

The Shadow

I remember the chimpanzees, the gorillas, the orangutans. Primatologists are predicting that our cousin lineage, the great chimpanzees, will be extinct in ten years. The media reassures us that those same forms of knowledge that can produce mass extinctions can also ensure that, at some unspecified time in the future, we can resuscitate the chimpanzee lineage via the preservation of DNA. Once again, as we face the abyss, science seems to win the day. But let's think about this reassurance. We will do this, they say, when 'the time is right'. But when will that period of utopian restoration come upon us? Will we reconstruct habitats? Will we reconstitute all the other species as well? And will the cycle of destruction begin again? This DNA dream reveals itself as what it is, a utopian myth that smacks of narcissism and hubris.

This is where Lisa Roet's work enters - when the dream of scientific restoration fades Roet's images of the great apes, humans, chimps, gorillas and orangutans, stay with us. The first works I ever saw by Lisa Roet were her drawings. These are not life drawings - rather they are images from memory - days spent in the company of primates in their various prisons and sanctuaries. What is striking about these images is that they contain a bodily memory - the fusion of the energy of Roet's body with the hands of those simians she spends so much time with. It is as if her energy and that of the primates she draws had merged and it is this that is recorded on paper - not representations so much as marks and traces of a process of transference and transformation. The drawings are powerful because while being almost many things they are not fixed in any particular category of knowledge. The furious and gorgeous charcoal marks on silk paper are almost beautiful, but not quite. The drawings are almost grotesque too - larger than life hands and digits that hover somewhere in the realm of the human - but then again, not quite. This work seems, at first, a form of life drawing, but then again, absolutely not. Some kind of ferocious energy emerges here and the work slips between and becomes more powerful than any one particular form of science or art would have it be.

Lisa Roet's computer images for the current show are also hybrids. Via image manipulations this work explores the shadow realm between humans and their close cousins, both mythical and natural. The Yetti, the Yowie and BigFoot represent, like Frankenstein, the shadow self of the human and raise the issue of where the human ends and the 'other' begins in a particularly haunted way. It is this shadowy transitional zone that these recent computer images capture. So too in cultures where primates live near human communities there are mythologies exploring the relations between humans and their primate cousins. The Dayak of Borneo, a culture and people who have lived with the orangutan for a very long time, have many stories about them. Lisa Roet introduced me to these tales, which are obviously very important to her. At the centre of most of them lies a philosophy about the active relationship and connection that exists between human and orangutan. I can see why the artist so loves them - they parallel in words what her work is about.

In both the artist's work and the Dayak stories lies a philosophy about the active, bodily connection between humans and primates. This kind of philosophy, which forges and explores fierce connections, is of great importance now, but one often ignored by a science based on distance and the severing of ties with the object of science. Roet's images and the Dayak stories are, I suggest, another kind of 'natural science' one that encodes, in images, marks, in body and in language, the relationship between one human and one primate. Looking at Roet as a natural scientist as well as an artist and therefore an heir to the traditions of science as well as art, has many implications for notions of what it means to 'know' our primate cousins - and for ideas of what it will be like to remember them.

How can I dare call Lisa Roet, artist exemplaire, a natural scientist? According to the ghettoised knowledges that do violence to our world Roet is not qualified as such although she has spent as many hours with primates as many professional primatologists. Ashley Crawford writes of the artist's justifiable anger at being ignored by a group of scientists she meets in a primate sanctuary. If I understood the story correctly she was ostracised because she was 'merely' an artist. Although not all primatologists act in such a stupid fashion this piece of individual ignorance is an unfortunate example of what happens too often when a particular form of knowledge reigns apparently triumphant. According to this way of thinking artists merely represent the world while scientists are capable of changing it. It takes only a few moments to realise that this belief in the infallibility of one form of knowledge holds on one condition only - the assumption that its triumph will continue. However if history teaches us anything it is that things change. Empires come and go, as do practices and philosophies. The so-called European empires, seemingly unconquerable and all-conquering in 1888, would start to disintegrate in 1914 and the twentieth century marked the failure of that empire. In such dire times we need, more than anything, many different forms of knowledge - and

canonical forms need interrogation. I characterise Lisa Roet's work as a natural science precisely because it problematises the nature of the knowledge that we have of other forms of life on this planet. From this viewpoint Roet's knowledge, one based on memory, body and the relationship between particular members of two different species, is a valuable form of science indeed.

Professor. Diane Losche, National Gallery of Kuala Lumpur, 2001.

Footnotes

1. Crawford, Ashley. Art in Australia. June 2001:577-583:p.579.