

Wonder and Horror: the Head, the Rock, Flesh

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The walls in artists' studios are revealing spaces. The imagery collected and pinned onto them can form a kind of map of the artist's mind, or, at the very least, indicators of their points of reference and sources of inspiration: postcards of favourite artworks from museums; photographs torn from magazines and books; film stills printed from the internet. The connection between this material and the subsequent artwork is often obscure - for in the gap that lies therein is the complex process of mediation by the artist; the matter of what they ingest and what they express in their own visual language. In Clare Woods' studio in Hereford a wall in one of the rooms is covered with all kinds of visual stimuli assembled together in fascinating groupings: paintings and sculptures by the artists she admires such as the interior of Stanley Spencer's Sandham Memorial Chapel; a Paul Nash still life entitled *Dead Spring*; a Graham Sutherland *Thorn Head*; an Eduardo Paolozzi bronze of a bandaged head, to mention but a few. These are mixed in amongst photographs of war-scarred landscapes of the Western Front; photographs by Don McCullen and Philip Jones Griffiths of bandaged war victims; images of charcuterie, innards, and birds feeding their young; seventeenth-century still life paintings of dead hares; Roman marble sculptures of victors holding up the head of a vanquished foe; a contemporary photograph of a Jihadist posing with the head of their victim. This is not safe, decorative imagery. It is visceral, fleshy and unsettling. On looking at the wall, textural affinities and visual rhythms begin to emerge between completely unrelated pictures, like auto-association. Juxtaposing disparate imagery that has no connection: a ballerina's foot, sausage-meat, a bandage, a Barbara Hepworth sculpture; micro to macro, Woods makes connections that don't exist in the real world. As with the Comte de Lautréamont's description of a young man as being 'beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella', this is Surrealist dislocation at work. They have been chosen for their visual impact, but what connects them together is the artist's eye and mind, simultaneously intuitive and intellectual.

One wonders about an artist who is drawn to such raw, disturbing, transgressive material. It is an unflinching eye that is unafraid of the darkness that polite society tends to hide away. Clare Woods, it would seem, is hard as nails. She is the kind of artist who will attend an autopsy out of fascination for what lies beneath the skin; who is interested in the way that the carcass of a dead animal loses its tautness when hung up; who sees a formal connection between the foam strips holding together a Phyllida Barlow sculpture and the bandages on the head of a victim of a terrorist bombing. But whilst that eye is unflinching, it is also sensitive and nuanced. Woods is able to identify and interpret in paint unconscious associations that others would not see. In this respect she can be seen as an inheritor of the Surrealist baton; or like Francis Bacon she has the ability able to re-imagine and interpret the world through intriguing and profoundly disturbing imagery drawn from paintings of earlier artists, film and

photography, as he did with the screaming woman from *Battleship Potemkin* or his painting of Pope Innocent X with hanging meat.

When looking at a painting by Woods all of this is hidden, or at least obscured. It becomes a trace within the work, the slightest prompt for a thought process, within a formal structure of paint on panel that can verge on the abstract. Woods' approach to painting is crucial to this process of filtering the rawness of her source material. Her technique creates emotional and mental distance from her initial inspiration. By working in oil on aluminium, and previously in enamel and gloss paints, she produces a quality of flatness characterised by reflective surfaces and an absence of brush-marks. There is no conventional recession or system of perspective, no surface texture, or the tactility of scumbling paint on canvas. Woods is not a 'painterly' painter, but in some ways is a creator of physical objects: her way of forming an image is akin to the accretive and deductive processes of a sculptor: taping and masking areas of paint to create layers and crisp linear shapes; painting flat and building up areas of form. This approach to making reflects her training in sculpture, first at Bath School of Art and subsequently at Goldsmiths College in the early 2000s under Michael Craig-Martin. In the past Woods has described herself as a 'frustrated sculptor', but it is in fact an understanding of sculptural form that underpins her work. So often her paintings are an attempt to understand a three-dimensional form within the constraints of a two-dimensional medium. This is where her wall of images has particular resonance, because Woods does not paint from the motif – when she was painting landscape imagery she was not painting in nature like an Impressionist; when she has painted sculptures she is not standing before them – instead she is working from flat photographs. As in André Malraux's celebrated *Musée Imaginaire (Museum Without Walls)* the medium of photography means that three-dimensional objects are flattened, and a vast form can be condensed so that it loses all sense of scale alongside another image in the collage of source material on her studio wall. This frees up the artist from the constraints of authentic scale, to concentrate on emotional impact, so that a domestically sized sculpture can be exploded into a monumental painting, as with her 20 panel work *The Perseverance* for the University of Aarhus in Denmark, based on an Eduardo Paolozzi sculpture *Shattered Head*. In her earlier works Woods was concerned with landscape, but following her major solo exhibition at The Hepworth in Wakefield in 2012 when she made vast paintings based on the Brimham Rocks, which look like sculptural heads in the Yorkshire landscape, her paintings have increasingly been preoccupied with conveying sculptural form and the human head through line and flat colour. Her approach has resonances with an exhibition called *Wonder and Horror of the Human Head* that was organized by Roland Penrose at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1953, featuring photographs of the heads of Gothic Madonnas alongside tribal masks, ancient carvings, and heads from all periods. The exhibition reflected the existential concerns of artists at the time, such as Jean Dubuffet, Paolozzi, Jean Fautrier and others (all of whom admired by Woods), who saw the human head as a template for universal emotions, often scarred, manipulated and contorted. In a series of four huge lithographs commissioned for the exhibition *The Seven Eggs* at Harewood House in 2013 Woods took as her starting point the medieval stone effigies in All Saints Church

on the Harewood Estate. Although these are some of the greatest examples of alabaster carving from the 15th century period in England, Woods made these carved ladies seem both timeless and contemporary: the scars of time speak of woman's experience rather than a specific historic moment.

The fascination with the vulnerability of the human head is manifested in Woods' paintings of Paolozzi's *Bandaged Head*; her interest in Phyllida Barlow's wrapping *Touch Pieces* from the 1980s, and her 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 painting *Silent Suzan* (2014) takes its title from a nickname for a type of bomb in the First World War; but whilst the title creates an association with an earlier conflict, the image is based on a photograph of the facial bandage on a woman who suffered injuries when a terrorist bomb exploded on a tube train in London in July 2007. Looking at the painting without any of this context, one focuses on the tragicomic qualities of the ghostly mask, with tendrils suggestive of a green man carving, but the underlying vermilion colour of the base layer of paint, with its associations with blood, ultimately sets the psychological tone for the work: anxiety. It is only when she is probed on this that it emerges that Woods' fascination in images of victims of the London bombings is rooted in her own personal experience. On the day of the bombings, she had experienced a panic attack whilst on the Underground at Bethnal Green, and so on leaving the station had taken a bus instead, only for it to be diverted and thus very close by when the explosion occurred on another London bus. Having witnessed the immediate traumatic aftermath she became obsessed with the photograph of the bandaged women on the front of *Time Magazine*. But the images were kept a drawer for over eight years, as she couldn't do anything with them. It was only after Woods had gone through a major operation, during which she had to be resuscitated, that this visceral manifestation of her fears began to emerge in her work. Struck by the brutality of the operation, of feeling trapped and unable to move, she was to realise that: 'my fear and anxiety about what's out there: the terrorist, the ghost, the murderer, had become internal.' It is interesting to note that this coincided with the shift in her work from landscape-based imagery, wherein the suggestion of threat is out in the woods, to focusing on still lives and the human form.

Sitting on the top of a piano in her home is a large jar containing what looks like the remains of a monster from a horror movie. The greyish form preserved in formaldehyde looks alarming, yet has a compulsive beauty; at once repulsive, but with a fascinating, frayed surface. Woods has drawn this strange creature on a number of occasions, exploring its uncanny forms in pencil and watercolour. These drawings are both *memento mori* and self-portraits, albeit highly unconventional for that monster is a section of her colon that was removed during that operation. Woods' drawings are outward expressions of her interior state, the inner self literally disembodied. Her colour palette has become increasingly corporeal: gone are the verdant greens and earth browns that characterised her earlier work, and in their place blood red, lipstick pink, bone white, shit brown. It seems somehow pertinent that one of her reasons for moving from London to rural Hertfordshire with Hughes and their son Sid, then just a baby, had been the anxiety caused by the terrorist attacks. Yet

Woods was not painting a rural idyll free of danger; in her paintings of tree stumps, roots and gnarled organic forms there is a note of disquiet. She was drawn to the poetic language of Mid-Century British Neo-Romanticism employed by artists such as Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland and Ivon Hitchens, and it is telling that the background to these artists work was the uncertainty and omnipresence of the Second World War. 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. Part of the reason for moving to the Welsh Borders was that ‘the landscape was so tied up in this pull between light and dark.’

Invariably the subjects of her paintings are stand-ins for the powerful feelings that lie behind them. She observes that: ‘I do things instinctively and don’t understand until I put them together.’ Whether consciously or not, much of Woods’ recent work is concerned with fragility, vulnerability, mortality and death. The painting *Mrs Henry Hope* might at first seem like an abstract organic composition, but in fact was based on a photograph that Woods’ husband, the artist Des Hughes, had sent her of the poached eggs that he was served for breakfast when staying in a Premier Inn. In the photograph the grey eggs looked like marble, rather than something that could possibly be eaten, but whilst the painting reflects her fascination with their form, it also carries a deeper association with mortality, for after the death of Hughes’ father they had gone to the hospital canteen where the only food had been grey eggs and plum tomatoes, somehow bringing home the banality of death. Woods would make an interesting choice for an Official War Artist: she is able to internalise the complex imagery of brutality and from that place create emotionally resonant, psychologically intense mediations, without dictating any response in the viewer. The intriguing titles of her works such as *Mrs Henry Hope* can seem entirely arbitrary, and whilst they often are, there is usually a deeper cognitive association. The long list of names that Woods has been collecting over the years is long, with titles taken from things that she had heard, place names, book titles. Like the initial subject matter, the viewer does not need to know why she had chosen that particular title for the work, for they are in no sense descriptive, but instead intended to allow the viewer into the work from a different angle. As she says, ‘they make sense in my head, they just feel right.’

In recent series Woods has made paintings of early sculptures by Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore on the mother and child motif. Such a subject presents a formal challenge, as alabaster has such subtle edges and there is no harsh line where brush-marks disappear behind other brush-marks; her usual approach to masking and layering paint. But whilst they reflect her preoccupation with sculptural form, and the love of these artists that she shares with Hughes, in some ways it seems that the sculptural relationships in these paintings are actually proxies or stage props for Woods to explore her own complex feelings to do with motherhood: the protective, loving urges, but also the frustrations, and occasionally the urge to push away. The tensions between the creative impulse and motherhood seem to be curiously and complexly interlinked in these works. Woods is constantly looking at the work of other artists, but the end result is always uniquely an authentic expression of her own vision. So many associations lie behind her work that one could almost overlook the

fact that for a gallery visitor stumbling upon one of her paintings for the first time, without any of this context, their response will be based primarily on the success of the painting as an object: its visual impact, composition and mark-making. Indeed, Woods' paintings tend not to give anything away instead they pose questions to us as viewers. Faced with strange titles and unsettling imagery the viewer is set a challenge, an enigma to solve. But whilst the traces and suggestions of that wall of images are there, like ingredients in a potion, the magic or alchemy comes from Woods' ability to mine her own life-experiences and subconscious to create images of visceral and raw power.