The Beautiful, Ugly Soul

Neil Walton

> *'One is limiting art much too severely when one demands that only the composed soul, suspended in moral balance, may express itself… there is… an art of the ugly soul, as well as an art of the beautiful soul; and in achieving art's mightiest effects—breaking souls, moving stones, and humanizing animals—-perhaps that very art has been most successful.'*
>
> Nietzsche, Human All Too Human

Ascending the dimly-lit concrete stairwell, I approach with trepidation the hephaestian mysteries of Cathie Pilkington's unconscious mind. Or is that her rented studio? Or both? The battered workshop door creaks open to reveal, silhouetted against high factory windows, a primordial tangle of forms, an emerging miscellany of bodies in space; complex, intricate, but unified and essentially sculptural, an aggregation of wildly varied surfaces and textures; glossy, glittering, organic, matt, coarse or delicate. And then there are the images, the characters, the fables, the morals; grotesque, ludicrous, fantastic and disconcerting. The unconscious/studio is looking mighty crowded.

What were these sculptures before they became sculptures? Were they raw materials, plaster, clay, wood, paint? Were they ideas, intentions, memories? Whose memories? Perhaps they were already complete type-forms circulating in the common culture, waiting to be appropriated and recombined. George Steiner writes in *Grammars of Creation* how '…all human constructs are combinatorial. Which is to say that they are *arte-facts* made up of a selection and combination of pre-existent elements.' To create something out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, may be a divine or cosmological possibility, but not for mere humans. Or other animals, for that matter.

Illuminating in this respect is the sculpture *Charity*. It depicts a painful spectacle of childbirth, a multi-tasking bunny-madonna in a tar-spangled nursery of love and suffering. Like a mini-Laocoon her 'sigh of anguish' is silent, and the toddler offspring surrounding her seem oblivious to her pain. Gotthold Lessing would have been offended by the 'ugly hollow' of her outstretched, leporine mouth (though Doris less so). Of course, the productivity of bunnies is proverbial, and if *Charity* is read as an allegory of artistic parturition it engages the old dichotomy of masculine creativity and feminine procreativity. However, this is an ambivalent celebration of fecundity: the flowers below are drowning in blood, sweat and tears. Mother and artist are difficult roles to combine. The Nietzschean superman-artist might need chaos within to give birth to a dancing star, but *Charity* has it outside as well.

The sculptress in the piece entitled *Babs* is also prolific. Obsessively churning out pierced forms, she is floridly manic. Her hands continue working the plaster automatically as she eyes previous sculptures which seem to be sprouting on her studio floor like mushrooms. One doubts that the real Hepworth was ever as totally wired as this. Her 1934 *Three Forms* is an image of serenity and balance, as well as alluding to her recently arrived triplets. But something is driving this duck-sculptor's compulsion to produce endless permutations. Is she struggling through the infinity of possibilities to manifest in a single object the Absolute? Is she doing art therapy, compulsively making reparation for attacks on the maternal womb in infantile fantasy? Or is she a starving duck-artist who has hit on a winning formula to keep the pot boiling?

Like *Babs*, *Potter Pig* is working hard. His pigsty of a workshop is littered with sloppy, brown misshapes: he is not yet potter-trained. He perseveres with desperate piggy pathos, but his tired trotters lack the varied movement and subtle sense of touch that a master potter requires. On first inspection Potter Pig cuts a pitiful and inadequate, if insouciant, figure. Pig-ignorant, you might say: his incompetence seems poignantly to mirror of our own finitude. But he is an ambiguous figure. Pig is the duck/rabbit of abject failure and redemption. In accumulating his botched efforts, Pig is enduring the untidy, uncertain encounter with stuff. Undeterred by logic or premature judgement, he is doing the valuably slow, material thinking of craft, the blindly disordered groping, the expectantly attentive dreaming which Nietzsche claimed underlies the illusion of artistic perfection. Pig isn't a genius or a master: could he be an artist? Keep going, Piggy!

In part, Pilkington's animal artists are a continuation of neglected traditions of popular art, the furtive social criticism of 'topsy-turvy world' prints, the satirical singeries of Rococo decorative artists, the demotic idiom of Staffordshire earthenware figures. However, this work adds in a reflexive commentary about sculpture and craftsmanship. In Pilkington's oeuvre, craft is not identified with nostalgia for some fictionally reliable standards of pre-industrial society. Her work thematizes 'bodging', 'cobbling', 'bungling', 'muddling up', 'jumbling together', while also demonstrating a virtuoso orchestration of technical repertoires from messy or fastidious hand-made-ness to pristine or worn out found-object-ness. In his ingenious study, *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett explores how a narrow version of craft, the mere obsession with getting things right, leads to the deformation of the work itself. 'The good craftsman places positive value on contingency …engaging with difficulty, accident and constraint… allowing the object a measure of incompleteness'. In Pilkington's words 'you need to fuck it up a bit'.

Pilkington's earliest memories of sculpture include a concrete geometric/organic abstraction that she used to climb on or sit in while her mum went shopping in Stockport town centre. She remembers encountering Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth in 'O' Level Art lessons and finding them confusing and ugly. But, interestingly, she cites as an early sculptural awakening her fascination with a drawer full of clutter in the kitchen, a mess of string, tools and an old, ornamental silver cigarette lighter. Pilkington's aesthetic is self-evidently not Hepworth's, but in a roundabout way she might agree with Hepworth that sculpture is 'primitive, religious, passionate and magical'.

Childhood beliefs and religion are thematized in Pilkington's oeuvre in pieces like *Epiphany* and *Levitation* . In *Epiphany* Pilkington reworks the story of Rose Red and Snow White, riffing on the binary oppositions of its narrative structure. An early version of the fairytale has the inseparable sisters, sleeping near a precipice, being looked over and protected by a guardian angel. In Pilkington's refabricated fable (partly inspired by a 70's Ladybird book illustration, often a point of reference), the girls are wide awake, and a sweetly ominous, black-haloed doll-angel has appeared, more like a harbinger of death than a saviour. The significance of this apparition is balanced on the edge of reverence and horror, and frozen in a moment of obscure revelation, the whole tableau-sculpture is a cliff-hanger.

The figures in *Epiphany* have the uncanny presence of waxworks, but Pilkington's work is all 'lifelike' in several ways. Even the most gestural, material pieces have a magical anthropomorphic quality: there is a lifelike interior richness to the work that makes it able to puzzle and provoke anew with each encounter, and to bear the freight of extended analysis without being wrung out or sapped dry. In its genesis, though, the work is anti-analytic. It seamlessly synthesises materials from the cultural unconscious, fusing, blending and layering vectors of subtle, unsettling meaning. Analysis often misses the point: it takes the work too seriously and not seriously enough. As Pilkington wrote after one epic exchange of emails, an extended, navel-gazing, hermeneutic binge; 'Thanks for the therapy. I am going to watch telly now.'

References

Sennett, Richard (2009) *The Craftsman*, London: Penguin

Steiner, George (2002) *Grammars of Creation*, London: Faber and Faber