

Crash Test

A woman, dressed in hat and gloves. Stockinged feet in shiny shoes. Twin set. Pearls. Tidy handbag. I imagine her dressing that morning (an orderly arrangement) smoothing her blouse against the trials and pleasures of the day. And with all that tucked in, she steps on to the street, only to end up.... more than half a century later in a yellowing photograph, and despite all her fierce effort to maintain normality, she is hanging from a noose.

This picture of a holocaust victim is one of the influences cited by Jamie Willis in his work *Crash Test*, made for Hindmarsh Square, in the city of Adelaide. The work comprises of five bronze figures, each resembling a crash test dummy and perched on a long, thin metal pole. They begin at eye level, their feet limp as if hanging or floating, their bodies pushing high into the air. The balance skilfully achieved by Willis gives the figures a feeling of perfectly stillness, as if caught mid fall or levitation. Shoppers wander through, and picnickers sit amongst this strange stand of unobtrusive, numbered, stamped, assembled, disposable yet permanent, crash test dummy people.

The repetition of bronze life size figures in a public space rings like a regular beat through history, signalling our unending fascination with our culture and each other. To walk through our day and be confronted by representations of ourselves is not an unfamiliar experience (and *Crash Test* is very much part of this tradition). Every city has a soldier, statue of a queen or notary made of bronze, allowing the living to walk amongst the dead through our city squares, parks and gardens. ...in *Crash Test* there too is a sense of memento mori, not memorialising a celebrated person or event, but a rather, providing us a universal monument to anonymous human pile-ups.

Crash test dummies stand in for people in horrific situations. They are the things that we throw against walls, or place in vehicles cranked to top speed. With irreverent glee we let them go just to see what happens. Crash test dummies let us feel the small pleasure of throwing things at hard surfaces and knowing they are going to break. However, Jamie Willis's crash test dummies are not crushed, they are limp, strung up, not quite floating (escaping the normal fate of a crash test dummy, only to remember one that is worse). Although lifeless, they are hauntingly lifelike. These figures seem to act out (doll like) the crashes in human history, the colossal mistakes and the times we smashed into each other. The blandness of these unobtrusive, hovering dummies acts as a foil for the quiet, deafening violence their hanging implies.

Jamie Willis stated that he wanted to make a work about people in general. No gender, no face, no colour. Crash test dummies are the clunky practical signifier for person, but beyond that, they also signify technology. Built to show us when our newest inventions do not work; crash test dummies demonstrate the limits of what we have made. *Crash Test* presents a series of questions, prompting us to slow down and ask: What are we hurtling towards? What are the limits of our technology driven society? And, who are those people we willingly put forward to become tangled in the test flight?

Crash Test is appropriately situated, created for a peaceful Adelaide garden square in this city known best for its beautiful churches and macabre murders. Surrounded on all sides by constant traffic, hemmed in by office towers, the work provides a point of pause, a meditation on the uncomfortable histories (and foreboding futures) that haunt the malaise of everyday normality.