

# Garden of

**Ravioli Me Away** have performed dressed as crisps, fishermen and Ebay, but Sian Dorrer, Rosie Ridgway and Alice Theobald's latest project is taking stagecraft to new extremes. When I visit them on a freezing day in their temporary studio at Wysing Arts Centre in rural Cambridgeshire, it's full of crazy paving, rolls of neoprene covered in credit card logos, and stage props including a human-sized Lazy Susan. These are costumes and sets for *The View From Behind The Futuristic Rose Trellis* – an opera, soundtrack album and exhibition encouraging participants to step inside “a freeze frame” of the production.

If an opera suggests something rather grand, then what could be more appropriate for a multigenre song cycle about individual and collective aspiration and the cycle of life, as “the trapped soul of humanity” searches for meaning. Romping through electro pop, black metal and classical recitativo, we meet characters such as Post-It and The Gameshow Host, and watch a surprisingly tender serenade between an Ikea Billy Bookcase and a wooden character called Wood B Cute, finding that each really wants to become the other. One character The Constant Sweeper is based on a recurring dream that bothered Dorrer for years. “Every time I did anything, it would just go back to as if I'd never existed. And the days and the weeks went on, and just out of the corner of my eye I would see someone with a dustpan, erasing any trace of my existence,” says Dorrer. Theobald explains, “we started talking about it in relation to real life, this need to document everything or prove your existence.”

Although all three have their own art practice outside the band, “we don't really function within the art world”, admits Theobald, and it's rare in the art world to “acknowledge all the people that make it happen”. Their collaborators on this project range from film maker Jack Barraclough to co-producer and performer Tom Hirst, artist Onyeka Igwe, opera singer Siobhan Mooney and black metal band Whitby Bay. They've all had to be good sports, they laugh. “One way to look at it,” concedes Ridgway, is that “what we've got, is us making stupid boys look really stupid”. A sort of structural punishment for being men? “They're taking it though,” shrugs Theobald. One of the actors in the opera “has to wear a pig mask and have a fight with himself”.

The band have used this spirit of collaboration to bring in different perspectives. “I don't think it's just about us any more,” says Ridgway. “Part of the reason the tracks are so different is because of the different people we've got involved,” adds Dorrer. They've particularly wanted to work with artists who can offer a challenge to an ableist perspective, and question “what we take as normal, how we understand or interpret things”, explains Theobald. “Which is why we're interested in working with Heart n Soul. They're a charity that work with musicians with learning disabilities and support them. We're working with Dean Rodney Jr, who's an amazing autistic musician. How he would interpret life and things around him – it's not necessarily considered the regular way.” All the band agree that Rodney, frontman of Fish Police, is “an absolute genius”, they chorus, “a lyrical genius. We're dumbfounded!”

The opera's vignettes all mine a sense of discomfort with everyday life, and a fascination by the aspects of our shared vernacular culture which reveal themselves

DIY centres and consumerism are targets of a surreal comic opera and exhibition by **Ravioli Me Away**. By **Tessa Norton**

Amy Gwackin



on closer examination to be deeply weird. "How is it normal to smash up paving stones and lay them as crazy paving?" asks Dorrer. "And how did we get to this, how did we get to...a trellis," adds Ridgway. "I think we're very uncool. We like garden centres." The garden centre provides more answers than you might think, a faintly creepy world full of minor attempts to improve ourselves. "It's a lot about aspiration," Theobald elaborates, "that constant thing of people trying to better themselves. But what does it mean to be whole when society is always making sure there is always something to buy, or aim for." But, adds Ridgway, "it's not a judgmental perspective. We're complicit in the things we are laughing at. You can't

take yourself out of things." "We sing about Le Creuset saucepans," laughs Theobald, "but we all have one! We've all, somehow, managed to get one."

Humour remains important to navigating the relationship between high and low culture; although "some of the funniest people I know are women", notes Dorrer, "but it's this major serious thing to be a woman in a band that you aren't allowed to have a sense of humour." It was important that the project stayed entertaining; not so much parody as part of mass culture's long tradition of pageantry and quotidian humour. They found that tropes of opera fed into their process as much as those of the garden centre. "When you think of an opera, you think of the

end bit where people throw roses at the woman on stage," says Dorrer. "We thought what we'll do is have the climax at the beginning."

They soon realised the "Queen Of The Night" aria is written for a specific type of soprano, while Siobhan Mooney was a mezzo-soprano. "We sampled Tom singing it, then we put effects on it to make it sound like a duck, and now a duck sings it," Dorrer laughs. "We're very concerned that we don't want to bore people." □ *The View From Behind The Futuristic Rose Trellis* is performed at Wysing Arts Centre this month. The soundtrack is released by Wysing Polyphonic. The exhibition continues until 14 April, then the opera goes on tour: see *Out There*

# Earthly

# De lights



Ravioli Me Away: (from left) Rosie Ridgway, Alice Theobald, Sian Dorrer