

Primate Prime Time

Mark Feary

Bronze, with its connotations of permanence and strength, has often been used to commemorate significant contributions made to society by some of its members. Parliaments, libraries, universities and educational facilities are rife with earnest sculptures of their founders or significant contributors. At best, they are well executed insofar as the sculpture bears resemblance to the depicted; at worst they are murky allusions to neither sculpture nor subject. Indeed bronze memorial sculpture is perhaps an art form unto itself outside of the realm of fine art altogether, beleaguered by its necessary objective to represent not only a clearly discernable likeness, but also a certain dignity, befitting of a subject being rendered permanent. Within this realm there is little margin for creative licence to veer from the formulaic process of capturing the subject. That considered, what would popularly be regarded as a successful bronze sculpture of this kind is one that strongly adheres to its subject, yet in a way that emphasises a sympathetic or proud depiction.

As a medium within fine art bronze is synonymous with permanence, and thus a certain importance. The processes and associated costs of casting bronze, especially larger objects lend the medium a degree of seriousness. Of a resolved idea, laboured over in the fabrication process. It is not a medium that embraces random chance or experimentation. By the time a bronze object is cast, the form and formation of the object have already been clearly defined.

Sculpture of this sort has traditionally been commissioned, rather than created of an artist's own accord. So this process has removed the agency of the artist to a degree, with their role not to explore an idea, but merely to craft a predetermined depiction, to mimic the form of the subject, and pertinently, with a degree of respectful yet not overstated embellishment. Most commonly represented has been the head, with its capability to register in the minds of an audience, capturing the features of the subject most recognisably idiosyncratic.

Perhaps instead of perpetually favouring the head of a subject, bronze tributary sculpture could be used to represent other parts of the human form to convey its message. For instance, could Winston Churchill not have been depicted as a hand, stoically presenting his iconic 'V for victory' rather than a somewhat chubby older man of gruff features? Would this gesture not have evoked the idea of Churchill as a forthright leader, fearlessly concerned with the good of his governed public? If this were to have ever been undertaken, one can imagine the glee of adolescent boys at the sight of the sculpture from the rear, monumentally giving the wider public an 'up yours'.

Lisa Roet exhibits here, as part of her latest body of work, two looming sculptures representing the fingers of a chimpanzee. Positioned as they are in the centre of the gallery, emerging out of the floor, the works hold a striking presence, both in scale and subject. The sculptures appear as sunken monuments recalling the closing sequences of *Planet of the Apes*, during which, the main character George Taylor looks aghast upon the only partially visible Statue of Liberty, symbolic of the decline of humanity and civilization as we currently encounter it. Roet's over sized fingers could be read as a sincere tribute to the primate, or alternatively, as a none too subtle gesture imploring humans to f*** off. There would be something undeniably justified in humankind's closest relative collectively giving us the finger for all of the hunting, deforestation and 'scientific research' that have left their numbers so irreparably dwindled. Roet's bronze sculptures could be read as offering these primates an opportunity to voice to us their dissent, permanently and unashamedly.

The hand holds a potent position within Roet's work, as a symbol of the sense most commonly associated with touch. In the absence of linguistic understanding, touch holds the most powerful communicative capacity between people and animals. Take for example, the moment in *ET* when Elliot and the extra terrestrial touch fingers, in that moment the characters understand one another, recognizing their differences, but overwhelmingly identifying a commonality. Beyond words, this is the moment of understanding and healing between these two beings, pure communication.

Within the research centres where primates are studied and experimented upon, the hand and fingers are integral to the processes by which scientists 'teach' chimpanzees to communicate through sign language. Through this speech training, notably pioneered since the 1960s at the Language Research Center at Georgia University, Atlanta, Chimpanzees are taught through repetition and reward systems, basic symbols for objects and actions. This potentially circumspect line of research, with its emphasis on the gesture, seems to imbue Roet's drawing techniques. These drawings, often executed to a bold scale, bring to the fore, singular limbs of her subjects. With the effect of minor anatomical studies rendered large, they are gestural to such a degree that the surface seems a build up of the curvaciousness of the form and the dynamism of action. Representational accuracy seems secondary to creating a surface that is full of movement, with rigorous mark making concerned with textuality, an essence of surface, rather than an exercise in scientific accuracy.

In *Great Apes*, a witty parody of humanism through an analysis of 'chimpunity', Will Self develops an elucidating perspective on captivity and agency through the framework of zoology and psychiatry. The central character of Simon Dykes, coincidentally an artist, descends into a severe delusional state following a prolonged session of 'ecstasy, crap cocaine and Glenmorangie' at the Sealink Club. After awaking Dyke's terrifyingly discovers that he is lying post-coitally not with his girlfriend, but rather with 'this beast, or ape, or something.'¹ After being institutionalised, it becomes apparent that Dykes is suffering from a rare and bizarre delusion that he is 'human' in an otherwise advanced society of chimpanzees.

As Dr Busner patiently explains to Dykes during the long course of treatment towards his psychological recuperation:

'Well, the human is markedly less spatially aware than the chimpanzee. Its capacity for extroception – intuitive awareness of the dispensation of surrounding objects – is diminished, barely there at all. Chimpanzees have always used the human as a clownish paradigm. Circus acts often incorporate chimps dressed up as humans, running around bashing into one another, d'you see 'huuu'?'²

That considered, what is one to make of Roet's photographs depicting an aging clown and a seated chimpanzee in a derelict caravan? Perhaps part of some freak show carnival, making its way from small town to small town, the chimpanzee sits nonchalantly thumbing through a book as an aging clown stands seemingly gesturing toward the viewer. The clown, predictably a symbol of comedic tragedy, has become a pervasive icon within contemporary visual culture. Whether the clown is used as a metaphor for melancholy or in more sinister instances, as a tyrant in their own right, barely hiding their own vices and failings behind a mask of humour, clowns are invariably loaded characters. What is perhaps most peculiar about Roet's image is the composure and disinterest of the chimpanzee in contrast to the ludicrousness and threatened stature of the clown. Does the character costumed in the wolf outfit, subtly discernable in the mirror serve here as a reference to Roet's earlier *Ape & the Bunnyman* series of photographs or as a peculiar coincidence? It might be the precursor to a completely normal exchange, albeit involving a clown, a chimpanzee, and a human dressed up in wolf's clothing, if that were not so unashamedly David Lynchian in its eccentricity.

Roet's bronze representations are not named, or rather, the depicted are not identified within the works themselves. In so doing, the chimpanzee represents not a chimpanzee, but *every* chimpanzee. This is perhaps counter to the plenitude of human heads immortalized in bronze, invariably with an accompanying plaque to identify and secure the prosperity of the subject. But in the instance that the figure itself is unrecognisable, perhaps to subsequent generations, the naming of the figure becomes almost irrelevant, as it transforms not into the depiction of a person, but to *every* person who has ever been canonised through such a tributary gesture. As such, the bronze head becomes a questionable example of who has been commemorated through historicization, and the overwhelming prevalence of aging Caucasian males immortalised in bronze sculptures. Perhaps ungenerously, such sculptures eventually become representative of a kitsch honorarium to a figure of loaded significance, and possibly minor reverence. Present yet forgotten.

As Taylor remarks to Landon in *Planet of the Apes* upon their arrival on a seemingly foreign planet at a non-definable time in the future, 'And the glory don't forget that. There's a life size bronze statue of you standing out there. It's probably turned green by now, no one can read the nameplate.'³ As Roet's chimpanzees are bereft of such nameplates, are they already anonymous, or in the process of being forgotten? Or perhaps, they will serve as a reminder of humankind's relentless legacy of destruction after the eventual extinction of the primate and all other animals with which we share this planet; a tribute to the fallen heroes and leaders of the natural world.

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- 1 Will Self, *Great Apes*, Bloomsbury, London 1997, p. 99
- 2 *ibid*, p. 251
- 3 *Planet of the Apes*, 20th Century Fox Films, 1968