

ANDREW NICHOLLS examines the work of an artist who combines nihilistic humour with intricate constructions.

# WOODEN PARLOUR GAMES

Anna Nazzari's relatively brief career has been largely focused on a provocative and very funny exploration of failure. Her undergraduate works were, as a rule, meticulously constructed but intentionally grungy. These included temple-like installations peopled by taxidermed road kill and elaborate, electronically powered contraptions recalling Meccano sets, whose pathetically limited, shuddering movement was intended to frustrate the viewer, who desperately wanted them to do *something* other than lurch forwards and backwards a few centimetres.

This nihilistic humour has characterised her practice; her works routinely refuse to 'play nice', always retaining an element of malice to avoid too cosy a reading. Even a seemingly sweet, wooden folk toy she exhibited in 2004 started an adorable fluffy rabbit viciously snapping its jaws at the turn of a handle.

Nazzari's recent postgraduate installation at John Curtin Gallery, *Casino Sisyphus*, represented an impressive development in her practice. Comprising a series of handmade wooden parlour games, spookily spotlit in a darkened gallery space, the exhibition extended (and beautifully resolved) her career-long preoccupation with futility, its title paying homage to the mythological figure of Greek legend who was condemned to roll the same boulder up the same hillside for all eternity. Showcasing her highly refined skills in marquetry and carving, these seemingly 'masculine' wooden objects poke sophisticated fun at mannered gender coding; though they use game playing as a metaphor, they reference the Edwardian gentleman's games room, rather than the pinball arcade. While no less fatalistic than her earlier works, for the first time the series sees Nazzari seducing her viewer through her objects' polished finish, rather than sneering at them.

Literalising notions of gender play and the battle of the sexes, the series includes a roulette wheel with male and female figures in place of numbers, and a Foosball table peopled by androgynous, robot-like figures. For Nazzari, however, the game is fixed, and those who try to break the rules have already lost before they started. Her coin-operated *Arc de Triomphe* sets three hand-carved figures of the iconically androgynous Catholic saint Joan of Arc racing to the finishing line, only to see them return to a predetermined sequence; before reaching the finish they simply reverse into their original positions (and the viewer has lost their coin).

Nazzari's forthcoming solo exhibition at Turner Galleries will re-show the *Casino Sisyphus* works in addition to a new tenpin-bowling game, *Night Mare*. Drawing on the sexual connotations historically associated with horses and the misogynistic mediaeval engendering of the nightmare as demonically female, the game will feature luminous horse-shaped pins and (Nazzari assures) will prove 'a nightmare to win'. It will be accompanied by a series of drawings in invisible ink, alluding to the crossovers between the visible and invisible, real and imagined that we experience in dreams. □

**Anna Nazzari**

Turner Galleries

Perth, Western Australia

7 October–5 November 2011



Top: Anna Nazzari, *Casino Sisyphus* (installation view), 2010. Photograph Bo Wong.

Above: Anna Nazzari, *Arc de Triomphe*, 2010, carved western cedar and electronic components, 200 x 100 x 100cm. Photograph Bo Wong.