

The Simian Connection

'Get your stinkin' paws off me, you damned dirty ape!' Charlton Heston's first snarled words to the simian warriors of *Planet of the Apes* have a force far greater than his struggling physique. With these words Heston's character, Taylor, becomes 'ape' – a sentient, thinking, entity. An animal ... with language. Taylor remains a freak, however. He is hairless, a throwback, that most wretched of species worth only hunting down, caging and experimenting on. A human. As the cultural critic McKenzie Wark has noted:

Animals used to be all around us. There was always a big bad wolf in the woods. Their difference from us, and their indifference to us, made us what we are: human. The boundary between us and them was easy to name – easy for us at least, because it was language. Language made it possible for us humans to invoke worlds and imagine ourselves creating them. It made us something more than animal.¹

Filed in 1968, *Planet of the Apes* preceded the digital age. Yet despite the absence of the twenty-first century's startling special effects, what seduced the audience were the humanised antics and activities of the simian characters in the film. The humanisation of animals has a history almost as long as human culture in all of its myriad forms, from the Greek Minotaur to Walt Disney's trousered mouse. However, Lisa Roet is having none of it. The Australian-born, Brussels-based artist has been working with primates since 1992. What began as an aesthetic fascination has evolved into an almost scientific mission. She has stayed at the cutting-edge Language Research Centre at Georgia University in Atlanta, travelled with experts in the jungles of Malaysia, and worked with zoos in Brussels, London, Sydney and Berlin. Her work has crossed into the realms of forensics, DNA structuring and digital manipulation.

With a major survey show in Brussels in 2000, a successful exhibition in Sydney, inclusion in the 2000 Primavera exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, and a much-hyped New York show in December 2000, Roet's explorations of the human-simian interface are finding an audience that is attracted to work which appeals to both the eye and the mind, and which continues to be simultaneously devilishly fun and poignant.

The ape-human connection is obviously a fertile one. In light of the success of recent works in the firecracker-hot field of comparative ethology, delving into the minds and emotional lives of animals, there is much to say about the permeable membrane between human and non-human in postmodern culture. Monkeys and apes have also played an intriguing, little-examined role in the emergence of technological modernity, from NASA's space monkeys to experiments on ape behaviour and intelligence. In the lab, and in the wild, the work of Diane Fossey, Jane Goodall and others has informed (and infected) our ideas about both human and artificial intelligence.

Despite her visits to both the lab and the wild, Roet is interested in metropolitan zoos where apes are held 'captive'. In comparing these structures, which can be read as either concentration camp prisons or educational entertainment complexes, she has come to some intriguing conclusions. 'Zoos tend to reflect the environment which holds them', says Roet, who spent considerable time working in the East Berlin Zoo before the fall of the Berlin Wall and travelled extensively through the Eastern Bloc.

Socialist zoos contain their animals in a different way and countries with a history of human rights abuse don't tend to have very healthy environments for the animals. You can even detect fascistic tendencies. It's very interesting when you view zoos as societies. Apes often come out the worst of all animals due to the fear factor of their genetic similarity to humans. A horse will often get a better environment than an ape. I first saw this in the East Berlin Zoo where the gorillas had two-by-two metre cages, whereas the zebras, camels and buffalos had huge parks to roam in.

More recently, Roet has travelled to Borneo on the Brunei border on the way to Sabah and Kinabalu. She says via email:

I just got back from the jungle where I went to visit a French science team working with wild orang-utans. All was fine until I showed them my catalogues and then they basically ignored me. It is such a protective and competitive world ... exhausting. They weren't sure on my take and I have to say seeing all the WWF [World Wildlife Fund] people and scientists following these wild animals around is sort of like a semi-zoo anyway. To me the only real issue to be dealt with to ensure the survival of the orang-utans is logging and environmental conservation, and not a pack of scientists getting personal glory for their harassment.

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After travelling down a river for three days, Roet walked through the forest with an old villager: 'Straight away a wild orang-utan ran right in front of us. A large male, it was amazing. I have been gathering tales and myths told by the Indigenous tribes in order to unravel a series of works. The Dayaks believe the orang-utan is man's descendant.'

Roet's work consists of both large-format, digitally montaged photographs and digitised videos, alongside more traditional charcoal drawings of ape digits which form the starting point for her classically majestic sculptures in bronze. There is a distinct and unusual conflict in this; the clash between these means of expression works in parallel with the clash between human and animal that Roet explores in her work. A further schism is the artist's revelation of the contrast between the scientific approach to the study of simian life and culture, and the approach that can be taken by art. As Roet explains: 'Apes are our closest ancestors and therefore allow us to have an objective view of ourselves ... Since the theory of evolution this has threatened the basic core of humanity which until that time was religion. It created great controversy. It is the moment where science starts to rock the boat.'

Roet's survey show in Brussels, 'Re-search', which was part of a larger 'Primates' project, included digitally manipulated images in which chimpanzees apparently contemplate erotic pictures hanging in their cages. The pictures, which Roet found in a flea-market, show two naked women cavorting with what appears to be an ape, but which is quite clearly a man wearing an ape costume. The chimpanzees respond in a hilarious manner or, as Edward Colless describes in the catalogue text: 'Stimulated by this forbidden vision of bestial intercourse, the ape has spread its own legs and is fingering itself; so absorbed in auto-erotic play it doesn't know it has been caught in the act. That it has become the player in a pornographic scene for us. Simian pornography: degrading, hilarious, lubricious. The stuff for other apes to get off on.'²

According to Roet, the strange connection between apes and eroticism, the idea of Beauty and the Beast, 'goes back to Darwinian versus Christian philosophy. The fear for the primitive that turns out to be our direct ancestor is also very Freudian. I have some great images of nineteenth-century French sculpture showing a woman being ravaged sexually by a gorilla as a reaction to Darwin's theory of evolution. But it also works in another way. When I was in Berlin I regularly saw a visitor who would always go very close to the glass of the ape house and then would show them some kind of erotic picture. The apes would always come towards him, but not, of course, to have a look at this picture. But in his mind they would.'

In the human-ape relationship there appears to be an urge to make simians less dangerous, less primitive, by letting them speak. This undercurrent of language pins the concept of 'civilisation' in Planet of the Apes where, apart from make-up and a bow-legged gait, the simians exist in a crude village environment reminiscent of early western civilisation, where both the spoken and the written word are held sacred. However, while they are totally humanised, they are never equal to man. In the scene where Dr Zira (Kim Hunter) is carefully kissed on the mouth by Charlton Heston, for instance, she clearly enjoys the sensation, but at the same time knows that it is not meant to be. It is this ambiguous relationship between human and ape – sameness yet difference – that is so compellingly explored in the work of Lisa Roet.

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Ashley Crawford, Art In Australia, Fine Arts Press, Vol 38 No. 4, p576-583, 2001,

CAPTIONS

LISA ROET, The kiss – three-part scene, 1996, computer-generated screenprints on hand-pigmented paper, 105 x 300 cm, photograph courtesy the artist.

LISA ROET, Untitled, 1998, 'Ape and the Bunnyman' series, cibachrome prints, 60 x 80 cm, photograph courtesy the artist. (Marian: Resting on their arms)

LISA ROET, Untitled, 1998, 'Ape and the Bunnyman' series, cibachrome prints, 75 x 120 cm, photograph courtesy the artist. (Marian: Three Jewish dudes)

LISA ROET, Untitled, 1998, 'Ape and the Bunnyman' series, cibachrome prints, 120 x 75 cm, photograph courtesy the artist. (Marian: Ape with shadow)

LISA ROET, Gorilla thumb, 1997, latex and resin, 120 x 300 cm, installation for 'Construction in Process VI –The Bridge', 1998, Melbourne, photograph courtesy the artist.