

Seven Eggs

Harewood House 2013

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Clare Woods knows the Yorkshire very well. It is the original home of the sculptors she particularly admires, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, and it is a place which has also had an important and transformative effect on her work. It was her many visits made in preparation for her last exhibition in the region, at The Hepworth Wakefield in 2011, which provided a significant departure point for Woods. Crucially the set of new, large scale lithographs she has made especially for Harewood House advance further the changes she made at that time and continue her recent enquiry into what we might call the wonder and horror of the human head.¹ In preparation for the Harewood works, she began by looking at the grounds but was drawn ultimately to the alabaster tombs in the 15th-century church on the estate, hence 'Suzanne', 'Sylvia', 'Shirley' and 'Sheila'. A head in isolation, even with a pretty name, is a disconcerting presence and makes one think of decapitation

Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river
You can hear the boats go by
You can spend the night beside her
And you know that she's half crazy
But that's why you want to be there²

These lithographs are part of the artistic journey Woods has been on of late and have their roots in the depictions of Brimham Rocks she made for Wakefield, works which have proven so crucial to her recent developments; in the mad and towering natural forms at Brimham, roughly hewn by centuries of erosion, Woods found something corporeal even if it was disfigured and unsettling, but then it has always been the dark and dangerous side of the landscape that has appealed most to her. The resultant monumental landscape paintings looked very human and led her to make a series of works in which this figurative presence was even more defined with a particular interest in the human head. Not portraiture of course, but rather heads which have previously been created by the likes of Moore, Hepworth and a number of more recent sculptors including Barlow, Bourgeois, Giacometti, Paolozzi and Tucker. Or in the case of these lithographs, she has been inspired by unknown carvers who depicted the previous owners of medieval Harewood for a renowned collection of alabaster tombs.

Whilst Woods has always been interested in history, it is hard to imagine that Woods was ever going to be drawn solely to the idyllic landscape Capability Brown created at Harewood; even though 'man-made' and manipulated nature has often appealed to her, the 18th-century Arcadian ideal seems to polite for an artist who has portrayed previously the wastelands of east London. Woods needs something 'other' to truly inspire her. That she found stimulation in a set of alabaster tombs comes as something of a surprise at first, but she has of late been casting a net beyond the mid-20th-century artists she has most often been associated and has been inspired by an Ancient mummy as well as works by the roster of recent artists above. But alabaster is a material that has, until recently, been readily available here and has been used by sculptors for centuries who have exploited its soft, translucent and colourful qualities. It gives the sensation of human skin, which historically made it particularly appropriate for portraying human figures, but it was also used to great effect by Hepworth et al for the organic, surreal forms carved in the 1930s which takes her back to the familiar ground of British modernism.

You look just like Sylvia:
Well you look like her to me
The way she wore her hair then.
Oh the way she used to be.

Clare Woods initially studied sculpture before becoming a painter, and she is almost instinctively drawn towards it still. The oddness of the medieval tombs will have attracted caught her eye; the comic headdresses and hairstyles that make one think of Danish pastries, I think, will have appealed to her sense of humour. However I do not actually feel she was especially concerned about the actual women depicted in the tombs, their personalities, how they looked, when they lived or how they died. In fact she has rechristened them, naming them after songs by Leonard Cohen, Pulp, Billy Bragg and the Smiths, which locates them firmly in the present rather than the distant past. This is not to suggest disinterest on Woods' part, but rather objectivity. Woods likes to create a mental distance between her and her subject matter, conversely this intellectual, cool detachment allows her to engage with it more closely. It is as if she withdraws physically and mentally, and in in isolation she is able to create the psychological space where she can conceive and make work. Being an artist can sometimes be a lonely place.

Is it wrong to want to live on your own?
No, it's not wrong – but I must know
How can someone so young

Sing words so sad?

Sheila take a, Sheila take a bow

talking with Clare Woods is the distance she describes for her subjects. Allows her an objectivity. Objectivity is odd for one of the most engaging works she creates, which draw one in. Engages us and draws us in. And because her subject is tombs, the most subjective of subject matters. Removal from what she depicts, an impartiality for the subject, but slows her to examine the materiality of the objects she depicts.

Rechristens them with names. Characters from contemporary song.

¹ A group exhibition held at the ICA, London in 1953, organised by the artist Roland Penrose and designed by the artist Richard Hamilton, with a catalogue preface by Herbert Read. See R. Penrose, 'The Wonder and Horror of the Human Head: an anthology', Lund Humphries, 1953.

² Leonard Cohen, 'Suzanne', © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC