

# Judy Darragh

b.1957

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When I moved to Wellington in the early 1990s, the homes of some of my friends were decorated in a particular style – with plastic flowers, Barbie dolls, fairy lights, fake fur, and kiwiana collected from the city’s op shops and fairs. This aesthetic was strangely familiar... Around the same time I began seeing Judy Darragh’s work; it was starting to be included in public gallery exhibitions throughout the country. Here was that aesthetic again and it was identified as kitsch.<sup>1</sup>

As it turned out, Darragh specialised in kitsch – in fact in the 1980s she became known as the self-styled Queen of Kitsch. For many years, she had been collecting kitsch objects for her home just like my friends, but then she began to include them as materials in her art works. And she used them in often hilarious and outrageous ways that subverted their former purpose or meaning.

Darragh made *Furry Fish* around 1990 in response to a historic hoax in an English museum. She writes, “I found an article in a newspaper with a photo of a rabbit skin-covered taxidermied fish someone had made and presented to the British Museum in London. They swore they had caught this furry fish and had it taxidermied. They tried to pass it off as real. Apparently, museums were presented with this stuff all the time, especially at the turn of 19th century, so the museum made an exhibition of these fakes”.<sup>2</sup>

Darragh’s *Furry Fish* is obviously a hoax too. The leopard print fake fur ‘fish’ is mounted like a trophy. She conceived it as a metaphor for the way art is sometimes viewed – as a souvenir of monetary success; a symbol of status; something to be admired for its price rather than its content, beauty, or technique.

*Furry Fish* has all the trademarks of the Queen of Kitsch’s work in the 1980s – the found objects, the tongue-in-cheek attitude, and the retro aesthetic. It’s made from readily sourced materials – fake fur, wood, a plastic fish, metal. Darragh found her materials at Catholic supply shops, emporiums, sex shops, car boot sales, school fairs, church fairs, and inorganic rubbish collections. She mixed up the tacky with the discarded to make something new – art.

She writes, “I have always sought materials which have either had a previous life or exist at the bottom of the food chain. The used objects carry a past anonymous life. They’ve been discarded, and I resurrect them and display them in the church of ‘Art’. Cheap and nasty materials have the qualities of mass production – usually plastic, non-archival and speaking of the masses who have no option but to utilise these objects...”.<sup>3</sup>

Darragh values the associations that particular materials bring to her work. They allow her to question what gives art value – if it’s not the materials, then what? Today, one of the things that represents value in an artwork is its ideas. *Furry Fish* embodies many layers of ideas – and laughs at the fact it’s made it to the gallery wall.

## Mary-Jane Duffy

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia definition: kitsch is a term of German or Yiddish origin that has been used to categorise art that is considered an inferior, tasteless copy of an existing style. The term is also used more loosely in referring to any art that is pretentious to the point of being in bad taste, and also commercially produced items that are considered trite or crass.

<sup>2</sup> Judy Darragh in correspondence with the writer July 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Conland, N. (2004). *Judy Darragh So... You Made It*, Te Papa Press, p. 74.

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

[www.govttbrewster.com](http://www.govttbrewster.com)

[www.physicsroom.org.nz](http://www.physicsroom.org.nz)

[www.telecomprospect2004.org.nz](http://www.telecomprospect2004.org.nz)

[www.tepapa.govt.nz](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz)

[www.tetuhi.org.nz/exhibitions/exhibitiondetails.php?id=13](http://www.tetuhi.org.nz/exhibitions/exhibitiondetails.php?id=13)

### Books:

Conland, N. (2004). *Judy Darragh So... You Made It*, Te Papa Press.

