

## Pit-Vipers

The seedy underbelly of Crothall's *Heat Pits*

**“MEADOW  
The great RIVER below in the cleft of the valley...is BROWN  
ENORMOUS GLASS PIPES  
Brilliant, curious colors”**

Fragments from script,  
The Chocolate Room, opening shot  
*I Want it Now*, Julie Dawn Cole, p. 237

Grace Crothall's images of Christchurch motels hold a sense of waiting-room catatonia. Hard-edged, economic units in zombie-bland palettes. Exhaustive lists of boring amenities; “ironing facilities, free toiletries, shuttle to and from”. The intolerable tedium of everyday necessities, stripped back to chilling uniformity.

Crothall plays the role of director, stage managing her scenes, outsourcing selected aspects of production.<sup>1</sup> Moonlighting as both set designer and special effects crew, the artist has added garnishes to her tepid interiors. Stills from the 1971 classic, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, light up the motel flat screens, and home-made, velveteen snakes weave their way into shots; crumpled like discarded sleeves – spangled white, olive green, turquoise. These details tug at a suggestion of potent dark-fantasy – of something meaty and rotten, simmering under the anonymous materials of tightly measured and slightly grimy rooms.

Mel Stuart's *Willy Wonka* has become a key source of glucose for Crothall's work; the film's influence flowing from its rich, subversive undercurrent. Think of *The Chocolate Room*, that lurid-industrial candy-field. Set designer Harper Goff's chocolate river appears off-colour and watery, like rusty blood. A lingering shot of the surface features a slow stream of rising bubbles...the camera holds, what lies beneath? As noted by actress Julie Dawn Cole (Veruca Salt) in her memoir of the *Wonka* experience:

‘The special effects team used chemical dyes, along with a milk powder to create the chocolate appearance and textures seen on film...on at least one occasion, the water had to be drained when the color shifted to a reddish hue and gave off a foul musty smell that permeated the entire soundstage.’<sup>2</sup>

The children are released into *The Chocolate Room*, and Veruca soon smashes open an immense striped orb (‘polysterene watermelon’), scooping out dark, fleshy slop with her bare hands. Dawn Cole describes this moment in detail:

“The taste of this runny-textured chocolate gloop was so disgusting that I could barely force myself to eat it, much less pretend that I was enjoying it...By the time this scene was completed, I felt ill from ingesting this chocolate-flavored nastiness”<sup>3</sup>

And that lemon-yellow buttercup that Wonka bites into? Cast wax. Gene Wilder immediately spat out his mouthful as each take was completed. Likewise, in the scene featuring lickable wallpaper – Dawn Cole's tongue was coated in a “powdery, chalky-tasting food coloring” to give it a candy-red tint.<sup>4</sup> For a final nasty note, those were live wasps in the inventing room, appearing as busy bees producing honey.

Props causing mild gastric distress, a dank waft down the confectionery aisle...An element of decay in something presented as luxury. Here's a parallel with Crothall's beige motel rooms. Take her image of a spa bath, surrounded with spongy blue matting – you know those springy fibres are chock full of skin flakes, maybe some sneaky cigarette ash. Oh, the familiar experience of rental accomodation let-downs. That Super-king mattress has lumpy, polyester pillows (and a worn mink blanket). The shower is but a trickle, harbouring whiffs of black mold, with a top-note of *JIF*. There's a strange ochre residue inside the bar fridge, and the measly dose of instant coffee has hardened inside its paper sachet. This is not horror, it's worse – an insidious and creeping sense of existential disappointment. The big holiday with the kids is a bit icky around the edges.

Crothall's imagery of sparse, constrained interiors builds a framework of strict control. *Heat Pits* situates this claustrophobic oppression within an educational context. The exhibition design plays on dated classroom formats, siphoning inspiration

<sup>1</sup> The images presented in *Heat Pits*, and Crothall's earlier exhibitions; *Alcala*, and *Shelter House*, have been shot and produced by Christchurch-based photographer Mitchell Bright

<sup>2</sup> *I Want it Now*, Julie Dawn Cole, p 260-261

<sup>3</sup> Dawn Cole, p 246

<sup>4</sup> Dawn Cole, p 391

from Stuart's *Willy Wonka*. Remember the weasel-faced teacher, lab-coat clad, glowering down at his pews of young charges? Chalk in hand, he is all knowing. The chalkboard itself takes on a domineering persona here – an elevated surface that dispenses hard information; chemical equations, percentages, black and white data – never to be questioned.

The artist fully understands this object-oriented power structure, pulling physical cues from conventional chalkboards into her image display strategies. Large-scale prints are supported by a timber ledge; lining the gallery walls, mounted at 'teaching' height, constructed from framing of a width and shape suited to holding lengths of chalk. A custom-made, triangular school table is centred in the gallery space – sharp angles and flat planes; the antithesis of childish squish and sprawl. This structure references spatial control of small bodies, while simultaneously operating as a mechanism to direct the traffic of viewers.

At the dark heart of *Heat Pits* is a slithering presence, penetrating the machine of stale control, leaving traces of its progress. Offcast disguises, outgrown by the fiend. A snake will shed its skin periodically throughout its lifetime; a process also known as *molting*, or *sloughing*. An internal layer of the old skin liquefies, before splitting close to the mouth of the snake. The entire skin will often come away in a single piece, rolling off the reptile's body as an elongated, inside-out sock. Snakes have long been a preoccupation for Crothall, favoured both for their biblical symbolism, and their style of locomotion. That whispering slippage around the edges of things. The french term *serpent*, comes from the Indo-European *serp-* 'to creep'.

Snakes exhibit several distinct forms of movement; *sidewinding* refers to a strange, rolling maneuver used to travel across smooth surfaces that offer no traction. In the context of Crothall's work, sidewinding might take on a metaphorical significance; not even the most-polished, pristine countertop is safe from the serpent. Undulating movements glimpsed in one's peripheral vision – omnipresent, but rarely faced head-on – the forked tongue of temptation, and accompanying doom, never too far away.

Crothall's series of home-sewn snakes deliberately exaggerate a faux aesthetic. Her critters are not meant to be convincing, or realistic. There's a looseness and impatience in these deflated reptiles, carelessly draped, darkly hilarious. Imagine The Chocolate Room if Goff had liberated himself from the goal of suspending disbelief – that's Crothall's style. It's worth noting that the artist originally trained as a painter; her early work centred on highly-skilled renderings of confectionary and decorations. Crothall's practice has since developed into a nuanced, multi-media creature – deftly utilising photography, installation, moving image, sculptural elements, text and publishing.

This shift from an illustrative, illusory process, towards a complex set of framing devices, has widened and deepened Crothall's vocabulary. A preoccupation with texture and surface has emerged, a drive towards the darker side of nostalgia, and an interest in localised specificity – she often references growing up in Christchurch, during the 90's. In May 2019 Crothall presented *Alcala*; an exhibition that broke strange new ground. Presented in a unit at the Alcala motor lodge, 100 Sherborne Street, Christchurch; the artist's body of work slipped between cream walls, fawn carpet, and flesh-tone linen.

Two publications were included in *Alcala*; the magazine style; *Mindful Marinade*, and a hardbound book; *Snakes of New Zealand*. Large-scale images presented in *Heat Pits* first appeared in this second publication – reconfigured here in the artist's aestheticised parody of a classroom. References to a controlling shadow-side of learning environments can similarly be traced back to an earlier project; *Shelter House*, 2021, a multi-media exhibition for The Physics Room, which introduced visual language drawn from retro education posters, religious colouring books, and primary school display structures.

In resolving a bespoke installation for Rm gallery, Crothall has pulled silken threads from both *Alcala* and *Shelter House*, simplified her presentation strategies, and increased the potency of her content. *Heat Pits* offers viewers a refined menu of artistic progression, concentrated in a body of work that is confounding, rather brilliant, and very funny. It's a nightmare scotch-egg, wrapped in layers of coded narrative, harbouring cryptic secrets...