

Looking back at ourselves

The ape's hands, or the mirror we see in an animal's eyes, are strange and troubling. For all of modernity's attempt at a superior rationality and modern art's resolute denial of animals and nature humans and non-human animals are tied together in the messy uncertainty of biology, nature and the environment. This talk looks at the ways in which Lisa Roet, and other artists, are exploring this territory. For much of the twentieth century animals were resolutely ignored by modern and contemporary artists. Occasionally they would surface, as symbols of the pre-modern or unbridled nature, by artists such as Picasso with his bulls, where they appeared as the obverse of modernist rationality, but almost any artist that was attempting to work at the forefront of the visual arts spurned any reference to them. They appeared irretrievably contaminated with romanticism and sentiment, in the same way that in the sciences they could exist as experimental subjects but never as thinking, feeling beings. Animals, therefore, or more correctly any identification or a affiliation with them as beings that we shared a world or real consciousness with, belonged in the past.

Animals might exist in or around our everyday lives, as the meat on our dinner tables, increasingly the product of a carno-industrial complex which produced meat seemingly without reference to any living creature think of battery hens or cattle in feedlots or pigs that spent their entire existence indoors in giant industrial piggeries or as living creatures, as domestic pets, much loved or pampered adjuncts in our households. As pets one could have a secret relationship with an animal an artist or scientist could touch and be touched, both in the warmth of direct contact and in the speculative exchange of the gaze with this close but unknowable creature. A dog could be, in effect, a family member, integrated into one's daily life. As I looked into the eyes of a my family dog, who (and not which) died sixteen months ago, I saw something I could never really grasp but could speculate about what did she see in my eyes, what capacity, if any, did she have to think this thought, what was her experience of our relationship? Our dog, like countless other dogs and cats, was loved, and while frequently the butt of family stories and jokes we believed, in our heart of hearts, that she in some doggy way understood our affection and reciprocated. While she was never, could never be, a person she was a living and dreaming presence.

The conundrum of course is that to think of animals in this way, as living, embodied creatures with their own (animal) consciousness both exposes one to charges of sentimentality and romanticism, and that as humans we have built our whole system of modern thought and consciousness on our uniqueness, our utter and inconvertible difference from animals (or other non-human animals). I think, therefore I am animals simply are, without thought.

My fondly remembered family dog, while she was instrumental in some of my thinking here, is not at the focus of these remarks my goal is not to legitimise sentiment and I am not going to attempt to develop a more rigorous map of our relationships with family pets. Rather she exists here as a reminder that even now there are (some) animals with which many people have ongoing relationships and that at this emotional level there is still considerable interest in what animals are, what they (might) think and (might) feel.

The question of the animal, in art, as I am pointing to it here, and in this exhibition, is a dual one where can non-human animals, and the things they represent or suggest, exist in contemporary art, and what, if any, are the implications for art as animals creep into visibility; and what is or can be the place of the animal more broadly in our thought and mental as well as physical universe?

It is clear to me, as I look both at Lisa Roet's work in this exhibition, and more widely at a range of contemporary artists, that animals now do appear in current art albeit they are now, as labelled by one author, postmodern animals. They are, on the whole, not the symbolic or romantic animal of the nineteenth century, something which had a clear meaning, that existed as a precise and well understood reference point (to everything from the spirit, to country life), but creatures of irony, or ambiguity or which have forcibly asserted their presence.¹ They are, in a sense, not just animals but markers of something other than human and hence a place in which it becomes possible to look back at the human, at ourselves.

To turn to this exhibition, and the work of Lisa Roet. We are surrounded here by apes, in detail (of hands and feet in the huge drawings), in three dimensions (cast in bronze busts, and presented not unlike any human portrait bust such as the Jacob Epstein portrait of Oriel Ross which was shown here recently), in photographs and video, and alongside other imagined and historical creatures. Lisa has a long standing interest in apes, from childhood initially but more particularly out of periods spent observing them, and the ways and places in which we, humans, keep and interact with them. There is, as with any artist, a biographical element (beyond childhood) which has influenced her work and thought she has spoken of living in Berlin in the early 1990s and spending time in the Zoo there watching the apes, watching their regular visitors, and keeping warm when as a young and impoverished artist winter was hard. She has spent periods observing in a language centre in Atlanta, in the US, where scientists were working with

chimpanzees and developing ways of communicating with them (using a board with a set of icons they could use as words or symbols). Lisa has also spent time in a forest research station in Borneo, a base for research on orang-utans (literally, men of the forest), where again both apes and the humans researching them were targets for her observations. Like most good or important art, though, it is important not to reduce this work to just or largely the artist's biography, Lisa's own curious or unique fascination.

Apes, of course, have also figured largely in the popular imagination since Darwin, and indeed Freud. Darwin asserted that apes are our relatives not just manlike, as had long been acknowledged and added a scientific, evolutionary argument supporting this assertion. Apes were not just similar beings, with opposable thumbs, hairless palms, etc., but cousins to the point where now we are told that 98.5% of our DNA is the same as a chimpanzee's. On one hand the theory of evolution, as it applies to the great apes and humans, has encouraged or facilitated eugenics, racial hatred, and particularly in the US arguments about miscegenation, or the mixing of the races. (Even now it is very easy to find material on the Internet which asserts the danger to the 'Aryan' races of mixing with lesser ones, which are portrayed as more directly related to apes.) On another we get films like *King Kong* (1932), or the continuing series of *Tarzan* films, or *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and its various sequels and remakes (2001). The original *King Kong* had things both ways. The sub-text of race in the US was very clear a powerful, black male lusts after and kidnaps a helpless blonde, only to be defeated by the white man's might (and military machine) but then, too, this animal (or Hollywood representation of one) cares for Fay Wray, protects her against all adversaries, and gazes longingly into her eyes before gently depositing her at the top of the Empire State Building and falling to his death. In *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984) the key incident that drives Lord Greystoke back to the jungle, and away from the civilized London, starts when he discovers a dismembered gorilla on a dissection table in the anatomy lab of the Natural History Museum it is man's inhumanity to ape to this proto-man which compels him to return the relatively pristine state of nature. Many of these films have replicated this dichotomy, between civilization and nature although with varying perspectives on which one it is that is truly raw in tooth and claw. In literature, too, apes appear frequently throughout the twentieth century. *Tarzan*, of course, is the creation of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the fantastic ape figure, at once savage and sentient, continues in popular fiction, as in film, through to the present. There has been, however, more serious fiction where the ape as protagonist, partner, or expositor is central. In Franz Kafka's *A Report to the Academy* (1917) through to Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* (1992), Peter Hoeg's *The Woman and the Ape* (1996), Will Self's *Great Apes* (1997), or Peter Goldsworthy's *Wish: A Biologically Engineered Love Story* (1995), the ape, as a non-human but intelligent other. In Hoeg's *Woman and the Ape* and Goldsworthy's *Wish* the relationship that develops between the two main characters, a human and an ape, becomes a love story, which extends into a physical and erotic relationship.

Sex with animals, or the possibility of some form of erotic relationship between animals and humans (or gods) is a long standing theme in art and literature. From the Greek story of Leda and the Swan (taken up by Nolan) through to stories of the virgin and the unicorn, or *Beauty and the Beast*, or indeed pulp fiction stories of blondes abducted and raped by apes (of which *King Kong* is a somewhat sanitised variation) the animal as an erotic other appears frequently. Where *Woman and the Ape* and *Wish* differ (or perhaps update the story) is that both central characters, ape and human, are treated as rational, thinking creatures, with their sexual relationship a natural consequence of the love that grows between them. In both cases there are particular and unique factors in this, however, and the world looks on with horror. In a series of photographs from 1996 and 1999, which were not available for this exhibition, Lisa Roet took up some of this history and ambivalent but sexualised stories of relationships with apes. The key work in these photos is an image drawn from *Planet of the Apes* in which Charlton Heston bends down to kiss the female chimpanzee main character as they part at the end of the film a point at which each acknowledges, really for the first time, that the other is a thinking, rational and feeling creature. Roet took this image and digitally inserted it into a chimpanzee enclosure in the Berlin Zoo, so that the apes there have it as a pinned up poster. Later she did a similar series of photographs using images from a set of soft porn slides she had found in a flea market in Antwerp, of two naked women romping with a character dressed in a gorilla suit.

That the (real) apes depicted in her composite images did not see the images Roet inserted into her collage is irrelevant. These are not pictures of an ape's experience, or which are about offering a real observation of an ape looking at a human and ape together, but images for the human audience of this artwork. They, like much of Roet's work in fact, are a play with our human sense of identity, which develop, or refer to, our myths or stories of the animal other, and allow us to imagine ourselves within them. They are, indeed, ironic and ambiguous.

The series of photographs which do appear here, the *Ape and the Bunnyman* series (1998) are also digital composites. The human dressed in the bunny suit is an addition to, or insertion into, the original images

(although the Hassidim are not). On a prosaic level the bunnyman here derives from Roet's experience at the Atlanta language labs, where a person dressed in such a suit was used in the labs as an intermediary in the training sessions, to provide rewards to the animals, and seemed to be a figure of fun or humour for them.

In 1968 his novel of the same name, science fiction Philip K Dick asked "Do androids dream of electric sheep?". That novel went on to become the basis for Ridley Scott's 1982 film, Blade Runner, in which the bounds of human identity, and the distance between the real and artificial, are central themes. The question that Roet seems to pose is whether these apes dream of floppy bunnyman or is it us that dream of ourselves as these half-human creatures able to commune with the animals and escape the bounds of human culture?

The bunnyman here is a human who has put on a fur suit and concealed raw skin, and perhaps gained liberation with that, or at least the possibility of another way of thinking and acting. The bunnyman is at once Bugs Bunny, an anarchist, uncontrollable, immortal jester (who the rational coyote can never trap or destroy), or the White Rabbit, who leads and lures Alice through wonderland, and a shamanistic figure, gaining, perhaps, access to the non-human knowledge through becoming animal. He is a hybrid creature although this form of hybridity is distinctly postmodern, not the result of genetic cross pollination (or miscegenation and able to play in both the dreams of apes and men.

Roet's drawings may seem to lie somewhere entirely different, to be simply the result of close, detailed observation, free from all knowing reference to postmodern irony or hybridity. There is another reading, however, which has been suggested to me through the work of Steve Baker, an academic who has done more writing in this area than anyone else. This reading develops out of his work on Jacques Derrida, who in turn wrote on Martin Heidegger, in a debate on hands, as something distinctly human, something that allows both giving and taking and hence a crucial mediator in interpersonal relationships as contrasted with an animal's paws or claws, which exist simply as tools, to grasp or grab. In a sense hands, in this context, exist as indicators of the relationships between self and other, where as paws, or not-hands, are simply about and of the self.

Applying this to Roet the question becomes do apes have hands and the answer she suggests is that yes they do. The drawings therefore are of the possibility of conscious relationships between creatures, not just the details of the surface of the skin.

It has been suggested that there are two strains within contemporary art dealing with animals, of art that is animal-endorsing and animal-sceptical. Animal-endorsing art would be that which tends to endorse animal life itself (aligning it with conservation and animal advocacy) rather than endorsing cultural constructions of the animal. Animal-sceptical art, would not be sceptical of animals themselves, but rather of culture's means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human. Roet's work can be read both ways she aligns herself and her art with both animals and humans, in doing so points to some of the complexities and contradictions that exist in our lives, within and outside art, in relation to ourselves and other animals.

1. Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p. 20

John Barrett-Lennard, Text for a talk at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery in conjunction with the Pri-mates: Lisa Roet exhibition., 2004.