

Bonita Alice

Strangers Of Commanding Aspect



Untitled (Grey Dog Head) 2014 Acrylic on wood panel 408X510X20mm

Bonita Alice: Obscured Proximities

Yvette Greslé

Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been – all that; and he – But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other (Virginia Woolf, *Flush: a biography*, 1933).¹

As ordinary knotted beings, they are also always meaning-making figures that gather up those who respond to them into unpredictable kinds of “we”.²

A sleeping dog, reminiscent of a greyhound, is wrapped up in a golden blanket, its head resting on a black surface. The idea of sleep, and the significance we attach to it, brings into view multiple departure points. I imagine the symbolic, spiritual and psycho-analytic significance brought to dreams and dreaming. Sleep is attached not only to rest, nourishment, insight and healing but also to narratives of vulnerability, traumatic memory, mortality and loss. The idea of sleep can also be political: what does it mean to close one's eyes, to feign sleep and the absence of consciousness? What does it mean not to see, to enable complicitous relationships to that which is not fair, just or ethical whether politically, economically, socially or environmentally? As I write about Bonita Alice's work I view *Anima* (2012), a video work, by the artist Charlotte Dumas, of horses as they drift into sleep and from consciousness (they are caisson burial horses of Arlington National Cemetery in the United States).³ Dumas films in silence, and close proximity to the animals, in the darkness and shadows of the enclosed space they inhabit at night. The video suggests points of connection with painting, its stillness, silence and play on light, darkness and shadows. I *feel* as I look and the distance I imagine between myself and the sleeping, shifting creature collapses, we are imaginatively, affectively intertwined.

The spatial relationships staged between the sleeping dog enclosed in Alice's circle, and the intricate patterning behind are ones of displacement and disorientation. We cannot know, with any certainty, where we are or what we are looking at. Is this an architectural site located physically and materially in the world or is the locus of dream-worlds, fantasy and psychic projection? Through the

intricate design, reminiscent of latticework, I register the material substance of the wooden panel, the artist has chosen for her ground. As I look I become conscious of the pressures embedded in vision, as a personal and subjective process of relating to ourselves and others. My looking is neither distant nor detached. I am conscious of my subjectivity as woman and as human animal. I am aware that my vision is freighted with my own historical and social relation to animals and the choices and ethical concerns that accompany these. Violence is always potentially present in vision, in how we look and then pin down, reduce, close off, and flatten out. Donna Haraway focuses critical attention on the encounters between human and non-human animals, in scientific, social, personal, economic, cultural and political life: 'All of these are figures, and all are mundanely here, on this earth, now, asking who “we” will become when species meet'.⁴

In 1933, Virginia Woolf wrote a biography of *Flush* the spaniel, which belonged to the English Romantic poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861). *Flush* was reprinted in 2005 by Persephone Books, London, a publisher that focuses largely on 'neglected fiction and non-fiction by women, for women and about women'.⁵ Apparently Woolf was inspired by a new edition of love letters between Elizabeth and Robert Browning, published in 1930, in which 'the figure of the dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life'.⁶



Draping The Horse I and II 2014 Acrylic on wood panel 507X601X20mm

The book, which was a commercial success, was not a critical success and Woolf herself referred to it as 'that silly book'.⁷ But *Flush* has also been taken up by feminist scholars and critics who focus on its social commentary. The book tells a tale about how human animals project subjective emotions, desires, longings, frustrations and so forth onto the bodies and souls of non-human animals. It also imagines a relationship between a dog and his mistress, the bonds of possession, love and power, and hierarchies of class, and gender, which extend to the scientific-biological meanings of species, and non-human animals in domestic and social life.

In Alice's paintings, multiple visual languages and iconographies, both familiar and strange, imagine encounters between human and non-human animals. Human hands emerge from the blankets of the dogs that rest or sleep. The hands point at subjects or objects that we cannot see or know. A figure, which appears human, but which might also be imagined as a creature of myth stretches upwards as he or she or it reveals an animal in repose. Phantasmic figures appear to merge with the substance of fabric, which veils, conceals or reveals. A white hand with exaggeratedly long fingers, ambiguously human, reaches out from a voluminous white sheet to touch the neck of a black horse. The gesture appears simultaneously tender and threatening: nothing is known, legible or explained, and we cannot see the figure to whom the hand belongs. Enclosed in the circle which has become a characteristic visual device in Alice's work my looking is contained as if I were looking through optical devices deployed to magnify distant sites and scenes. The devices promise visibility, and proximity to that which we cannot readily see.

These paintings obscure the borders and hierarchies imagined between species, and which have been so thoroughly overturned and critiqued in the scholarly work on human and non-human animals attentive to the ethics and politics of human-animal relations. In Haraway's work we encounter cyborgs, monkeys and apes, oncomice, and dogs: 'In every case, the figures are at the same time creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality; the dimensions tangle and require response'.⁸ Alice talks about the relationship between pain and beauty in her work, and its politics: 'There's this thing about heightening pain by rendering it in a decorative, aestheticised tone [...] My underlying content is a painful one. In this exhibition we are talking about a relationship that I regard as floundering in the aftermath of a betrayal, a failed relationship with massively destructive repercussions for animals on an enormous scale [...] and quite possibly, emotional repercussions for all parties. The result is an anxiety that comes from both sides'.⁹

Alice's paintings are beautiful and she is consistently attentive to how things are constructed, crafted and made. In making these paintings, acrylic paint on wooden panel, she departs from the dust work, which similarly explored ambiguity and blurry borders between the human and its non-human others: figures I imagined as ghosts, aliens and animated objects in proximity to mountains, volcanoes, cliffs, oceans and indeterminate grounds.¹⁰ Of her decision to explore painting Alice draws attention to how she navigates across media. She speaks of the pragmatic underpinnings of making a work but also alerts us to the ambiguity that is present not only in the human/animal figures but also in how she works with particular media, crossing processes and disciplines: 'what's guided me is the idea that actually very often I'm drawing when I'm painting. Keeping this in sight helps me find my way with painting. This is how an acrylic on paper work landed up in the Jerwood Drawing Prize Exhibition in 2014'.¹¹ She says of the earlier dust works: 'What guided me with the dust was a linear, hard-edged way of making forms that came from various, quite decorative traditions such as historical Japanese and Chinese printmaking, and Indian miniatures'.¹²



In Which The Horse Plays The Straight Man II 2014 Watercolour 560X764mm

Visiting Alice's studio in Dalston I am able to view not only the work itself but also the traces and material culture of an artist's process – preliminary sketches, notes and visual sources. There is an affective charge in Alice's practice as a whole, which resists an empirical fixing of the world, and there is a politics and an ethics to the work that is neither prescriptive, didactic nor self-explanatory. We, as viewers, are invited to think more critically and more rigorously about how it is we look, and what it is we see in the entanglements of Alice's human-animal figures in grounds that we cannot ever fully know.

¹Woolf, V., *Flush: a biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933). Available as a free e-book <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/persephone-ebooks> (accessed 23 March 2015).

²Haraway, D.J., *When Species Meet* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p.5.

³Charlotte Dumas: *Anima and the Wildest Prairies* at the Photographer's Gallery, London, 6 February – 6 April 2015: <http://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/charlotte-dumas-anima-and-the-wildest-prairies-2> (accessed 23 March 2015).

⁴Ibid., p.5.

⁵Persephone Books: <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/about-us/> (accessed 23 March 2015).

⁶Persephone Books: <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/flush.html> (accessed 22 March 2015).

⁷Persphone Books: <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/content/persephoneforum/persephone-book-no-55-flush-by-virginia-woolf/> (accessed 23 March 2015).

⁸Haraway, D.J., *When Species Meet*, 2008, p.4.

⁹Interview (Bonita Alice and Yvette Greslé) 4 March 2015, London.

¹⁰Refer to the exhibition *Beast at Home* at Gallery AOP, Johannesburg (6 March – 3 April 2010): <http://www.artonpaper.co.za/view.asp?ItemID=39&name=tblComponent1&oname=Exhibitions&pg=front> (accessed 23 March 2015).

¹¹Interview (Bonita Alice and Yvette Greslé) 4 March 2015, London. See also: Jerwood Drawing Prize, 2014: <http://www.axisweb.org/features/news-and-views/in-focus/jerwood-drawing-prize-2014/> (accessed 23 March 2015).

¹²Interview (Bonita Alice and Yvette Greslé) 4 March 2015, London.

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I
I had the impression, at least with some, that I was getting through.

There was an ease, an absence of something, that would get me thinking. If my efforts caused me no embarrassment, I'd go on, encouraged and quite confident; having mastered the accent as a feat of mimicry, I was able initially to create the impression that I was, if not fluent in the language, at least sufficiently competent for some kind of exchange.

But then came the reply, with native fluency, and I was stymied. I felt, and must immediately have appeared, a fraud, an interloper, and usually at that point I sensed that any sympathy or curiosity gained just flowed away, and one of us quite quickly would turn and move off.



There are a few who still refer to The Great Capitulation. You can't necessarily assume they like the term any more than I do, but it radiates enough bitterness. For some, that's important. Many, however, say there was never a moment of mass dawning when everyone, everywhere, and around the same time, became aware that a fight was coming; that they'd need to try and get away, at the same time knowing it would probably be futile; that they'd end up giving in, or be restrained by force.

Something must have happened though. Something to prompt the change from undisguised autonomy and unguarded agency, to a state where you must hide all of that and play along.

If there was anything like a revolutionary spirit it arose when it was already too late. When the handover, was already so complete that we couldn't have made a place for ourselves. It seems clear now, that everything was designed for separation and subjugation. Everything. How did it go so far before anyone noticed what was happening? In retrospect it's not clear, but it was certainly efficient and thoroughly done. Once it began, the assertion of an alternative view would have seemed too ludicrous for words.



When one finds oneself in a room full of strangers, a useful rule is that one needs quite early on to approach someone and start a conversation. Chances are they'll be happy you made the approach, and you'll talk, and for the rest of the evening, you'll have a sort of ally; someone you now know, in a way, and can return to as you drift around, for further conversation or just a witty remark in passing. The principle is a useful reminder that if you leave it too long, waiting for someone else to make the first

move, beyond some point it'll be too late. When you've all been wandering around for a stretch of time, waiting until it is acceptable to leave, it becomes more and more awkward to make an approach. It's less likely then to appear natural or spontaneous; more likely that your approach will seem forced... a necessity... just stiff and uncomfortable. That's why you have to make a move early on.



Now, apparently, no one ever wanted it to be like that. Every little part of the system is having to be rehabilitated, not least the concrete design of things; apart, that is, from a few eccentric and incongruous exceptions. These moments of "sensitivity" I find variously charming and naïve, and



Untitled (Dog and Jacket) 2014 Acrylic on wood panel 408X510X20mm

inadequate, to say the least. Here's an example: you run a major highway through a grassland passage, having it cut clear across a crucial route between two positions. You later realise that this was a misguided bit of planning – or absence of planning, if you ask me – and you add a bridge that spans the highway, allowing unbroken passage from one end of the route to the other. So as not to cause alarm to its users, you contrive a continuation of the soils and flora so that the surface of the bridge becomes in effect a narrow strip of the same "fabric" as the grassland. It works, but you can see why it might have caused some quietly to smile.



Although in cities we live apart, and despite our physical isolation from the rest in separate comfortable places, word gets around, as they say.

Imagine the Grapevine as a soundless route of communication, but only for those who live outside human language. Imagine no grapevine.

On the acceptance of guardianship: I've learned many useful tricks of compliance and sometimes I'm quite happy.

B.A

II
"...In our extremities the captain and people told me in jest that they would kill and eat me, but I thought them in earnest and was depressed beyond measure, expecting every moment to be my last. While I was in this situation, one evening they caught, with a good deal of trouble, a large shark, and got it on board. This gladdened my poor heart exceedingly, as I thought it would serve the people to eat instead of their eating me; but very soon, to my astonishment, they cut off a small part of its tail and tossed the rest over the side. This renewed my consternation, and I did not know what to think of these white people, though I very much feared they would kill and eat me."

From the diary of Olauda Equiano, a Nigerian born in 1745, kidnapped and sold into slavery.



"Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time-sense of those whom it exploits by proposing a continuous present. This is the authoritarian secret of all methods of imprisonment. The barricades [of uprising] break that present."

John Berger, G, 1972



Dog In Water 2014 Watercolour 148X210mm

"The animal is there before me, there next to me, there in front of me... it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also... it can look at me. ... the gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself. "

Jacques Derrida in his lecture and essay of 1997, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am', on the now legendary interaction he had with his cat.

He continues, accusing the greats of western Philosophy of neglecting – or denying? – what to him seems critical...

"... They neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systematic consequence from the fact that an animal could, facing them, look at them, clothed or naked, and in a word, without a word, address them. ... Their discourses are sound and profound, but everything in them goes on as if they themselves had never been looked at, and especially not naked, by an animal that addressed them.

"... But since I don't believe, deep down, that it has never happened to them, or that it has not in some way been signified, figured, or metonymized, more or less secretly, in the gestures of their discourse, the symptom of this disavowal remains to be deciphered. ..."



John Berger describes a photograph showing a row of 5 men:

"It is as if a court, at the moments of their conception, had sentenced them all to have their heads severed from their necks at the age of fifteen. When the time came, they resisted, as all workers resist, and their heads remained on their shoulders. But the tension and obstinacy of that resistance has remained, and still remains, visible – there between the nape of the neck and the shoulder blades. Most workers in the world carry the same physical stigma: a sign of how the labor power of their bodies has been wrenched away from their heads, where their thoughts and imaginings continue, but deprived now of the possession of their own days and working energy."

The photograph is of a group of members of DISK, the left confederation of Turkish trade unions which was declared illegal after the coup d'etat of 1980. Many of its members, and members of political parties also declared illegal, were arrested, tortured and killed.

John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief As Photos*, 1982



"... The public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and then passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have been immunized to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a central place in their attention... That look between animal and man which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished. Looking at each animal, the unaccompanied zoo visitor is alone. ..."

Modern zoos are an epitaph to a relationship which was as old as man. ..."

John Berger, from *Why Look At Animals*, 1980



Outside, the Irish chugger called Roy, collecting for Save The Children, said, "Take care of the children and they'll take care of the animals."



Like our bodies and like our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no-one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away."

W.G. Sebald *The Rings Of Saturn*, 1995



Earth has lost half of its wildlife in the past 40 years, says WWF.

Guardian, 30 September 2014

Bonita Alice was born in Hillbrow, Johannesburg in 1962. She completed a BAFA at Wits University and an MFA at UCT. She lived and worked in Johannesburg, South Africa before moving to the UK in 2007 where she now lives with her partner and two cats in Hackney, London. Her interest in human-animal relationships belongs to her ongoing concern with psychological processes, specifically, the destructive potential of unacknowledged internal crises which are reflected in the external environment. www.bonitaalice.blogspot.com

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