Katarina Rose's eccentric taxidermy: 'I've got a hedgehog and a weasel that I haven't sewn up yet'

An underachieving mole who reinvents himself as a fortune teller, a charlatan psychic shrew... Welcome to the weird taxidermy world of the Dorset artist Katarina Rose

By Louise Carpenter
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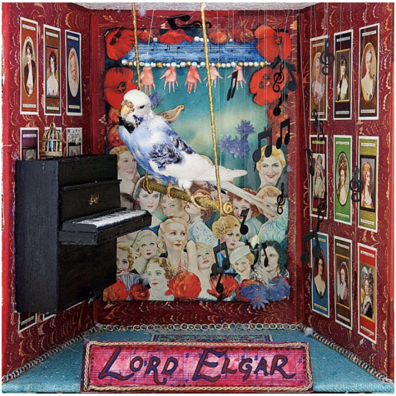
Artist Katarina Rose: "They were my way of expressing how I felt" | CREDIT: Photo: Rebecca Bernstein

When Katarina Rose impulsively bought herself a stuffed mole for Christmas three years ago, she had no idea it would change her life so profoundly. A classically trained sculptress, previously she had produced figurative pieces under her real name of Lisa Lindqvist. But one mole led to another, and after that a steady stream of dead animals started appearing in her studio: squirrels, voles, rats, birds, shrews, weasels, an albino mouse. Nothing was too small or too gruesome.

The creatures would arrive – and continue to arrive at her studio near Bridport, Dorset – already stuffed, in the form of eBay finds mailed in Jiffy bags; or freshly dead, clamped between the jaws of her friend's cat. Her studio fridge is now full of frozen bags of the as-yet-unstuffed dead, which she handles much as the rest of us might pull out a bag of peas. 'I've got a hedgehog and a weasel that I haven't sewn up yet,' she says casually.



Characters in Rose's The Field project include Lord Elgar, 'a lying fantasist witha singing voice of liquid gold'

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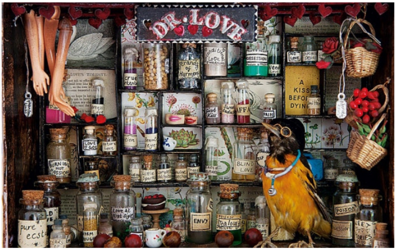
(REBECCA BERNSTEIN)

With the arrival of each new creature, a make-believe story began to take shape in her mind. The stuffed animals needed a place to live; they needed lives and personalities and a 'look'. Slowly she worked away, dressing them in clothes adapted from charity-shop or jumble-sale finds, each one stitched by hand. Identities established, she placed each in its own habitat: a glass-fronted vintage box containing a miniature world. 'They were not just things I dressed up,' she explains. 'They were actually my way of expressing how I felt.'

As the number of boxes grew – and slowly began to attract the interest of Dorset collectors – the overarching idea of The Field was born: a kind of modern-day, rock'n'roll Wind in the Willows. Currently it comprises a dozen characters and is part of Rose's latest exhibition, Ships in the Night, which opens today in Bridport.



Another character called Dr Love, 'who gathers and bottles all aspects of love' (REBECCA BERNSTEIN)

Rose has piles of identical black-leather notebooks, full of ideas for the constantly increasing cast. One creature in The Field is a mole called John, who has not been fulfilling his potential. He possesses psychic powers and reinvents himself as the great fortune teller Moltar. In that guise he helps the albino mole Oshi, who, 'forced into a reclusive life of depression, anxiety and isolation… rarely found the energy to get out of bed'.

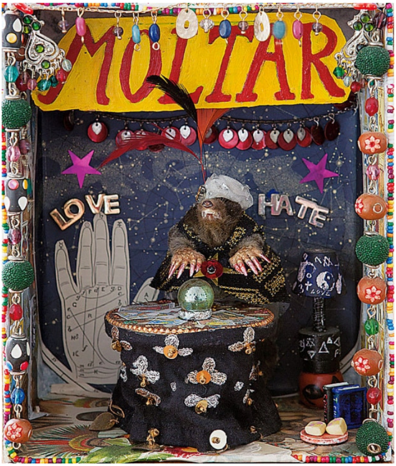
> *'I suppose I wanted to analyse society, the darker influences in life, and ask why human beings want power and control'*
>
> Katarina Rose

Moltar is one of Rose's favourite inventions because, she says, he is an extension of her and all her former feelings of thwarted creativity. Oshi, on the other hand, sits in his box surrounded by tiny self-help books – How to Win Friends and Influence People and Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway – made by Rose using paper and cardboard. There are also miniature bottles labelled whiskey on the floor and an impossibly small packet of Marlboro Reds. 'It is those little things that make it real,' Rose says. 'I always think to myself, what would he be reading? What would he be smoking?'

- The art of taxidermy: me, a gerbil and a scalpel

Other characters in The Field universe include Sholtar, the fake fortune-telling shrew, a 'wily imposter'; and Vida the flamboyant squirrel, who used to be a terrible hoarder, forever storing and counting her nuts, but who eventually realised that her acquisitive nature was 'rubbing out her soul' and is liberated by painting – and on it goes in wonderfully eccentric fashion.

It is unsurprising given the emotionally complex lives of her creatures that nothing about Katarina Rose herself – on the surface a 44-year-old mother-of-three living in Litton Cheney – is that straightforward either.



Moltar challenges 'the tyrannical mole society' (REBECCA BERNSTEIN)

When that first mole arrived in the post in a Jiffy bag, she saw it as a metaphor for her own life. 'Trapped in society,' she says, 'making a nice home, having a family… but then when he escapes, he is above ground and it's just amazing.'

Within the last year, Rose has separated from the father of her children and is now forging a new path on her own with her girls. To reflect this, alongside the characters from The Field, there is new work in the exhibition in which she has turned vintage dancing shoes into boats with sails, suspended above yards of pianola rolls. 'My work is so personal,' she says. 'The latest stuff is about guiding your own ship, being singular about what you want. Often these issues appear in my work before I even understand them myself.'

Katarina Rose's studio (REBECCA BERNSTEIN)

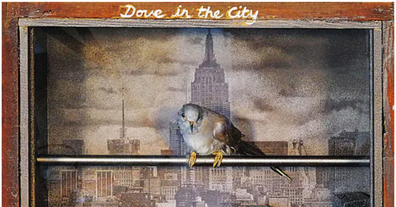
Adopting the name Katarina Rose signified the creation of an alter ego – much like with her creatures – the invention of the kind of woman she aspired to be. 'She is the confident, sassy version of me,' Rose explains. But now, she says, she feels more and more like Katarina than Lisa.

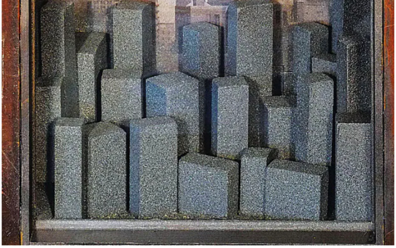
Rose is an arresting presence: Swedish-looking, with blond plaits twisted up and over the top of her head. Lindqvist is her mother's maiden name, which she adopted after her death in 2000. (She was born Cox. Her mother's family come from the south of Sweden, and Rose has won gold medals for England at international snow-sculpting competitions.) She studied fine art at Wimbledon College of Arts and then took up a career mostly in costume, props and theatre. After her mother's death, she enrolled in the Frink School of Figurative Sculpture in Stoke-on-Trent as a way of coping with her grief.

Creating the world of Rab, 'an edgy cross-dressing rat' (REBECCA BERNSTEIN)

While reasonably successful throughout the last decade, spent combining her sculpture with raising her children, Rose says that three years ago she had a kind of nervous breakdown – ‘I was just freefalling’ – which precipitated a period of psychotherapy. ‘Although now I see it more as a “breakthrough” rather than a “breakdown”.’

Many of the creatures’ personalities and struggles are based on Rose’s own experiences of modern life: the politics of envy; the narrow, limiting conventions of a bourgeois society; the constant pressure on us all to strive for and **acquire status through material wealth**; the way personal dreams often get quashed by ‘alpha’ characters intent on promoting a different path. ‘It is a way of saying that things are not quite what they seem,’ she says, ‘and it is distressing when you first realise that. But [my message] is that you have to follow your own line.





Dove in the City (REBECCA BERNSTEIN)

‘You have to be aware of who you are and where you are going, otherwise you float in and out. I suppose I wanted to analyse society, the darker influences in life, and ask why human beings seem to want power and control.’ At some point, she would like to write and illustrate a children’s book, or even a series of them, based on The Field.

• Taxidermy: all creatures great and stuffed

The boxes containing The Field creatures have an enduring appeal for the public. In the exhibition, Rose has sectioned off part of the art space, dedicating it to them. Her other installations include clocks with mice in them; ‘spring’ created inside a guitar case, inspired by a Tom Waits song; and a world carved into the inside of an ostrich egg, entitled A Dream Waiting to Be Born. These works have a lot in common with The Field because, as Rose says, it is about navigating your way in the world, with all the joy and hope and disappointment that brings.

When the show ends, the creatures will return to their home under Rose’s stairs. Next to this sits a desk, which is, she says, where she will write the next instalment of their lives.

Ships in the Night runs until July 26 at the Old Timberyard, West Bay, Bridport, Dorset; katarinarose.com

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