

The 'kabinet' of Silvia B.

DEFORMED BEAUTY

Silvia B. makes freaks: a giant in Rotterdam and a disconcerting beauty that will be installed in Groningen. A disquieting sculpture because we fear all that is deep and dark?

By Marcel Möring, Volkskrant 14 October 2004.

In E. L. Doctorow's highly enigmatic and unparalleled 'Loon Lake', the hero encounters a broken-down carnival. Joining the carnival is the last thing on his mind. And yet he unwittingly finds himself following three little people and a dwarf as they leave a shop.

It is the era of freak shows, circuses with a scattering of lions and possibly a bear, but whose principal attractions are the Fat Lady, the Wolf Man, the Man with No Skeleton, the Giant and the Dwarf. The nineteenth century is on the wane and the twentieth glimmers on the horizon – an era in which that which is similar to us and yet visibly dissimilar apparently ignites the public imagination. Perhaps this is a late continuation of symbols still to be found in some ancient cemeteries: a skeleton carved into granite, proclaiming: what I am today you will be tomorrow.

The idea is not new. It dates from the fourteenth century, when the Black Death gripped Europe, decimating almost half of the population. This was when depictions of the Dance of Death first made an appearance, as did the first paintings of three unsuspecting, rosy-cheeked nobles riding through the forest where they encounter three rotting or fleshless corpses. This riotous parades of cadavers and skeletons told the fourteenth-century viewer that he was, most certainly, very far removed from 'this'. But by how much?

The 'freak' is as unlike us as the reproachful dead. Face to face with him or her we know: that being relatively sound in body and limb, and relatively free of genetic accidents, in fact means very little. A single flawed base gene pair, a twisted branch of the family tree is enough. Staring at the 'freak' we think: there, if not for the grace of god, go I. It is what the French-Jewish philosopher Levinas may have meant when he wrote that the self is possible only with the recognition of 'The Other'.

But there is not only recognition. Sometimes, the Other also possesses an unexpected beauty. Fanny the Fat Lady, in 'Loon Lake', may be grossly obese but the protagonist sees something else when she smiles at him: '[...] her little painted mouth widened like the wings of a butterfly as if it were basking on

some pulpy extragalactic flower. The folds of her chins rising in cups of delicate hue, her blue eyes setting like moons behind her cheeks, she smiled at me and unsmiled, smiled and unsmiled, sitting there with each arm resting on the base of a plump hand supported by a knee that was like the cap of an exotic giant white mushroom.'

Immediately there is poetry, yes: beauty in the blushing white flesh of Fanny. Innocence, even. Something delicate that is barely reconcilable with the enormity.

We 'normal people' have and do ascribe extraordinary qualities to the 'freak' – traits relating to sex, as empathic medium, as the connection with the animal that we still are. Such ideas are explored in the Mike Nichols film 'Wolf'. One night, publisher Will Randall (Jack Nicholson) is bitten by a wolf. After the bite, the poor publisher finds himself in the throes of gradual changes. He becomes progressively more wolfish. His sense of smell is heightened, his body odour stronger, his eyesight keener and his sex drive enhanced. The premise of the film is that it takes very little to activate the layers of the brain found below the cerebral cortex. And then the bear – or the wolf – is unleashed.

We are domesticated animals, separated by the flimsiest of membranes from a world that both fascinates and scares us. A world that intrigues us because it appears to be a place where the morals, ethics and all that's enshrined in the ten commandments no longer apply – and that terrifies us. We want nothing more than to be animals, swept away by the deepest, darkest aspects of ourselves; but we have become so domesticated that, were we to release the beast within, we would still return to the cage for water, food and protection from ourselves. Civilisation is an invisible prison that we both yearn for and despise.

The oeuvre of Silvia B. largely consists of freaks who are like us, and yet not. Somewhere in Rotterdam, the bronze skull of an enormous man thrusts through the tarmac, as though a giant lives beneath the city and the city is merely a thin skin below which something titanic and unimaginable reigns. Standing in front of it, you'll be able to detect the features of an atavistic titan: a pronounced root of the nose, a knitted brow, a bald skull suggestive of an atavistic strength that is better left buried beneath the paving. She also has a series of mannequins sheathed in skin or animal hide, some nothing more than a head, others a complete body. There are two children covered in astrakhan skin. They are black and woolly but not in the way that prompts my daughter's habitual squeal of delight on seeing anything soft and furry. Cute? No. Lily Lucinda, for instance, is a figure a little over one metre high. A girl, so it would seem, but entirely covered by long blonde hair. She looks like the female counterpart of the Wookiee in Star Wars, the enormous, hairy, yet soft-hearted

creature who served as Han Solo's co-pilot. Lily is more unsettling. Chewbacca is an alien; Lily Lucinda could live next door.

Silvia B.'s last major work is *Ultra*, an eight-meter-high sculpture soon to be installed in Groningen. *Ultra* is a voluptuous woman's torso on a child's body, clad in an extravagantly proportioned period dress: a crinoline with queue de Paris. *Ultra* unites the multiple facets of Silvia B.'s work: the beauty of the other; the vaguely sexual connotation that permeates all her images; the artificial and the human. In *Ultra*, this totality is expressed in an alluring, gigantic – and, only on closer inspection – deformed beauty: an eight-metre-tall *contradictio in terminis*.

From a distance, we see a statuesque woman in an evening gown; as we approach, the prostheses with which her unduly short arms touch the ground become apparent. And from close proximity her body shows itself; a torso entirely out of keeping with her womanly features and bosom, a rump that dangles, far above the ground, suspended from the enormous crinoline. She is like Fanny the Fat Lady, but in reverse. Where Fanny at first seems nothing but a ludicrous mound of fat and flesh, yet has eyes like moons and a mouth that rises, butterfly-like from the flower of her face, *Ultra* is a formidable beauty who, as you draw closer, to your increasing alarm, is not what she appeared to be. No one who sees the work of Silvia B., and certainly no one who beholds this immense statue, will be able to avoid the question of what underpins our aesthetic. Why do we find beauty in that which we consider beautiful; why are we repelled by something that at first seemed to attract us (or vice versa)? And, more importantly: what does consensus have to do with these intensely private opinions?