

## Pri-Mates

First encounters with an artist's work can be crucial; they can shift your own psychological terrain and open up welcome possibilities that you hardly knew existed. They can be both disturbing and enthralling—not a bad combination—and this usually happens when you immediately sense an idiosyncratic vision on the loose, moreover one that is not looking to inhabit an art worldish niche.

I was introduced to Lisa Roet's decidedly idiosyncratic work in an unusual place: a site along the Maribyrnong River in the gritty outskirts of Melbourne, Australia called the Stoney Creek Backwash. Overhead: the towering West Gate Bridge which seems to soar on for miles, gleaming Melbourne off in the distance, and before me the river which I was told was improving, but which still looked suspicious after decades of industrial punishment. I didn't really know what to expect, other than an outdoors work by Roet, and what I did find was a giant-sized finger protruding from the water. It was an ape's finger, cast in polyurethane, and it weirdly beckoned: a monster under the water, a science fiction terror, a grade Z horror flick creature about to spring into life, an ancient relative gesturing from the murk. Under the bridge nearby there was a cacophonous recording of ape sounds, which mingled with the reverberating traffic. Together, both finger and sounds, were wonderful, strange, and hilarious; an instant animalization, so to speak, of a place where nature and human constructions totally merge. There was something outlandish about the work, absurd, and borderline ridiculous. There was also something sneakily profound.

It was for the exhibition "Construction in Process VII - The Bridge" (1998) that Roet this otherwise obscure site got pulled in different directions at the same time, toward primal origins and an uncertain future, endurance and fragility, connection and alienation. As startling as Roet's work was, it basically made you want to stay, be patient, think, and dwell in the midst of these reeling juxtapositions. The ambiguity of that gesture, swaying in the currents, was striking. It was both a salutation (after all, we come from somewhere, indeed directly from apedom) and a wavering good-bye (many species of apes are currently threatened to the point of extinction.) In fact, we collectively are engaged in the generally bizarre activity of either destroying or incarcerating (whether for amusement or study purposes) latter day examples of our own primal ancestors, which prefigures many other forms of intra-human domination and mayhem.

Yet even though Roet's work suggests such potent issues as it accesses a visual language steeped in science and evolutionary studies, her flexible artistry propels things in surprising directions. Among other things, this particular work reversed an enduring order of commemorative public sculptures. It did not honor some figure of great deeds (usually a man) but instead functioned as an outsized trace of a nameless and ambiguous animal "other". As humans—indeed as self-avowed lords of the earth—we like to think we're the focal point, and that history is the record of our conflicts and achievements, but the rest of the world, including apes, but also fish, viruses, lions and plants, hardly shares this conviction. Furthermore, Roet's work wasn't in some available plaza downtown but in an obscure, tough-to-find site on the periphery. Then there's its mock-bombastic heroism, which both suggested and demolished the kind of Socialist-era ideological sculptures that Roet thoroughly absorbed on trips through the former Soviet Union. All of this got mixed with the theatrical verisimilitude of movie set props and natural history museum dioramas. Roet has an ability to flash across categories, and to leave things altered and unsettled, but it's all in service to her large inquiry, which is namely an investigation into who we are, what constitutes our relationship to the outside world and especially to animals, what underpins our own experience in a world we uneasily share.

That finger was one of a series Roet has accomplished through the years in various media, as charcoal drawings, sculptures on pedestals, and outdoors works. Her anatomical studies of apes, or of parts of their bodies, arise from close observation—for years Roet has been an attentive, and in many ways obsessive, habitué of zoos and ape study centers in Australia, Europe, Asia, and the U.S. She is also familiar with research into primate behavior and has spent a considerable amount of time with scientists who are working in this area. Typically, Roet pays careful and sensual attention to details: to the textures and colors of skin, to the shape of a gesture, to its communicative potential. A charcoal drawing of an orangutan's finger has a dark, looming force, a sense of mystery, and confrontation, as does a solitary thumb on a pedestal: both seem at once familiar and alien. There is something creepy about these isolated body parts, suggestive as they are of dissection and fragmentation, but also something visually thrilling. Taken together, they form a choppy, truncated language which is elusive and compelling—a language of ciphers, fragments, and codes calling to us across the great looming gulf between the animal and human. It's precisely that gulf which Roet's work questions and disturbs, and it's one replete with a great deal of power and violence. In another series from 1996, large scale fingerprints of both apes and humans function as identity markers, but also seem like police lab evidence concerning some nameless crime. Roet's research completed during the past decade both underscores and transfigures the visual heritage and social lineage that apes and humans share.

Under cover of her concentrated investigations, it's probably the case that Roet adores her subject matter, indeed that her work is animated by a profound sense of connection between the animal and human. This is something that becomes particularly strange in the zoos and institutes that she frequents—free us, on the outside, looking at those exotic animals which we have isolated and entrapped. In focusing on apes, Roet calls attention to the structure of our own minds vis-à-vis these near relatives with which we share 97% of our own DNA, namely our lingering anxiety with our own evolutionary past, the way we study apes scientifically and approach them as entertainment, the way we project on them our own fantasies and culture, while often assuming that they are in some sense “inferior.”

For a series of 1996 photographs and silkscreens of apes in the Berlin Zoo, Roet used digital techniques to montage a scene from *Planet of the Apes* into the cages—the famous scene when the ape and human first kiss. Instead of looking into a sham rendition of a natural habitat in the zoo, you see that sham rendition now sent through the ringer of pop culture movies. But the presence of this loaded image, which is sharply ironic, and which succinctly encapsulates just how much our own consciousness, ideologies, and pure force invade the circumscribed world of these primates, carries with it a lingering wish—for communion, connection, understanding.

Roet's 1998 “Ape and the Bunnyman” exhibition in New York at the LiebmanMagnan Gallery was inspired by an artist's residency at the Atlanta Ape Language Center, where researchers train apes to respond to human language. One way they do this is by dressing up in bunny costumes which apparently make the animals feel more at ease, and in between these sessions the apes are shown videos of themselves interacting with the “bunny”. Whether effective or not, it's a bizarre situation loaded with potent connotations, for in striving to be close to the apes, scientists dress up as animals, but in a way that's completely refracted through human culture—a cloyingly funny costume suggestive of cartoons or kids' games at birthday parties, but one which winds up looking downright nightmarish. What Roet accomplished was to take this situation and intensify it, to make it even more extreme and bizarre, by fusing disparate events in digitally-altered cibachromes. In one, the human/bunny dances with the ape as if the two were performing in some goofy musical. In others, the two recline sharing a quiet moment; three people peer through a window at an ape in its lair while the bunny, like some privy-to-it-all observer, watches from the edge; or an ape looks warily at the bunny who hogs much of the frame. These surreal encounters didn't, properly speaking, happen, but they could have, for they're based on actual experiments. In extending what occurs in the institute back out to the world, Roet unleashed a series which is at once humorous, disconcerting, weird, and malevolent, but in any event charged with the whopping biases and manipulations that so order our relationships with animals, and especially with apes.

For this exhibition at the LimeLight, Lisa Roet has proposed a new work: a rendition of an ape's finger and a bust of an ape encased in ice. It's a wonderful idea, and one suffused with her peculiar mix of conceptualism and visual poetics. Multiple suggestions abound: ancient bodies preserved in glaciers before eventual discovery, refrigerated specimens ready for the scientist's scalpel, sealed off yet observable figures that are both close and remote, which is pretty much what happens with apes when they have the misfortune of falling into human hands. Of course, like much of Roet's work, this piece maintains a disarmingly humorous quality and her signature oddball verve. But what's also apparent is her deeply compelling attitude as she pursues her investigations: at once forthright and elliptical, risk-taking and absolutely precise.

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