

Clare Woods: The Monster in the Jar
A Tree A Rock a Cloud Exhibition Catalogue 2014
Simon Martin, Co-Director, Pallant House Gallery

On a recent visit to Clare Wood's home on the Welsh borders, I was intrigued to see a large jar sitting on top of a piano containing what looked like the remains of a monster from a horror movie. The greyish form preserved in formaldehyde looked alarming, yet it had a compulsive beauty: at once repulsive, but with a fascinating, frayed surface texture. In the home of a collector it might be taken for a meditation on mortality by Damien Hirst, or a relic that you might see on the shelves of a Baroque Wunderkammer, but whilst it carries these connotations, it is actually far more personal, far more emotively charged, than any YBA conceptualism. Woods has drawn this strange creature several times, exploring its uncanny forms in pencil and watercolour. In a strange way these drawings are both a *memento mori*, and a form of self-portraiture. Not conventional portraits in which the inner state is discerned through external appearances, but the inner self working out - literally disembodied. The monster in the jar is - or was - a part of her: a section of her colon removed in an operation last year. Anyone else might be squeamish about viewing the remnants of their uncomfortable operation which could be seen as a reminder of our own fragility and impermanence, but Woods has a sanguine attitude, at once matter-of-fact but also looking for the poetry in the banal, the uncomfortable, the down-right challenging. In this respect her attitude and approach to source material reminds me of the way that Francis Bacon would reimagine the world through scraps and images that were often profoundly disturbing, sexual or simply intriguing - like the screaming woman from *Battleship Potemkin*, images from *Physique Pictorial* or Muybridge's photographs of bodies in motion. But whilst Bacon's studio was a chaotic mass of papers in urban South Kensington, Woods' is a gleaming white, semi-industrial space in the countryside of the Welsh Borders, with trestle tables laid out neatly around the room on which are arranged her paintings-in-process and tables and pin-boards of source imagery.

Driving to the studio through the rolling hills and dense wooded areas of Herefordshire and the Welsh Borders I couldn't help but think how this journey through the countryside must have seeped into her work, rather like the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell's notion of 'a green thought in a green shade'. When I have seen her previous exhibitions at the Hepworth Wakefield, Roche Court and Modern Art in London, amongst others - I have been struck by the way Woods has taken something of the language of Mid-century British Neo-Romanticism employed by artists such as Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland and Ivon Hitchens, but exploded it on an ambitious scale. The powerful response to the *Genius loci* (or sense of place) so beloved of Nash has been an important driving force for her, but where these earlier artists had a tendency towards a kind of nostalgic yearning for lost idylls, Woods can be ruthless. There is no room for what Ruskin described as the 'pathetic fallacy' of over-identification with nature in which it becomes a carrier for man's emotional state (or if there is then the ambitious, gargantuan scale on which she has worked in some of these works must make us ask awkward questions.)

Knowing these previous landscape-based works, and a recent series based on modernist and historic sculptures of the human head, I was surprised by the new work. I am not sure what I had expected. Her new paintings have moved away from the poetic romanticism of her earlier work: gone are the verdant greens and earth browns that characterised her palette, and instead the

colours in these new paintings are visceral and corporeal: blood red, lipstick pink, bone white, shit brown. When I asked her about this she commented that she had always wanted to use red and pink, but they have both been difficult colours to use while painting landscape-based images. The last two works she made for the exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield, *Mistaken Point, 2011* and *The Intended, 2011* used pink and orange. For Woods this was 'a massive break through', which only came after looking in depth at Bacon's use of these colours. But something else has also driven this change: it brings to mind the contents of the jar: the internal body made visible, its vulnerability exposed. The imagery of her work has also shifted. Last year, I was working on a retrospective of the artist Eduardo Paolozzi and so I was fascinated to discover that by a strange coincidence at the same time Woods had made two paintings based on his 1950s sculptures about the fragility of the human head: *Bandaged Head* and *Shattered Head*. Her explorations of these ruptured sculptures make me think Woods is a sculptor who paints: her original training at Goldsmiths was as a sculptor, and so much of her work is an exploration of physical form. She is not a painter who revels in the tactile quality of oil paint and turps on canvas: from 1996 until recently she has painted on aluminium with gloss and enamel whose reflective surfaces and lack of brush marks gave her more distance from the subject depicted. But in these recent works she has moved to working in oil, enabling a depth created by the weight of the brush. As she puts it, 'the oil allows choices, it's much more complex and harder to use, it's a challenge.' Her paintings are resolutely objects: her approach to creating the image is akin to the accretive and deductive processes of a sculptor: taping and cutting, painting flat and building up areas of form. They carry a tension between painting and sculpture, but at the same time she is totally grounded in the medium. Allied to this change in technique, which has affected her way of working, is the shift in subject matter. She used to photograph the landscape or outside world and so would be experiencing the colours and smells of the environment, but now she is mostly using black and white found imagery to which she does not have any emotional or physical attachments. When questioned about this Woods observes that, 'this has created a space where I can project my own colours onto the images, it's given a distance from what is expected and allowed me to engage closer.' The fascination for the vulnerability of the human head - which presumably drew her to Paolozzi's *Bandaged Head* - seems also to be what has led to her fascination with the raw imagery of Philip Jones Griffiths photographs, or found images of World War I casualties or a bandaged victim from the July 2005 bombings with his tie wrapped around his head. Much of this seems to be intuitive and instinctive: Woods consumes all kinds of seemingly random, often grotesque images in an unpremeditated way, but they start to make sense collectively. In the case of the Philip Jones Griffiths photograph that accompanied the Oriel Davies exhibition of *A Tree A Rock A Cloud*, it condensed various unrelated ideas that she had been considering to do with the work of Paolozzi, Louise Bourgeois, Phyllida Barlow's wrapping *Touch Pieces* from the 1980s, and her own thoughts about 'making sculpture from flat pieces of fabric or flat cast sheets of wax: an idea of how you take something like that and sew it or melt it together to form a shape, in particular a head.' Her use of intuitively connected source material allows her to be free and think about objects and is a way of bringing the concept and the making closer together.

The titles of Woods' paintings are intriguing. Sometimes it seems like they are entirely arbitrary, and to some extent they are, although there is usually a deeper cognitive association. Woods has a long list of names that she has been collecting for years, taken from things she has heard, place names and book titles but she is clear that: 'I never go looking for titles - they always find me.'

They are in no sense descriptive titles, but intended to allow the viewer into the work from another angle. For Woods, like the initial subject matter, the viewer does not need to know why she had used that particular title. The connections between title and imagery instead work on an almost subconscious level: such as *Harry Patch*, which was based on a photograph of a young cuckoo being feed by the host parent, and the title taken from the name of the last surviving British veteran of the First World War who died in 2009. In a similar way, *Silent Suzan* is based on images of the London bombings and a 'Silent Suzan' was a nickname for a type of bomb in the First World War. As Woods says, 'they make sense in my head, they just feel right.' Imagery from the First World War of two bandaged men in the back of a truck was also the starting point for *The Bunion Specialist*, whose title is taken from the name of a book. Woods comments that at the time she 'was reading about all these doctors that were sent out to treat horrific field wounds that were not qualified or who had never seen such mangled bodies, sending a Bunion Specialist to help someone who had lost half their face...' Such source imagery used by Woods is often uncomfortable - material at the edge of acceptable aesthetics - but like the Surrealists she admires, such as Eileen Agar, Paul Nash, Francis Picabia, Joan Miró, she is a mediator. Even at one step removed - after the process of drawing, projecting, cutting, and painting - there are traces of such imagery which can trigger associations in the viewer. She has said that: 'When working on a show like *A Tree A Rock A Cloud* it really interests me to be able to work on a body of paintings that feed off each other, that create a pace of looking, small images, large images, gentle subtle images and others that are not so easy to look at. Opposites and the borders where they meet have always been an interest for me, this is one reason I moved to the Welsh border and the landscape was so tied up in this pull between light and dark.'

The new paintings that Woods is presenting as part of *A Tree A Rock A Cloud* largely concern the bodily, the corporeal. Although she is a very positive person she perceives a constant level of darkness in humanity, or indeed herself, that is mostly contained. It is this tension, the Eros and Thanatos (or instinct of sex and death) that seems to give her new work its unsettling power. When pressed on this Woods acknowledges with matter-of-fact honesty that she has 'felt the struggle between life and death more in the last two years than ever before, maybe this is to do with getting old.' In all of this, like the elephant in the room, the monster in the jar is there reminding us of Woods' ability to mine her own life-experiences and subconscious to create images of visceral and raw power. But actually, we just need to look at the work to discern that for ourselves.