

Burlesque Gestures

Lisa Roet arrived in Berlin in 1990. It wasn't the first time she had been there but this time she wanted to stay, even if it meant doing so illegally. She found a cheap, two room apartment in the east side of Kreuzberg. A forgotten corner. There was a soup kitchen nearby operated by nuns. It was used mostly by junkies. Russian soldiers loitered on the streets, waiting for their posting back home, with nothing to do but watch the Wall come down piece by piece.

When winter set in hard, and the temperature got down towards minus twenty, Lisa would crouch by the open oven in her studio and not move. "I didn't know anyone there at all," she recalls, "and at the start had only three words of German. A friend of a friend who lived in Berlin would ring me once a week to make sure I was all right." The apartment block was mainly occupied by heavy duty junkies, rake thin. And there were others, more menacing, who used to come and go across the snow and slush of the courtyard into the back of the building. Grey figures in black, stumbling and skidding on the white, below her window. She would watch them, like a voyeur. When summer came they would hang out in the yard, with their shirts stripped to show off their tattoos. Most had tears tattooed on their faces, one tear for each year in jail.

When the landlords spied her bringing a black acquaintance in one day, they threatened her with the immigration police. They figured she was illegal. She found another studio in an old, disused factory in Potsdamer Platz. The massive redevelopment hadn't started back then, and the area was a collapsing industrial zone. The factory had been squatted in by artists and film makers who had turned it into a commune. No showers, no hot water, no heating. It was tough and intense, but things improved for her. She made some friends there. She was working too, in a cafe some days from mid-afternoon to about one in the morning, and then she would go home and work in her studio until dawn. She worked at night, in the darkness. With that schedule, as winter closed in again, there were stretches when she wouldn't see daylight. It was what she wanted. "Everything was black, grey, white ... and cold. I loved it though," she says, "it was the happiest time of my life. I was anonymous."

Lisa had moved there in order to paint. After leaving Australia at the age of twenty-two, she had spent eight months in Italy, painting and exhibiting around Siena. Then, in Berlin, lack of money and the isolation did something to her work. The colour dimmed. The paint disappeared. She reduced her work to the tonal range of her milieu, drawing things she had sketched and studied or simply gazed at day after day in the cramped, ugly East Berlin Zoo. The animals there all had "hospitalismus", a kind of autistic withdrawal. The seals and monkeys would do endless figure eight movements around their pens. As if identifying with their imprisonment and dementia, Lisa herself would draw, endlessly through the night, the paths they took, looping the symbol for eternity back onto itself in a thickening dark tracery.

The elephants in the zoo were cramped in small cages, shackled, sadly rocking their huge heads and swaying their trunks to and fro in heavy, listless arcs. It was hypnotic. She was fascinated by that long, slack swinging thing that would occasionally and surprisingly sweep high in the air, twist around through the bars or pout at her, or that would sniff and gesture at other creatures. "Even caged like that," she observes, "an elephant managed to communicate with its trunk, using it the way we would our hand." The drawings she did back in her studio are not naturalistic studies of these trunks, but burlesques or grotesques of human limbs and organs. Noses, penises, fingers, arms, tongues.

They are drawn as if they are monstrously ambiguous appendages to some obscure, gigantic and dubious creature. Yet they are also autonomous figures, human in scale if not in appearance, solitary and isolated against bare backgrounds. They can droop or slump as if dejected. They prowl, coil, bulge, flinch or wince the way tentacles or feelers do, responding to some stimulus which isn't seen. They might appear to be dumb flesh, worm or grub-like, or even resemble plant roots blindly ploughing or groping through soil. But they are also congested, taut, aggressive, anxious, growing things. The elaborate creases in each trunk shoot beyond the contours like spiky hair, or get tangled in swirls as if the trunk is both thick matter and also a finely spun, ripe cocoon, swelling with some surge of new life.

Lisa worked in black and white, drawing obsessively with very hard, dense blocks of charcoal that gave sharp, clean lines but that required her drawing to be vigorous, forceful and rapid; a discharge of intense pressure for a few hours. Only floorboards offered enough support for the weight of the strokes, and only a certain kind of silk paper would hold up against the solid push of the block. In order to draw, she would have to kneel down or squat on the floor, and to get that pressure through her arm and hand she would work in close to the paper, at times breathing in the charcoal dust clouds. "My face would be only a few inches to maybe a foot away from the image," she explains, "that's probably why there's so much detail. I block

in broad areas first; that's a general sense of life. But I won't get up and step back and look at it. I need to stay in close, never to break the intimacy. The detail is my own personality."

She recalls that lots of lonely people went to the zoo in Berlin. Bag ladies, especially. They would pick certain apes and elephants and "adopt" them, visiting them regularly as if they were friends. "I remember one bag lady who regularly came to see an elephant, and talked to it as if it were her son." Sometimes the opposite happened. Lisa went to the zoo four times a week over a year and half. After a while, one elephant began to recognise her and would greet her when she walked up to its cage. "It lifted its trunk, puckering the end of it at me. The keeper said it did this only for me," and Lisa lifts up her right hand up in front of her face, palm outward with fingers spread, then softly closes her hand shut. You can tell that, even five years later, it's a special, sentimental gesture for her. It looks like a wink more than a wave, like a cute hide 'n' seek game one might play with a baby, switching attention back and forth from hand to face.

The elephant that "adopted" Lisa was stirred by the sight of her. It raised its trunk up to its and to her face, and "puckered" at her. Its absurd erection became a outrageous kiss, represented by a clenched hand. This gesture repeatedly appears throughout her work in various guises as its ambiguity is explored: innocently playful, suggestively erotic, plaintive, aggressive, anguished. It was a gesture, too, that the artist was seeing in another guise repeatedly around her, in Soviet monumental sculpture of heroic workers striding towards the future with their fists thrust in the air, clenched. That phallic sign of workers' solidarity which had universal usage throughout the USSR – and Lisa travelled widely through the crumbling and dangerous parts of the Soviet Union in the early '90s – was fast becoming a grim emblem of subjugation and of a regrettable old world order. The elephant trunks that she was drawing might, then, also be seen as fantasias on this declining giant's amputated virility.

In 1996, after a couple of years back in Australia, Lisa returned to Berlin and Potsdamer Platz. This time she went to the West Berlin Zoo to look at the apes. Their hands fascinated her: creased and wrinkled skin, but stiff, "like the weathered, callused hands of a labourer" and like a creature that is very old. "History is in that skin, those wrinkles give individual character to the hand the way the lines on our faces do." When she began drawing, however, she found herself reducing the subject to little more than a finger. These fingers grotesquely and comically flex, poke and thrust into space in a similar way to the trunks. The cumulative and intense linear detail of the drawings – the thumbprint, as she admits, of this artist's personality – records the mutating objects' arousal, tightening, sagging and swaying as they shift through physical associations with vegetable, animal and human form. Their pseudo-muscular antics, which contract into deformity, became so substantial to the artist that she produced a suite of ceramic sculptures based on them, which effortlessly merge lumpy excremental play with mutilated phallic arousal, identifying ripeness with decay and potency with waste.

The ape's fingers are primitive and archaic, like the outmoded fist of the proletarian worker hero who is now, after the fall of communism, an aberrant offshoot of human evolution. Her starkly outlined, isolated figures inhabit the sorts of desolate places she was lured toward in Berlin, as the Wall came down: the snow covered courtyard, the dead zone around the soup kitchen, the bleak cages of the two zoos. But their isolation gives them a neurotic energy. Like the trunks, the fingers perform for us in amusingly exaggerated or parodic versions of bizarre sexual vigour and triumphant human labour, while they also carry the poignant impression of an animal's instinctual and self-absorbed play. Their behaviour indexes – as if responding to – the forceful grasp and stroke of the artist's own hand. As her hand clutches at the charcoal and scratches or rubs the paper, it deposits that intricate detail in which she recognises her own personality and identity.

The bestial image is destined to become this cryptic, all too human self-portrait; but this can only happen by severing the body parts (fingers, trunks and any of their analogous organs) free from the rest of the figure, an action made conspicuous in her ceramic modelling. This is a consistent strategy of disfigurement which makes the image anonymous and repetitive, and yet at the same time impels the gestural drawing or modelling into an intensity of detailing that personalises the image. "In one way or another," she says, "I have been doing that shape since I began art school. I work on the image by cutting things off. "

Lisa remembers beginning art school with a showdown in her drawing class, appalling at the time but which she now regards as comical. She was about sixteen and encountered her first male model in a life class. "I couldn't look at the penis," she says, "not that I was innocent. I had a boyfriend and had no problem with his nakedness. But this was an anonymous model. I looked at him as a general figure but I couldn't get down to details." She scribbled what she imagined the model's penis would look like, and got it wrong. It was out of proportion. The fifty year old male art teacher held her drawing up in front of the class and

ridiculed her publicly: "Lisa won't draw the penis!" he shouted. Everyone was laughing at her. She felt alone, isolated. "Then he grabbed me by the head," she recalls, "and pushed me up to the model, so that my face was a few inches to a foot away from the groin and ordered, 'Look at it and draw it!'"

For Lisa, her art begins when she overcomes the generalisation of a figure and gets down to details. The details of the image were once her blind spot. To see and transcribe them, she submits repeatedly to that phallic aggression which forced her to look closely at its own mutable form, the penis. She imitates this masochism in her working method, pushing her own face close to the material surface of the image, the same distance from the paper as it was from the life model's groin. In a sense, then, she has been drawing that life model's penis, again and again through all these drawings, but in an intentionally absurd, overstated and fantastic way. It endlessly changes its shape, substance and meaning as it responds, like the elephant's trunk, to her. It becomes a caricature of her identity as an artist, manifested in the imperative that she "look at it and draw it". When the deranged bag lady in the East Berlin zoo looked at the elephants she mistook one of them for her phantom son. Lisa Roet makes no mistake when she looks. This mutating creature that she encounters up close on the floor of her studio, that appears under her clenched hand, is her very real, demon lover.

Edward Colless, World Art, Fine Arts Press, May issue, p54-56, 1997.