

Christie Brown | Rara Avis

ARTHOUSE1. PRESENTS

RARA AVIS

A solo exhibition by
Christie Brown

PRIVATE VIEW | WEDNESDAY 6 APRIL
6.30PM - 8.30PM

EXHIBITION OPEN UNTIL 30 APRIL 2016
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Ghost Portrait, ceramic 2015, 55 x 28 x 16 cm.



Rara Avis

For some years now Christie Brown has created human/animal hybrids often reminiscent, in form and posture, of the figurative objects of ancient Egypt and China. In doing so she has harnessed the ability of such archaic and mythical artefacts to speak across time; to propose links between the ancient and the contemporary. Collaged from Brown's archive of moulds along with free-built elements, the new statues and portrait busts of *Rara Avis* contain echoes of earlier projects including the figures of *DreamWork* (Freud Museum, 2012-13), inspired by Sigmund Freud's collection of antiquities, and *A Thwarted Dynasty*, a series of ceramic busts in which she portrayed the estranged Soane family, first shown at the Sir John Soane Museum in 2013. However, in this body of work her use of collage brings a new sense of complexity, one that makes it hard for the viewer to impose straightforward anthropomorphic interpretations on the figures. Rather than simply attributing human traits and emotions to animals or, conversely, representing the animal-like qualities of humans, she has become more interested in ideas that rupture the perceived barrier between human and animal, and which challenge traditional Western philosophical notions of what is intrinsically human.

Brown's recent thinking has been shaped by varieties of pro-animal thought applied within contemporary critical debate surrounding the representation of gender, sexuality and race. A particular point of reference for her has been an essay by Marta Segarra in which she explores pro-animal texts, such as H  l  ne Cixous's *Stigmata* (1998) and Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2001). In considering Cixous's story of Fips the dog, a childhood pet whose difficult life met a tragic end, Segarra notes how:

'The author recognizes ... the limits of the knowledge we can have of the other's identity. The other – above all the absolute other the animal is – is not "assimilable" nor "digestible"; we cannot think of him or her as a familiar being without depriving him of his essential qualities.' (2006: 120)

Cixous's insight is that, in contrast to the human attitude towards pets, Fips does not seek to turn his fellow humans into dogs. Segarra points out that she therefore realises the dog to be:

'... "much more than me," because he does not want to *colonize* the human other with his own

animality. That makes him *superior* to people, the dog paradoxically being more *humane* than his human fellows, due to his “profound animal humanity.” ’ (2006: 121)

Derrida’s text is a comparable exploration of the logic and set of linguistic practices that lead to the marginalization or objectification of other species. Part of his argument is based on a personal observation about the animal’s gaze. Segarra explains: ‘... when his cat looks at him naked in his bathroom, this gaze is totally enigmatic, because it expresses “the point of view of the absolute other.”’ (2006: 120) Whereas the standard humanist position identifies human beings in terms of their difference from and superiority over animals, Derrida proposes another way of understanding humanity and animality by means of ‘la pensée de l’animal’ (‘thinking concerning the animal’ or ‘animal thinking’). His ‘Animal thinking’ thus encourages us to look at the world from a different viewpoint that is not exclusively human. As Segarra comments on the gaze of the animal, again quoting Derrida:

‘This gaze is beyond human perspective, thus “uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable,” but it is still a gaze, and a gaze addressed to us from the “abysmal” unknown, from the nonhuman, reversing the usual direction. It is we human beings, who think, we have the right to know, to observe the world and to define it, but when it returns our gaze, we are suddenly plunged into another, irreducible world, this one not having been built in accordance with our perceptions and our judgments.’ (Segarra, 2006: 122)

Derrida’s ‘uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable’ provides a fitting description of the uncanny gaze of Brown’s metamorphosing humanimals and other creatures. Maybe behind the gaze of each of her *rarae aves*, seemingly posthuman, frequently beyond species, is the recognition of hubris, that fatal human flaw that invariably leads to downfall? If not, they are certainly reminders that we human beings might benefit from a form of self-scrutiny that is more objective and far less self-regarding.

Reference: Marta Segarra (2006) ‘Helene Cixous’s Other Animal: The Half-Sunken Dog’, *New Literary History*, Vol. 37, No. 1., pp. 119-134

Text by Tessa Peters

Photography by Sylvain Deleu

Left: *Lop-eared Woman*, ceramic 2015, 70 x 24 x 18 cm
Right: *Statue*, ceramic, 2015, 99 x 25 x 24 cm



Seated Figure with Black Ears, ceramic 2015, 80 x 34 x 42 cm



Clever Sheep, ceramic 2015, 50 x 26 x 22 cm

