

The Simian Line

'No matter how guarded we may be against anthropomorphising their behaviour, we regularly suspect that when apes act out their instinctual urges it is as a parody, if not travesty, of our own censored social conduct... not only do they inversely reflect us naked – beneath our bare skin, the monkey's fur – but they also seem to taunt us with their portrayal of the human, inside out.'¹

Over the past twelve years, Lisa Roet has investigated with characteristic verve and candor the complex interface between humans and our simian relatives. Drawing inspiration from extensive residencies abroad at major international zoos, first-hand observation at ape research centres, and field study of apes living in the forests of Borneo, the resultant body of work entitled *Pri-Mates* thus challenges some of the great paradigms and theories relating to evolution and creationism, language and communication, science and art.

Certainly the ape-human connection is a contentious premise in postmodern culture. One need only consider recent explorations in the sphere of comparative ethnology which suggest a permeable membrane between human and non-human, or the intriguing, albeit little-examined role of apes in the emergence of technical modernity, from NASA's space monkeys to experiments informing ideas about both human and artificial intelligence. Yet while Roet traverses such territory, she deliberately avoids any heavy-handed didacticism, navigating, rather, this potentially political minefield with refreshing insight and humour. As the artist herself notes, 'Of course, I have my own personal views on the political aspects of the ape issue, but I prefer to keep them separate. Art is not meant to carry a slogan beneath it.'

With the ape as her muse, Roet encourages us to reflect upon prevailing attitudes towards these relatives with whom we share 98% of our DNA - the lingering anxiety with our evolutionary past; our use of apes for scientific and entertainment purposes; the way in which we project onto apes our own fantasies and culture, while at the same time assuming that they are somehow 'inferior.'² Indeed, for all modernity's attempt at a superior rationality and modern art's resolute denial of animals and nature, *Pri-Mates* powerfully highlights how inextricably linked humans and simians are amid the messy uncertainty of biology, nature and culture.

Fundamental to such thesis is the motif of the ape finger and hand which reappears in various formats and media throughout Roet's practice. A direct reference to the scientific theory that the origins of humanity and civilisation developed from the evolution of the primate hand and opposable thumb, the image is a disturbing one - embodying the point at which mankind is both aligned to, and alienated from, the animal kingdom. Therein lies our kinship and uneasy sense of difference. Ambiguous, abstracted, the hands confound our sense of identity - beyond the stereotype embedded in the word 'animal', we realise the fingerprints could be those of any person, the finger that of human or ape. As Roet observes of these 'faceless portraits', creased and wrinkled 'like the calloused hands of a labourer': '...history is in that skin, the wrinkles give individual character to the hand the same way the lines on our faces do.'

With her subject predicated in the timeless debate on evolutionary theory, it is appropriate that Roet here embraces classical bronze as her preferred means of expression - the medium conferring a certain universality that ensures her art will endure the distance of time, both aesthetically and conceptually. This distinct contrast with her use of contemporary, cutting-edge media elsewhere including video installation and computer montage is echoed moreover in the artist's revelation of the dichotomy between the approaches offered by science and art towards the study of simian life. Nowhere perhaps is reconciliation of this dual perspective more apparent than in the lifesize primate busts which - derived from a death mask obtained from one of her favourite chimpanzees at the Antwerp Zoo - simultaneously evoke the emotional realism of antique Roman sculpture.

Not surprisingly, Roet's investigations into the psychology and soul of simian-human relations have attracted an impressive number of local and international accolades, including the prestigious National Gallery of Australia and Macquarie Bank 'National Sculpture Prize' 2003 and most recently, the McClelland Gallery Sculpture Prize 2005. Suffused with her peculiar mix of conceptualism and visual poetics, indeed the sculptural pieces comprising the *Pri-Mate* series are arguably among the artist's most compelling with their dark looming force, their inescapable sense of mystery and confrontation. As isolated body parts, they are suggestive of dissection and fragmentation - at once unsettling and visually thrilling. Juxtaposed together, meanwhile, the pieces offer an elusive, truncated language of ciphers and codes with which one may unravel the powerful social and visual heritage that humans and apes share.

Footnotes

- 1. Colless, E., 'Animal Husbandry', Re-Search catalogue, Dienst Voor Cultuur, Brugge, Belgium, 2000.**
- 2. Volk, G., Pri-Mates catalogue, Australia Council Visual Arts Development Fund, 1997.**