-tall giants.

Indeed, Mr. Mueck's characters look remarkably like real people. It is hard to escape the notion you are peering, voyeuristically, into your neighbours' windows and seeing things best left unseen.

Sixteen of Mr. Mueck's sculptures will be in the National Gallery exhibition.

Before arriving in Ottawa, the exhibition, with slight variations, was in Paris, Edinburgh and Brooklyn. The crowds were generally appreciative; some fans were downright cultish. The professional critics were not always so kind.

Grace Glueck, writing in *The New York Times*, was generally positive in reviewing the Mueck exhibition and describing the raw humanity within it. "Objects they are, of course, but there are moments when you almost believe they have lives."

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Ms. Glueck did complain about some of Mr. Mueck's oversized people. "Wild Man, a hairy, bearded giant nearly nine feet high who sits in a catatonic trance, hands gripping the edge of a bench, comes off as a carnival sideshow or a wax museum exhibit. And once you get over the initial shock of *In Bed*, a colossal tableau -- 21 feet long -- of a woman lying in bed, giant hand to apprehensive face, you wonder: Why so big? The subject has not earned its monumentality, so to speak, and its size distracts from its emotional intensity."

Jonathan Jones, writing in Britain's *The Guardian*, was downright caustic about this "brainless," "flimsy gimcrack charade" that was only masquerading as art but was, nevertheless, attracting adoring crowds.

"I just don't think, if you are one of these people, you see enough art," Mr. Jones wrote of Mr. Mueck's fans. "You need to get out more."

The Jones review sparked a deluge of letters, pro and con, to *The Guardian*.

"I suggest you get out less," harrumphed one letter-writer to the critic. A supporter of the Mr. Jones' point of view countered by describing Mr. Mueck's work as "clever -- but so is taxidermy."

Regular National Gallery of Canada visitors will be familiar with at least one of Mr. Mueck's creations -- the giant baby head the size of a cube van usually parked at the entrance to the contemporary galleries. The gallery also owns *Old Woman in Bed*. She's the kind of frail, old person we are all afraid of becoming.

Ms. Clarkson says *Head of a Baby* is one of her favourite works in the National Gallery and that every time she sees it, she wants to take it home.

"I imagine the body is somewhere underneath, huge, fat, with wrinkled wrists," Ms. Clarkson says. "It isn't a severed head; it isn't grotesque. It give us a vision of life and what it can be."

Mr. Mueck achieved fame -- or is that notoriety? -- with the unveiling in 1997 of *Dead Dad*, a rendition of the artist's own father in death. American art critic Robert Rosenblum, the author of the Ron Mueck exhibition catalogue, described his reaction upon first seeing *Dead Dad* a decade ago. It was "so shockingly real and so shockingly unreal that, like an unexpected trauma, it left an indelible imprint."

Mr. Mueck has been leaving imprints across the globe ever since. His show is something of a rarity at the National Gallery of Canada, where contemporary art has been given short shrift in recent years.

The last curator of contemporary art, Kitty Scott, left the federal institution last summer, complaining about the difficulty in getting contemporary shows mounted. Seven months later, a replacement for Ms. Scott has yet to be named.

Contemporary shows usually draw far smaller crowds than Old Masters or Impressionists. Hence the Renoir Landscapes exhibition slated for the summer.

Mr. Mueck has the potential, however, to keep the turnstiles spinning. At the least, his exhibition should spark a lively debate: Does his art expose the human condition in all its frailties or are these simply absurdly sized mannequins?