

## **With a Focus on Apes**

Since the early 1990's, the Australian artist Lisa Roet has been studying the relationship between humans and the great apes in order to depict in different ways how that relationship might express itself. She has watched apes in the wild as well as in captivity and transformed her impressions into a number of projects focusing on the often complex and contradictory relation of man to his closest relatives.

Despite the fact that Roet does not deliver any readymade interpretations of her art, there is no mistaking her great empathy for the apes and her criticism against the often disrespectful attitude of humans toward them. The projects are strongly communicative, and as a watcher you are led back and forth between different positions from which man's attitude to apes can be considered.

At her visits to zoos in order to contemplate attitudes towards the various animals, Roet was struck by the conditions in the former Eastern Bloc (as in countries with no tradition of respecting human rights): they seem to treat especially apes particularly badly.

Socialist zoos contain their animals in a different way, and countries with a 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.

So, when a zoo is regarded as a social structure of its own, Roet observes that this structure often reflects the kind of society where the zoo is situated: People who are themselves living under oppression intuitively seem to oppress others, and as for animals in a zoo, many choose to oppress above all those who most resemble ourselves, i. e. the apes.

But Roet has also watched how visitors relate to the animals in the zoo, and she found that some people "adopt" an animal, visiting it regularly. Roet especially noticed a man who routinely would seek out a chimpanzee to secretly show it pornographic pictures. The ape seems in this case to have been made a substitute for the man's missing a human with whom to share his inclination. Afterwards, in the project *Beauty & the Beast*, Roet depicts a chimpanzee in front of a photograph of two naked women engaged in sexual activities with a man in a gorilla costume. Is that, perhaps, how the man would like to see himself?

At a language research institute in Atlanta, USA, it was discovered that communication with the apes improved significantly when the scientists dressed up in rabbit costumes. Why is that? According to Freudian symbolism, the rabbit represents gentleness and imagination, and when it turned out that the rabbit-human also treated the apes to chocolate and Coke, the explanation seems quite simple: Who, in the ape's situation, would not let himself be disarmed by a gentle fantasy figure who suddenly appears out of the shadows of the cage bringing large quantities of candy and soft drink?

In *Ape and the Bunnyman*, however, Roet relates how the situation in the research center goes from harmless fantasy to nightmarish experience. The rabbit-human seems friendly, but when the ape tires, the creature refuses to leave him alone. The rabbit-human is all too eager to be the ape's best friend and clings to it, demands attention, wants to dance, cheer and be merry, eat chocolate and drink Coke!

The rabbit-human towers like a dark shadow-figure on the wall behind the ape who turns away. But the ape cannot escape, he can only turn his back on the rabbit-human and hide his head beneath his arms. The situation created by the scientists has, in Roet's depiction, developed into the bizarre, and one might ask if this type of research does not really say more about humans than about apes.

When it becomes known that Roet intends to use photographs of the rabbit-human for an exhibition, she finds that the film company Warner Bros considers itself as holding the copyright of the rabbit costume, which represented Bugs Bunny, and the company would not permit the pictures to be used.

Roet has taken part in excursions to meet apes in the wild. On those occasions she also met aborigines of Borneo and was told about their mythology surrounding orangutans. Contrary to Darwin's thesis, they believe that man has not developed from the orangutan but the orangutan from man, and that the ape therefore is one rung above man on the evolutionary ladder!

The project *The Shadow* (2001) is founded on data collected by Roet during her field studies. Based on the Dayak people's view on orangutans, but also against the background that orangutans are an acutely

endangered species, Roet depicts them as nearly mythical creatures. The pictures form into a kind of “future memories” showing a creature, by then extinct, described by many as greater than man himself, a creature called Orang Utan (Man of the Forest).

The disappearance of the apes is a recurring theme in Roet's art and can be explained by their precarious situation. From a river (outside Melbourne) a sculpted finger is seen breaking the surface. It is the finger of an ape, and it may be the last we see of the reaching hand of an ape sinking below the surface, vanishing before our eyes. As watchers, we can consider whether there was anything we could have done to save the apes from extinction.

In spite of all the obvious similarities between man and the other great apes, humans act in a way that will hardly allow apes to live on in their natural habitats. They are all endangered, mostly due to man's exploitation of their habitats for his own gain. Along with deforestation new roads are built through earlier untouched regions, making these available for even harsher exploitation, extended hunting and trading with apes.

Lisa Roet shows how difficult we humans find it to deal with the question how we are to relate to the other great apes, to those who are not humans but still very like us. Why do we not succeed, in spite of all the similarities, to create a mutual relationship based on respect and appreciation? Roet stretches her hands both ways, communicating the problems and trying to bridge the sometimes abysmal chasm. On the one hand she conveys a sense of likeness and affinity, on the other she is painfully aware that man, through his dominant attitude, is destroying the possibility of building an equal relationship over species borders.

With the aid of police equipment, in the project Finger Prints, Roet has taken finger prints from some apes she has met. The prints, and the fact that policemen have helped producing them, suggest that a crime has been committed. But despite the impossibility of defining the crime of the apes, they are still condemned to a life controlled by man, within tourism and entertainment, trade, zoos or research.

In the project Chimponauts, Roet has dressed nine chimpanzees in space suits. Are they leaving us now? Will they return? Roet does not give an answer, but she knows the future looks grim. One of the apes raises his hand above his head and waves good bye to us . . .

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