

Animal Husbandry

Aping. It seems to be the essence of the animal. To copy its human relatives, but to do so mindlessly or at least with such childlike simplicity that the performance makes human conduct laughable. Whether in a zoo or in a research institute, the captive ape mirrors its captor as an entertainment and as sly defiance. The animal's affection is as semiotically treacherous as its anger is physically wild. Unlike a domestic pet that can be incorporated within the physical spaces and routines of human everyday life, the captive ape eludes incorporation because it threatens to supplant its keeper. Not to usurp its keeper's power by force, but to take the keeper's place by empty imitation. Animals have been used allegorically in fable, from Aesop to Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Disney's *Lion King*; but the ape can also appear in a particular, amoral sort of comedy. The eighteenth century pictorial genre known as *singerie*, for instance, in which monkeys played fashionable Parisian courtiers or Confucian sages, was a mode of decorative fantasy. An amusement indulging the wit exercised in Regency salons that regarded judgment and intelligence—moral as much as intellectual—as matters of finessing one's appearance. Some individual in an army of monkeys chained to typewriters may eventually and by accident produce a Shakespeare play: remote as it seems, there is the probability of a moment of consummate order within any chaotic system. Shakespeare can be judged the equivalent of a exceedingly rare monkey. Immersed in their hack work, the rest of them constitute a ludicrous behavioural model for the rest of humanity.

The apes that Lisa Roet has so attentively and affectionately visited and photographed don't stroll through aristocratic gardens or imperial palaces. Living under fluorescent lights in the sterile confines of zoological study, they are more like slavish word processors. Roet's apes inhabit a lunatic world, a fantasy of pseudo-spaces that mirror domesticated human territory. In a room that has the tiled and frictionless, libertine aura of a gymnasium change room or subway station, a large ape sits on a wooden bench and—with the expression of a psychotic derelict—grins salaciously at a photograph of two lovers which has been pasted onto the wall nearby. This photograph, resembling a poster in an adolescent's bedroom, is a monochrome photograph of a bare chested man with a rifle slung over his shoulder. This is a still from the 1967 science fiction classic, *Planet of the Apes*. Charlton Heston plays the sole surviving astronaut from an expedition out of earth, shot through interstellar space at near light speed inadvertently ending up stranded on the very planet the crew had left behind at the outset of their journey. Returning home to see it for the first time, Heston's astronaut is cast away in a post-apocalyptic reflection of his own era. On this future "monkey planet", the apes have evolved through the burnt out ruins of humanity to become the world's new masters. It may be new wine but it's in old skins. Jack-booted militarists and corrupt politicians stamping out free thought, along with bigoted theologians and blinkered scientists denying their species' past as much as any Creationist squaring off against Darwin. The apes are legatees of a human archaeological record their culture must deny and repress for its own safety: "beware man and shun him", the archaic ape Scriptures rightly warn, "for he is the harbinger of death".

That is the traumatic truth the astronaut ambassador delivers fatally to this plotless simian Eden—much like a rat bringing the plague or a conquistador carrying small pox. The astronaut is, in melodramatic terms, the dirty little secret that looms out of the ape past; in Freudian terms, he is the return of the repressed. In this photograph, he is embracing and tenderly kissing a monkey whose head tilts back slightly, letting the elegant sweep of her lush dark hair fall down onto the shoulders of the leather coat she has demurely buttoned up to her neck. Her lips are parting in the kiss, and her eyes close gently as she gives way to that familiar, erotic surge. The grinning ape on the bench clearly finds this image amusing, but also exciting. 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. And for humans, too, who might be drawn, like the ape on the bench, toward that dangerous edge of affection and libertinage.

Or, of course, so it seems. This nondescript corner of urban space is actually a cage in a Berlin zoo. The poster on the wall has been digitally inserted into the scene; so, in fact, the ape may not be grinning at all—let alone getting off. Roet's joke, in mock embarrassment of the animal, conforms to a common observation of captive apes' scandalously nonchalant mischief and lechery. 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. Their behaviour in other words seems directed at us, even when their backs are turned. 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. It is an accusation not of inner baseness and depravity, but of absurdity and lunacy. The indifference that most zoo-bound animals display toward their human audiences is deceptively mimed by apes. They are,

after all, maestros of simulation. No matter how cute or careless or perfunctory, an ape's behaviour in front of humans will hardly ever remain innocent. Inevitably, it rhetorically suggests the narrow but profound gap between the two species, and so the ape's behaviour will appear to be an enigmatic act of communication across the species divide. Like extraterrestrial aliens and anthropomorphic demons, apes treacherously offer the hazardous ecstasy of that special sort of close encounter with sentient otherness which promises a secular equivalent to spiritual fulfilment: the "contact" which is almost always as carnal as it is cerebral.

Roet's art is a fantasia upon this phantasmal, erotic climax of human evolution. Since 1996 she has produced monumental charcoal drawings of gnarled simian thumbs and index fingers. Individually isolated and distinctly profiled on their white backgrounds, the intricately hatched and contoured rendering of these monstrous digits corresponded to the look of fingerprints dusted at the scene of a crime, but magnified by suspicion or indictment. Forensic evidence that not only reveals identity but also culpability; that's to say, traces which communicate intent and sense. Translated into ceramic as well as resin sculptures and sitting on pedestals or even rising up out of a river like King Arthur's lady of the lake, these fingers lewdly flex, poke and jab with the phallic comedy and deformity of a bodybuilder's repertoire of poses. They bulge, swerve and sag through stages of automatic arousal and detumescence. But they also gesture at us—soliciting and rebuking and showing off. They are variously coy, triumphant, aggressive and obscene and also quite possibly meaningless. Their performance, then, is highly ambiguous. Is it idle play, habitual physical response, or an articulate utterance...a type of signing?

Roet creates her images in the indeterminate zone between the ape and its human audience, neither clearly on one side or the other. This is the place occupied by the comic Bunnyman figure in the cibachrome series, *Ape and Bunnyman*. A clown-like diminutive figure, dressed in a sagging and gaping Bugs Bunny party costume, dances for and cavorts with chimpanzees as if he was paid entertainment at a children's party or hen's night. Will he eventually strip for the chimp, or is the fun even more perverse? The Bunnyman is derived from Roet's two residencies throughout '97 and '98 at the Language Research Centre of Georgia University in Atlanta, USA. In the course of the Centre's experiments in cognitive communication with chimpanzees, the researchers used an intermediary figure of a keeper dressed in a bunny costume. The chimps, apparently, conversed with the researchers through the Bunnyman. Roet elaborates the black irony of this mediation in her restaging of the scenario with chimps from Antwerp zoo. The burlesque, cartoon Bunnyman is the chimps' fantasy playmate, lolling about on the floor of the cage or goofing off, trying almost too hard to be friends. Is this how the chimp sees its human interlocutors? Wannabe animals in drag? But this grotesque caricature is also reflected back onto the chimp. When one of Roet's favourites from Antwerp recently died, the keepers took a death mask of it. This provides the source for three bronze portrait busts—*Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil*—in which the chimp's facial features are re-animated, as if with the emotional realism of antique busts of Roman orators in mid-sentence. Consequently, these personalised portraits look like the rubbery manipulations of a prosthetic mask. If these expressions signify something—a thought, a pronouncement—then its meaning is ultimately elusive. Is this how zoologists see their chimp interlocutors?

The relation between human and animal in Roet's work thus can only be sustained in the arena of erotic fantasy, of one creature's fantasy of ... and fantastic desire for ...the other. This has become explicit in the recent set of cibachromes *Beauty and the Beast*, a work which takes its title not from fairytale (at least not directly) but from a 1960s set of softcore pornographic photos Roet found in a flea market. In these photos, two voluptuous naked women take on a gorilla and conquer the beast, tying him down and ravishing him much as Venus did to Mars. The beast is evidently a man in a stock gorilla suit, but the mock bestiality adds a masochistic piquancy to the erotic scenario. It is difficult to determine who is directing this fantasy, the women or the gorilla-suited man. It appears to be a mutually satisfying sport. And, adds Roet, the fantasy seems to be equally enjoyed by the curious and possibly masturbating apes gazing at these pornographic photos on the walls of their cages. But why on earth has an ape been presented with this pornography? Presumably, by some researcher testing the ape's response. The masturbating ape is Roet's invention. Like the ape sitting on a bench in the Berlin zoo, the scene is a digital creation. The researcher behind the scenes is a fantastic figure, a surrogate of the artist. Ultimately, then, it is the artist's fantasy and so it is the artist who is imitated by the figures of the Bunnyman and the gorilla-suited man. The artist assumes the fantastic role of intermediary between human and ape. She is the place in which these two species can meet and, as in *Planet of the Apes* or *Beauty and the Beast*, kiss and copulate and speak to each other: the mutual sexual fantasy of both ape and human.

Edward Colless, Re-Search Catalogue, Dienst Voor Cultuur, Brugge, Belgium, 2000.