

From paintings to porcelain, Vera Klute is a prodigious talent, writes **Cristín Leach**

The artist Vera Klute is a 21st-century Renaissance woman, the real deal. She paints and draws with immaculate skill. She taught herself taxidermy on the back of a decision to use dead birds as part of her Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) show in the Ashford Gallery in 2014. She taught herself tapestry too. And in 2015, when she won the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI) Hennessy Portrait Prize for a realist oil painting, she spent the €15,000 prize money on a kiln and set about establishing a proficiency in ceramic-making. The kiln is the crucible in which the four cool, shiny, white porcelain sculptures in her current Molesworth Gallery show were forged. They hang on the wall like glazed pieces of meat, petrified layers of innards and flesh.

Collectively entitled *Flesh and Blood*, from a certain angle the first resembles a thigh sliced through, all skin, muscle and bone; a body part ready for further butchering. The second implies intestines, but includes an unexpected tracery of pattern, the imprint of lace on internal flesh. It takes a while to see that hidden deep within the layers of these pieces is the figure of an unborn baby, rear end exposed. Here is something hot and messy made cold and specimen-like by its re-formation in clay. In the gallery, these meaty, porcelain objects are made more human than they might otherwise be by their close proximity to a video portrait that fills the room with the sound of recorded heavy breathing, the sound of a living, human presence.

Klute is no meddler in these various crafts and skills. As an artist, she appears to be a remarkable shape-shifter in her own right, a quick and astute adapter to whatever her next project calls for. Unlike conceptual artists who get others to do the making for them, Klute retains control of the entire process by mastering and doing the work herself. That the results are so well finished, so consistently aesthetically pleasing, bears testament not only to her talent, but also to her uncompromising vision.

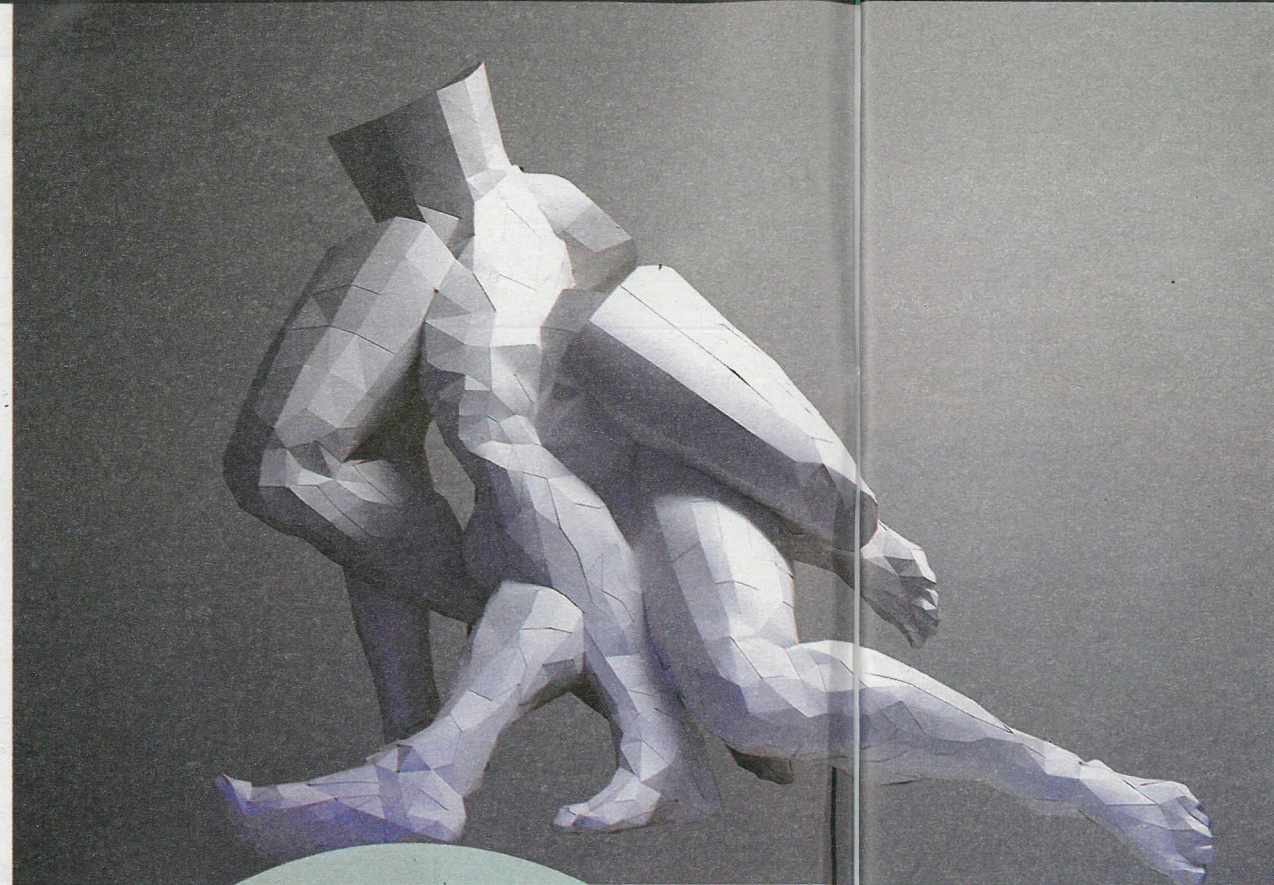
Klute was born in Germany in 1981,

but lives and works in Dublin. She graduated from Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology in 2006 with a first-class honours degree. In the decade that has followed, she hit every marker that an ambitious fine art graduate could hope to target: emerging artist awards in 2007 and 2008; solo shows from 2006 to 2014 at the LAB in Dublin, the Wexford Arts Centre, the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny, the RHA and the QSS Gallery in Belfast; inclusion in group shows both here and abroad. In 2012, her work was added to the National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland. In 2014, she was commissioned

to produce a portrait of the social justice campaigner Sister Stanislaus Kennedy for the NGI Portrait Collection. As part of her 2015 win, she will add another commission to the collection – and all the while still in her mid-thirties. It's a remarkable string of achievements.

She makes, among other things, drawings, paintings, static and kinetic sculptures and animated or kinetic portraits, which are often the most eye-catching elements of her output. These portraits are also strangely conflicted objects. They have a mechanical, almost travelling sideshow, old-fashioned circus aesthetic, which is essentially

GOING OUT ON A LIMB



tricksy and entertaining, but it is combined with a solid quietude that runs throughout Klute's oeuvre and anchors it somewhere in a place of very solitary, deep contemplation. This dual aspect gives her work its personality, its heft, its intelligence – regardless of medium. It is also what makes it so compelling. She is a deft maker of objects, an artist for whom drawing comes first but is not always the end point.

IWAN BAIN, BRYAN APPLEBYARD



Her latest video portraits combine hand-drawn animation with sound and digital collage. One is a self-portrait. The other two, entitled *Lara* and *Mum*, hang side by side, breathing both audibly and visibly. *Mum's* shoulders rise and fall to a sound resembling a continuous sigh. Every now and then she does actually sigh. Her face is sketched. Her eyes are video recordings. Her hand is a black-and-white photograph that she raises to scratch or rub her upper lip every now and then. The background consists of a slow-moving display of kaleidoscopic images of desk objects: pens, pencils, Pritt Stick. She gulps. She blinks. The portrait repeats on a four-minute loop, endlessly.

Blinking eyes are a Klute trope. *Lara* blinks too, and breathes. She is Klute's daughter, age 5, surrounded by a moving halo of animated childish

drawings: crawling insects, a galloping unicorn with rainbow hair. There is a constant sound of wind, and a plane flies by. *Lara* looks slightly anxious.

An undercurrent of anxiety is a constant presence in Klute's work. Her art is unsentimental but genuinely curious, strangely intimate and equally dispassionate. This is part of what makes it unsettling, occasionally uncanny. Her video portrait subjects are absorbed in their own inner worlds, made visible – in the background – as if to invite us in, but always remaining separate, mysterious. The appearance of the unicorn coincides with the little girl's smile; the unicorn is smiling too.

There are oil on canvas paintings in this show too, loosely painted compositions with one-word titles: *Wolves*, *Gnome*, *Skeleton*. The drawings on display are made up of body parts.

Talent show Klute's work *Stampede*, far left; *Cluster I*, left; *Mum*, below left

Cluster IV is a pinkish bundle of fingers and toes. *Mass* and *Bulk* present mirror-fractured and conjoined images of fingers, elbow, hair, teeth, ears, arms, legs, a nose. They are a mishmash of limbs, conglomerations of naked human parts. It is as though Klute is trying to dismember the body in order to parse and reassemble it into a new whole that is both viable, as an image, and unviable, in real life. The words monstrosity, deformity, beauty, purpose, form – all fit as descriptors for the shapes she has made.

The body, its presence, its mysteries and its alienating familiarity when dissected or intimately investigated are at the core of much of her work. This show is called *Breeding Ground*, and comes on the back of Klute's experiences of pregnancy and birth. *Bulk* is an image of a female body folding in on itself, tying itself in knots, trying to find its centre. It is fractured, but revolving around a clear core. *Mass* has a toothy scream at the heart of it. Human form is embraced, explored and disrupted.

Upstairs, Klute underlines her painting credentials with *Skeleton*, a dark and stormy composition in which the objects of a domestic still life are arranged like samples, on a windowsill. A model skeleton dangles from its stand. It's about the same size as the blackening banana beside it. There is hand soap and a juice box, a potted plant. This is a superb, slow-revealing painting about life, death and the storm clouds that can mark the bits in between. The view from the window offers no real escape. The outside world is oppressive; the inside world mundane, approaching morbid. Klute's repeated use of the bottom edge of the canvas or page as a cut-off, slice or splice is very deliberate. It seems to say: enough.

Her *Cluster* drawings are beautifully rendered depictions of repeated limbs: legs knotted, hands holding on. They imply an attempt to pull together, to gather strength with mass, to huddle, to protect. Her large paper sculptures have an entirely different energy. *Stampede* and *Rush* offer entanglements of limbs let loose. They are light and airy, delicate, papery, fresh. If the drawings acknowledge the body as trap, these stand-alone structures imply the potential to be free, despite the restrictions of flesh and blood – the promise of escape under the locomotion of one's own limbs. ■

Vera Klute, *Breeding Ground* is at the Molesworth Gallery, Dublin, until June 10; www.molesworthgallery.com