



A PAIR of children's shoes can stir up a variety of emotions – happiness, affection, longing. The shoes Belinda Durrant has made bring these and more, a maelstrom of feelings from nostalgia to unease, curiosity to confusion.

The shape suggests a soft red nubuck, shiny shoes worn with white ankle socks to herald the first day of school. But these are slate grey and made of hard, cold, unyielding lead. They're both beguiling and peculiar.

You may not instantly understand what statement Little Lead Tootsies Age 3 are making, you might not get the reference to the outlawed tradition of foot binding until you see the sister piece, Little Lead Tootsies Age 23, a pair of oddly-shaped shoes with unfeasibly pointed toes that are almost the same size.

The piece is an unspoken comment on the ancient Chinese practice of squeezing and wrapping rich girls' feet so they grew up with an enticing sashaying walk that wouldn't take them far from their husbands' sides. But it also comments on the way Western women dress. Belinda, 57, from Stroud, became fascinated by the custom whilst researching corsets and the way women stuff themselves into clothes to accentuate their features.

"There is something exquisitely beautiful about the feet of a small child," says the mother-of-three grown children and grandmother to two little ones.

"I hope the initial response to this piece is a feeling of 'essence' of squishy little feet, followed by conflicting feelings caused by the nature of the materials I have used.

"These shoes are cold, hard. There is exposed stitching inside. They would be uncomfortable and poisonous as they are made of lead.



An enticing sculpture captures one of history's dark traditions. **SALLY BAILEY** talks to Belinda Durrant about the shoes that earned her coveted gallery space

"Nobody would put their child's feet into these shoes.

"They are meant as a foreboding of the loss of innocence, the pain of growing up, the fact that life gives you blisters. Life can be extremely uncomfortable sometimes and that is what these are all about."

When Belinda appeared on the telly programme Show Me The Monet, Little Lead Tootsies Age 3 had an instant affect on the 'hanging committee' of judges.

The BBC Two show brought artists from across the country to compete for gallery space at a selling exhibition in the Royal College of Art, London, whittling the applicants down to 1,200 potentials, then to a final 35 artists for the filming.

Judge Charlotte Mullins told Belinda the solitary pair of shoes had such an emotional impact on her that she felt unable to make an objective decision.

"Charlotte got it straight away. They really moved her. She told me later they would fit her child's feet which made it hard for her to be objective. I got a unanimous 'yes' to go through which was great. They absolutely loved the work.

"At the exhibition the Little Lead Tootsies didn't sell but I was secretly hoping they wouldn't because I didn't want to split them up from their sister work." For someone unused to performing in the spotlight the filming was nerve-wracking.



"It was really right out of my comfort zone," Belinda says. "I went in and was told not to say anything so I stood there whilst the hanging committee just stared at me. The silence went on for ages, they didn't tell me it was so they could put a voice over on the film afterwards."

Foot binding may be illegal now and corsets out of fashion but even today, Belinda says, we impose harsh measures on ourselves.

"Our mothers don't bind our feet or push us into corsets now but we have this need to conform, to be beautiful. How many times have you squeezed your feet into uncomfortable shoes? My work questions that, it's a metaphor for women, but it's beautiful in itself."

Whilst Lead Tootsies is thought-provoking, Belinda's work can also be simply enjoyed as something enchanting, images of birds, poetry, and the paper cut creations which were a Chinese tradition she did fall in love with.

"I work with all sorts of materials; lead, which is very pliable and you can cut like fabric, paper, Japanese tissue, but always something unexpected. I'd never make a pair of shoes out of leather or a dress from fabric. It has to be challenging for me, and for the viewer. It has to be beautiful in its own right."

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