

wilma cruise

Cocks, Asses, &



Kizo Art Gallery **20 June – 28 July 08**



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Front cover:
Sarcophagi I
2007
Ceramic
340 cm in length

Left:
Adam and Eve Before the Fall
2006-7
Ceramic and bronze
on steel base
Adam 187 cm
Eve 180 cm



Left:
The All-Knowing Ass
2007
Digital print
160 x 80 cm
Edition: 7

Right:
I Can't Hear
2007
Ceramic on steel base
180 cm



COCKS, ASSES, &

Brenda Schmahmann
Professor and Head of Fine Art, Rhodes University

In this exhibition, Wilma Cruise selects a deliberately provocative title. “COCKS” and “ASSES”, delightfully iconoclastic in their allusion to the bawdy naming of sexual body parts, are of course also totally respectable designations of two kinds of animals. But why does the title end with “&”? What is the absence to which *COCKS, ASSES, &* is referring?

Cruise is interested in what she terms “the gap between – that space where the unspoken exists as a vestigial text.” “One way or the other,” she observes, “I use the body as palette and page on which I project the inchoate and unsaid in an attempt to understand. It is meaning, which remains tantalisingly out of reach, which I seek.”¹ *I Can’t Hear*, the show’s subtitle, invokes this struggle. Hélène Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine*, which suggests that the body itself is inscribed with its subliminal drives, resonates for Cruise whose figures seem to carry the traces of desires and needs that cannot be articulated adequately through language. Rather than being an empty void, a break in speech becomes the site of a struggle to express that which is beyond speech.

Cruise’s interest in the inadequacy of phrases and sentences to communicate, is manifest through the centrality afforded to writing in this exhibition. Featuring especially in her notebooks, words serve as markers of desires struggling to find articulation. The notebooks, for example, include incomplete sentences, words crossed out and replaced, and thesaurus-like listings with a question mark added to the occasional term or concept that has resonated or perhaps ignited a new thought. These are not, then, indicators of a process of arriving at a “resolution” but are instead evocations of the impossibility of ever giving voice to the scattered and unknowable drives that underpin conscious thought.



A work that serves as a precedent for these explorations of language is *Conversations* (2000) which Cruise made shortly after the death of her mother. Involved in a serious accident, Cruise's mother had been placed on a ventilator and, unable to hear or speak, relied on written communication with her family during the last two days of her life. The actual A4 sheets including these dialogues were retrieved by Cruise, organised into a diachronic sequence around all four walls of a small closed-off space, and accompanied by an audio recording of the artist playing the piano and reciting a poem consisting only of musical terminology. When shown at Wordfest at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2000, the work was installed in a tiny womb-like room which alluded to the undifferentiated bodily space of mother and child that Julia Kristeva termed the *chora*. The *chora* makes possible what Kristeva termed "the semiotic" – a primary condition characterised by libidinal drives and impulses, and which precedes the acquisition of language and structures of signification.²

Left:
Dumas
2007
Ceramic on steel base
170 cm

Right:
Wilma Cruise and Guy du Toit
Springhaa(r)s
2007
Bronze
185 cm



The animals featuring in *COCKS, ASSES, &* extend this interest in a space governed by pre-linguistic impulses. Rather than functioning as metaphors or symbols for conduct in the human realm (the dog as “fidelity” for example), they suggest the possibilities of non-verbal forms of communication between human and animal. In this regard, Cruise observes: “The question being raised is just what communication is possible between human and animal and how essential is it for humans to understand animals. The probable answer (and it is my concern), is that we need to connect again to the natural world in order to save the planet from human destruction.” But the works are by no means simply didactic statements about a need to preserve the environment. Rather, like other works by Cruise, they make reference to forms of communication that are pre-linguistic. Playful sexual puns, such as that invoked by *Springhaa(r)s* (a collaborative work in which a bronze *springhaas* by Guy du Toit is placed in conjunction with a female figure by Cruise), may be understood to allude to a condition of orgasmic bliss, perhaps even to a female *jouissance* that, for Kristeva, applies to that “portion of woman that exceeds the bounds of oedipal laws, especially the law of language”.³

Also at play in the recent works – and stemming from Cruise’s *Dolly Suite* of 2004, where she “cloned” numerous life-sized clay sheep from a single mould – are questions about the subjectivity afforded to sentient beings. Commenting on the content of the *Dolly Suite*, Cruise asks: “Did Dolly (the sheep) have a say over her cloning? Has she rights? Does she think? I believe the cloners assumed she does not. If I think therefore I am, is it logical to ask that if she does not think, is she not? Is she therefore a negation? An inconsequential?” Such questions are also invoked in the current exhibition where an original mould of a female form served as a prototype for a humanoid “dolly”. At times referring ironically to a “flatback”

ceramic figure placed on a mantelpiece, this prototypical female alludes in one sense to a construct of the ideal woman as domestic embellishment. Often headless and armless, these female figures are rendered mute and devoid of agency. And yet they also resist their immobilisation. Their mass, actual and implied, invests them with emotional weight. Completely lacking conventional prettiness, they are in fact interchangeable with the male figures featuring in Cruise's oeuvre. "They are all heavy" she notes, "and you could take a penis off a male figure and it would be female." Scale too is important in these works. "Tabletop size implies domesticity and manageability" Cruise observes, whereas these female figures are in contrast "confrontational".

Crucial to Cruise's exhibition too are the ways in which works in different media complement one another. "Through musings, writings, scribbling and sketches I start working on an idea" Cruise remarks, and the notebook will be "filled (or forgotten) during the process of creation" or indeed perhaps "added to after the completion of the work". A sculpture or print is thus never simply the realisation of a concept "planned" through the notebooks, but is itself an arena in which ideas have been negotiated and re-negotiated. Furthermore, all of her works, whether the diary-like notebooks or the sculptures and prints, articulate the idea that making art is a *process* which happens over a period of time. Norman Bryson has identified a tendency in a Western artmaking tradition to eliminate signs of making and to produce works which encourage a "synchronic instant of viewing which will eclipse the body".⁴ Cruise, however, defies such an approach. Exposing transitions and shifts that have occurred during their production, each page of her notebook and each sculpture or print reveal what Bryson terms "the traces of the body in labour".⁵ We, as viewers, do not experience these artworks as disembodied finalities but instead as traces of the acts of consideration and reconsideration that took place

during their making. More particularly, Cruise's articulation of the struggle to find an apposite language to communicate or articulate desire is not simply conveyed as an abstract idea but is instead felt, bodily and immediately, by viewers of her works.

Cruise has always worked in a way that confounds categories. In her hands, clay is not a medium for small figurines but for life-size figures. And a page in her notebook, no matter how notation-like, never serves simply as a plan for a print or sculpture. This intriguing exhibition suggests, however, that paradox is equally central to her work. Revealing the ways in which desire might write itself on the body, Cruise's art also suggests that muteness is itself a potent form of speech.

NOTES

- 1 All comments by Cruise quoted here are taken from either a written statement she prepared for David Krut Publishing or interviews with the artist conducted by the author in 2007.
- 2 Elizabeth Grosz, "Julia Kristeva" in Elizabeth Wright (ed.) *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 195.
- 3 Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Jouissance" in Wright, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, p. 184.
- 4 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 94.
- 5 *Ibid.*



Left:
Pender
2007
Ceramic and ostrich feathers
on steel base
160 cm

Overleaf:
Untitled (Horse and Rider 1)
2005
Bronze
170 cm

Untitled (Horse and Rider 2)
2006-7
Bronze
65 cm

Untitled (Horse and Rider 3)
2006-7
Bronze
100 cm

Untitled (Horse and Rider 4)
2006-7
Bronze
100 cm





Mother Goose I

2007

Etching and carborundum

Image size: 50 x 30 cm

Paper size: 61 x 38 cm

Edition: 10



Mother Goose II

2007

Etching and carborundum

Image size: 50 x 30 cm

Paper size: 61 x 38 cm

Edition: 10

*We have shut our ears
to their primal screams
their rumbles, hisses, purrs*



Chanticleer
2007
Ceramic
150 x 170 cm



Chanticleer

2007

Spitbite aquatint and drypoint

Image size: 99 x 66 cm

Paper size: 121.5 x 80 cm

Edition: 15



I Can(t) See (With Mirror)

2007

Drypoint

Image size: 99 x 66 cm

Paper size: 121.5 x 80 cm

Edition: 20



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