Cathie Pilkington

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Room 2
44 Lexington Street
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Karsten Schubert London

2 Cathie Pilkington, *Bust*, 2023
Jesmonite, oil paint and wood, 51 × 35 × 35 cm. Edition of 3

> The fullness, serenity, and honor of those depicted naked on the Parthenon friezes was inseparable from the shame of lesser bodies.
> Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone*[1]
>
> In the zoo the view is always wrong.
> John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?'[2]

Cathie Pilkington's horses would struggle to stand, so instead most slouch and loll like painted ladies, stretched supine for the viewer's pleasure. They are peculiar hybrid objects: pony chargers, horse mosquitos, with the bottoms of babies and the legs of adolescents. Their clay and plaster bodies come from the world of serious sculpture – work in progress – but thanks to the fronds of iridescent ribbon curtain spilling from the shelves, they also have one hoof planted in the rainbow unicorniverse.

The mixedness of these *Weird Horses* reads like a mockery of the calculated mingling undertaken by professional animal breeders. We might think of them, too, as sculptors of a kind – shapers of imposed categories of animal life, experts in the judgement of form and balance, creators and guardians of species and their specifications. Refining and guarding the characteristics and 'purity' of a breed is not a neutral exercise, whether applied to humans or to animals (just think of Mark Wallinger's horse portraits *Race Class Sex*, 1992). It implies a hierarchical order of beings, improvement by design.

Horses and dogs are bred for beauty as well as utility. Having trained and constructed these objects of desire, can we unravel animal allure from behaviours and traits we consider seductive in the human? Horses toss their manes and frolic. Dogs flirt. Young women teeter on coltish limbs. We've all felt puppy love.

One of Pilkington's *Weird Horses* gazes over its shoulder like Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* (1814). It's a plausible animal position – one that dogs adopt too. Who learned to seduce from whom?

Instead of the balanced elegance of an English thoroughbred or whippet, Pilkington's *Weird Horses* display their hybridity openly in a collision of origin stories. In body, they are kin to the embryonic, unstuffed cloth foals and lambs spread across the floor in her work *The Scattering* (2021). Those had the worrying limpness of dead things – stillborn domestic animals of the kind once skinned to make children's toys. These new cloth foal bodies are stuffed with straw and plaster; ungainly dead weights, like bits of damp bedding, they are held in position until they firm up.

The overlong resin legs are puppet-like, angular as mantis arms, more like industrial fixtures than body parts. In the past Pilkington has given similar limbs to female figures that hover in a categorical no (wo)man's land between doll, figurine and sculpture. *Twinkle* (2014) is a tall girl figure with overlong, cloth-patterned wonky legs – perhaps the result of a clumsy repair? *Reclining Doll* (2013) has legs like boomerangs. Such misfit limbs bust through any pretence of verisimilitude. They make otherwise lifelike figures a little freaky. In a gleefully subversive move, Pilkington has exhibited her *Degas Dolls* – alien-limbed dolly sculptures supported by armatures – in the life rooms of London's Royal Academy of Arts and Brighton University for *Anatomy of a Doll* in 2017, and again the following year during a residency at Dorich House Museum in London. These are places of study, where art students draw from plaster casts of classical statuary as well as from life models. Pilkington wants us to learn, but also to question what it would be 'right' or 'wrong' to look at and learn from.

The *Weird Horses*' heads and deep necks borrow coiled muscularity from the Horses of Saint Mark, the copper *quadriga* that stamped and snorted above the portico of the Basilica in Venice (now displayed within to protect them from pollution). More than once they were looted as spoils of war: over two centuries ago they were taken from Venice by Napoleon, and five hundred years before that, plundered by the Venetians from the Hippodrome at Constantinople. Their origin – Greek

or Roman – is uncertain, but they have become emblems of Empire, witnesses to transitions of power over millennia. This *quadriga* also lent its name and profile to a 1935 picture by Eileen Agar, an apocalyptic foursome painted while Italy was under the fascist regime of Mussolini. It was also one of the only works by a woman shown at the First International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in 1936.

The eyes of the Horses of Saint Mark are expressive and lifelike, incised to suggest a pupil and an illuminated, active gaze. In their place, Pilkington's horses have holes punched straight through the head – not even eye sockets, just an absence that makes them object-like. It's an uncanny effect she has reached for before – in the breasted, girl-faced owl of *Messenger* (2019) and the patterned Saint Sebastian of *Dazzle* (2020) – denying us the satisfaction of an engagingly lifelike creature. They are eyeless, hollow things, like damaged pieces of ancient sculpture that have lost the fragments of shell or enamel that once gave them plausible vivacity.

Arranged in various positions on the artist's worktable, Pilkington's *Weird Horses* greet one side-on, recalling figures in a classical frieze. Like the naked human men alongside them, the horses that Pheidias designed for the Parthenon frieze epitomised equine perfection – muscled, fit, ready to charge. They clad the temple of Athena, goddess of war, and broadcast the physical and mental acuity of the city's fighting force, coached in combat and rhetoric, their uncovered bodies displayed high on the raised temple for all to see, suggesting openness of speech and intention. As the sociologist Richard Sennett reminds us, the Parthenon frieze also reflected the hierarchy of bodies in Athenian society: democracy was the privilege of able-bodied free men. Women, children, slaves, foreigners and those with illnesses or disabilities were excluded.

Somewhere between toys, sculptures and models for a monument, Pilkington's horses broadcast a rather different message, and unlike the Parthenon frieze, their parade is decorated with sparkling ribbon streamers. There is something archaeological about the stashes of spare body parts on shelves and the notes and numbers scrawled onto them. We can look at this worktable and imagine its component parts as found

fragments that the artist has discovered and is now piecing together in the belief that all were once part of a common whole.

Pilkington makes us aware of 'the artist' as an authorial figure, though this 'artist' is often a construct in themselves. *Babs* (2010) is part Barbara Hepworth, part sexy cartoon duck. *Potter Pig* (2010), a porcine ceramicist. With their complex, smothering installations, earlier shows at Karsten Schubert Gallery reimagined the space as though it were a site of storage and assemblage from which an unidentified artist had temporarily departed. In *Weird Horses*, we might look at the worktable and ask whether things are being assembled or taken apart – is this a repair shop or a dissecting table? What unnatural practices are taking place here in the name of art? Surrounded by body parts and tools, there is something witchy to this absent artist who brings new monsters to life. The term 'uncanny valley' is often used to describe the gulf of discomfort that sits between humans and their close but unconvincing imitators – artificial intelligences and humanoid machines. It's a phenomenon that has been deployed for decades by the designers of movie monsters. Sure, you can build a slime-shooting green alien with a thousand limbs, but if you really want to scare people, create a monster that looks plausibly familiar but upsettingly 'wrong' – demonic pets, possessed children, broken dolls.

This uncanny has long been Pilkington's territory. The early sculptures *Alasdair* (2002) and *Dick* (2003) are disconcertingly lifelike dogs (the first a chihuahua, the second an elderly Jack Russell, currently taking a nap in the Keeper's Studio at the RA). In the two decades since, she has teased at the sympathetic response, seeing how far a human or animal figure can be pushed away from faithful representation while still exercising some kind of appeal. What happens if the colour is wrong and a body is rendered in monochrome? Or if the limbs don't match? Or the eyes are missing? What if it's unfinished or dismembered? What if everything about this figure – from the armature supporting it, to the very evident nature of the construction materials, to the words and bits of tape labelling its body parts – tells us that it's an artifice, a constructed thing, the fruit of human skill and imagination?

If, despite all this, we find Pilkington's *Weird Horses*

appealing, what is it that draws us to them? This question reaches to the fundamentals of sculpture and its specific impact, because, it seems to me, what draws us irresistibly to these objects is our desire to touch them. While they retain the colours and patterning of the materials from which they are constructed (and even, in some cases, from the paper they were laid on to dry), the actual texture of these materials – cloth, plaster, resin, clay – has a velvety mattness that evokes skin. They curve and wrinkle like real bodies. Their sculpted flesh has the inert vulnerability of a baby animal in a specimen jar. In scale, these horses recall gawky children – we could carry them in our arms. The (rational) optic and the (emotional) haptic are at odds. Despite everything we can observe of their artifice, they still register in some way as helpless newborns.

Soaked in a watery sequence of prismatic colours, the series *Spectrum* pictures horses *in utero*, folded in on themselves and reaching awkwardly towards the birth canal. Flooded with light and surrounded by deep colour, this womb looks like a cave illuminated by a passageway to the world beyond. In 'Why Look at Animals?' John Berger writes about teddy bears and zoos, and notes that the rise of both coincided with that of the modern city and its human occupants' alienation from other major lifeforms. The artificial menageries offered to young children were developed in an era when their lives were no longer evidently intertwined with other species'. In the world of pre-school play, 'cow' and 'horse' have been reduced to symbolic entities further and further removed from living creatures.

While they may not have been toys, exactly, some of the earliest sculptures were carvings of animals made in bone or wood, small enough to be gripped in a hand and carried on the person. Pilkington's paintings of horses in caves belong to a lineage of horses painted in caves that goes back tens of thousands of years, to when horses were all wild and full of the animating magic of the world. In many cultures, caves were considered analogous to the womb: the uterus of the earth, in which newly formed rock could be seen, still wet, in the form of stalactites. In the ancient cultures of the eastern Mediterranean, cave and womb alike were sites of creation where matter was

given form – the Egyptians used the same word for 'uterus' and 'mineshaft'.

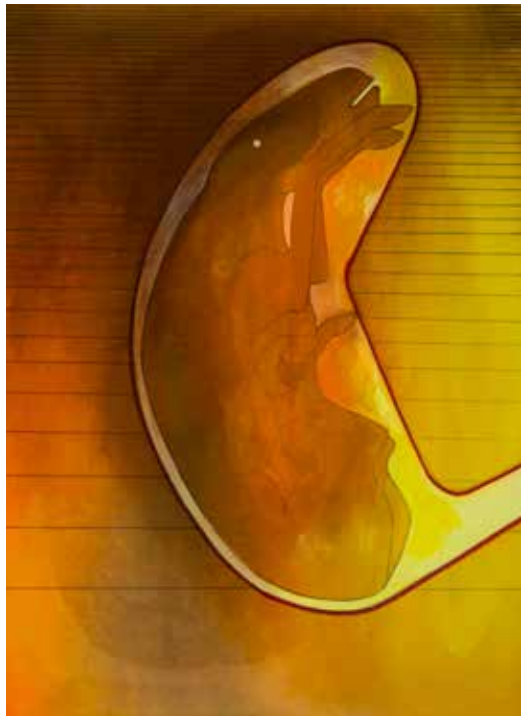
With their hollow eyes, the foetal forms of *Spectrum* relate directly to Pilkington's sculptures; they are part obstetrics diagram, part process image, in which an object passes through a border zone to become part of the world. The sly suggestion of the artist as mother is a motif in Pilkington's work: an early version of the floppy, cloth-covered foetuses that now form part of the *Weird Horses* first appears in a work called *Mother* (2010), in which a fairy-tale nanny goat diligently stitches and forms a giant baby creature from straw and pieces of old blanket – a miracle of creation! Taking the horse off its pedestal, Pilkington reimagines the sculptor and their role: as toymaker, teacher, shaman, mother, midwife, witch.

Hettie Judah

1 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, Faber & Faber, London, 1994, p.44.
2 John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?' (1977), reprinted in Filipa Ramos (ed.), *Animals* (Documents of Contemporary Art), Whitechapel Gallery, London/MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2016, p.68.

Cathie Pilkington, *On the Table*, 2023
Fabric, plaster, straw, resin, car filler, paint, masking tape, rubber, linoleum, paper, glitter curtain and wood, 165 × 305 × 100 cm

24 Cathie Pilkington, *Spectrum 1–4*, 2023
Felt-tip pen and acrylic on linen board, 12 works, each 61 × 44 cm








26 Cathie Pilkington, *Spectrum 5–12*, 2023
Felt-tip pen and acrylic on linen board, 12 works, each 61 × 44 cm

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