

## the simian line

### Veronica Angelatos

Investigating the complex interface between humans and our simian relatives, Lisa Roet's acclaimed Pri-Mate series thus challenges some of the great paradigms and theories relating to evolution and creationism, language and communication, science and art.

Certainly the ape-human connection is a contentious premise in postmodern culture. One need only consider recent explorations in the sphere of comparative ethnology which suggest a permeable membrane between human and non-human, or the intriguing, albeit little-examined role of apes in the emergence of technical modernity, from NASA's space monkeys to experiments informing ideas about both human and artificial intelligence. Yet while Roet traverses such territory, she deliberately avoids any heavy-handed didacticism, navigating, rather, this potentially political minefield with refreshing insight and humour. As the artist herself notes, 'Of course, I have my own personal views on the political aspects of the ape issue, but I prefer to keep them separate. My art is not meant to carry a slogan beneath it.'

With the ape as her muse, Roet encourages us to reflect upon prevailing attitudes towards these relatives with whom we share 98% of our DNA - the lingering anxiety with our evolutionary past; our use of apes for scientific and entertainment purposes; the way in which we project onto apes our own fantasies and culture, while at the same time assuming that they are somehow 'inferior.' Indeed, for all modernity's attempt at a superior rationality and modern art's resolute denial of animals and nature, Pri-Mates powerfully highlights how inextricably linked humans and simians are amid the messy uncertainty of biology, nature and culture.

Fundamental to such thesis is the motif of the ape finger and hand which reappears in various formats and media throughout Roet's practice. A direct reference to the scientific theory that the origins of humanity and civilisation developed from the evolution of the primate hand and opposable thumb, the image is a potent one - embodying the point at which mankind is both aligned to, and alienated from, the animal kingdom. Therein lies our kinship and uneasy sense of difference. Ambiguous, abstracted, the hands confound our sense of identity - beyond the stereotype embedded in the word 'animal', we realise the fingerprints could be those of any person, the finger that of human or ape.

Suffused with her peculiar mix of conceptualism and visual poetics, the sculptures and drawings comprising the Pri-Mate series are arguably amongst the artist's most compelling with their dark looming force, their inescapable sense of mystery and confrontation. As isolated body parts, they are suggestive of dissection and fragmentation - at once unsettling and visually thrilling. Juxtaposed together, meanwhile, the pieces offer an elusive, truncated language of ciphers and codes with which one may unravel the powerful social and visual heritage that humans and apes share.

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