

## Planet Of The Apes

"A lot of people say that apes don't have a soul or spirituality. The creationists against the evolutionists, instinct versus soul. I believe all animals are spiritual beings," says artist Lisa Roet of her simian muses.

Melbourne born Roet might be single minded when it comes to her subject matter - she's been fixated on apes for more than a decade - but she's diverse in terms of her resultant work. Her photographs, sculptures, her vast organic drawings and surreal video installations have been exhibited regularly in Brussels, New York, Sydney, Melbourne and, on occasion, in Vladivostok and Kuala Lumpur. Roet's curriculum vitae reads like the plot of a schmaltzy Hollywood movie; she's been artist in residence at zoos and galleries from Antwerp and Berlin to Kuala Lumpur and Borneo (home of the endangered Asian orangutan). An obvious animal lover, Roet is nevertheless keen to avoid political statements about her art. "Of course I have my own views on the political aspects of the ape issue, but I prefer to keep them separate. Art is not meant to carry a slogan underneath it," she says. Over the course of her career Roet has observed numerous caged apes in zoos. She's interacted with chimps taking part in bizarre experiments to determine their capacity to learn. She's even taken a death mask, for use in her sculpture, from a deceased chimpanzee whom she regarded as a friend. "Strangely, animal liberationists have been threatened by my work, perhaps they can't work out which side of the fence I'm sitting on, which is deliberate. It's not really what I set out to say, but it is there and I think if people really look at the work they will see it. In the end, I find it a bad joke - putting animals behind bars."

Roet's fascination with apes began ten years ago when she found herself living in squalid rented rooms close to Berlin Zoo. "When I got to Berlin I became more and more interested in animal behaviour and instinctual language. In the Berlin Zoo the animals were boxed in; in Eastern Europe the people were boxed in. So many people had never left there." The concrete enclosures of the zoo provided a respite from the hectic studio she shared with "an avant-garde speed freak whose best work was a piece of sticky tape stuck to the wall." Initially, it was the parallels between apes and humans that interested Roet. She recalls being transfixed by the apes' hands; a theme which echoes through her latest exhibition, *Pri-mates*. The exhibition, which showed in New York's LiebmanMagnan Gallery prior to arriving in Sydney at the Gitte Weise Gallery, features large, emotive charcoal drawings of disjointed ape limbs along side a video installation of the artist's hand reaching for an ape's hand - in a simultaneously beautiful and grotesque parody of Michael Angelo's famed image. According to Roet, both New York and Malaysian audiences were "shocked" by the film, seeing the ape's hand as a grotesque version of the human's. "One man in KL reacted strongly to the image, seeing the ape hand as disfigured by leprosy. He changed his mind when he realised that it wasn't human. As an ape's hand it was beautiful, so beauty is contextual," says Roet.

Roet enjoys working with film for its truth, but she has no preferred medium. "Each medium I use expresses a different part of what I do. Drawing is very instinctive, you've only got your hand and your head and it's an automatic response, whereas computer generating images is a much more carefully thought out process," she says. Roet believes that there has been a shift within the modern art world towards accepting mixed media. "Sometimes art is judged according to whether or not it fits in with what else is going on around it. This is something I don't understand because I've always thought that art is meant to be about individual expression. In the past, I've been told that I can't combine computer generated images with classical drawing in one exhibition," she says. "Curators are now less afraid of mixing it up."

The giant, phallus-like ape finger Roet floated in a forgotten bend of Melbourne's Yarra River as part of 1998's *Construction in Process: The Bridge* exhibition mixed things up. The work was energised by the echoing strains of apes fornicating emanating from speakers installed under the bridge. With a nod towards the barely suppressed eroticism of *King Kong*, the installation brought to mind the surreal, ironic illustrations of *Monty Python and his Flying Circus*. Roet seems unafraid of controversy and her art engenders debate. Her White Ape sculptures evoke images of the busts of Roman Emperors; dignified, majestic, preserved forever in proud splendor. She worked from the death mask of a chimpanzee from Antwerp Zoo. "I was inspired by a story from the Bronx Zoo. At the turn of the century they captured and exhibited a pygmy African, filed his teeth and put him in the cage next to the orangutans," she says. "Comparisons can be drawn with the way we treated the aboriginals in this country. The White Ape has come full circle." It has turned history on its head.

In a Berlin market, Roet unearthed a set of late 50s pornographic slides showing naked blondes cavorting with a man in a gorilla suit. Despite the obvious overtones of bestiality, the slides look strikingly innocent in the modern context. The statuesque women resemble hearty naturists rather than sleazy porn stars and Gorilla Man forms a comedic figure. Roet photographed chimpanzees looking up at and interacting against a backdrop of these slides. Further images swapped the blondes for Charlton Heston, using a still of *that* kiss from *Planet of the Apes* as the object of the chimpanzee's interest. *The Beauty and the Beast*

series plays with issues of voyeurism, drawing parallels between instinctive man and the ape. The images explore the primitive, basic sexual instinct which is common to man and animal, hence our use of the term “animal instincts” with reference to man’s untamed, base sexual desires. These themes are echoed in *That’s Entertainment!*, a video installation juxtaposing images of the apes imprisoned behind glass in Antwerp Zoo with footage of prostitutes in Brussels red light district. “I lived around the corner [from the red light district] and would often drive past and witness the voyeuristic attitude prevalent there. It’s not just people going to visit prostitutes, there’s a lot of window shopping,” says Roet. “There’s tragedy beneath the glitz. The women look surreally beautiful in the neon lights but in the end most of them are Eastern Block refugees desperately trying to make another life.” The work expands on a recurrent theme of Roet’s: who is looking at who? The ape has taken on the human role, up-turning accepted norms and ushering in acknowledgement of the chaos that already exists within human society. “You’re watching them as they watch you,” Roet explains. “It’s interesting, that gulf between humans cooing over how cute an animal in captivity is, when in reality you’ve got this caged beast that would rip your finger off if you poked it in through the wire.”

Much of Roet’s art has a surreal edge. In particular, some of her photographic works exhibit disturbing, even absurd, qualities. On the surface, the *Ape and the Bunnyman* series is humorous but it has sinister undertones. Roet made preliminary photographic studies during her artist’s residency at Atlanta Zoo, Georgia, USA. She was allowed to interact with chimpanzees involved in a language experiment. “The chimps have been taught over 250 words through symbols, words like “love” and “hate”, the equivalent vocabulary of a three year old child. The first time I went there, I talked with a chimp through a computer in the language laboratory,” recalls Roet, who describes the experience as “like tripping”. Subsequent visits to the centre revealed a catalogue of the bizarre. Not only did the apes converse with the scientists, but the scientists dressed up in bunny suits for the occasion. If talking with the animals in a modern take on the Dr. Dolittle story seems quixotic, that the scientists interacted with the chimpanzees dressed in cartoon rabbit outfits transcends the absurd. It begs the question: are the scientists themselves not the ridiculous figures in this scenario? The scientists were looking for a symbolic figure to stimulate the apes; yet why choose the Bunnyman? In Freudian symbology, the rabbit is equated with mildness and fantasy. “It’s probably something that deep down attracts the chimps in the same way it attracts humans,” suggests Roet, who is nevertheless unclear as to exactly why the Bunnyman made it over, say, Catman or Dogface. During the course of the experiment the Bunnyman, in the eyes of the chimps, became a Santa Claus figure. The apes loved the Bunnyman, the amusingly long-eared bringer of treats and rewards.

Roet’s photographs show the scientific circus in action. One photograph presents us with an unutterably peculiar image of an ape and the Bunnyman dancing together. Another shows the dark shadow of the Bunnyman looming up behind an oblivious chimp. Back in Brussels, preparing for her *Ape and the Bunnyman* exhibition, Roet received a telephone call from the Atlanta Zoo. “They told me I couldn’t use my original photos because Warner Bros. had copywrote the Bunnyman image!” she recalls. Undaunted, she re-enacted the Atlanta scenes in Antwerp Zoo, dressing her then boyfriend up as the Bunnyman. This twist adds to the depth and theatricality of the series, further blurring the boundaries between fact and fantasy.

Through the fantasy of *Ape and the Bunnyman*, the shock voyeurism of *That’s Entertainment!* and the organic reality of her *Primates* charcoal studies, Roet remains consistent in her devotion to her muse, the ape. It’s instinctive.

**Clare Barker, Oyster Magazine, 3D World Publishing, June issue, p68-71, 2001.**