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*"And the Lord God formed
man of the dust of the
ground, and breathed into
his nostrils the breath of
life; and man became
a living soul"*

Genesis 2:7

My first meeting with Vanilla Beer took place when a mutual family friend held a drinks reception at The Royal Academy Schools. Upon meeting Beer, I was immediately struck by this energetic and outgoing woman in her skull patterned dress and trainers. After speaking with her briefly and then later researching her work, I was intrigued. A few months later I found myself travelling to the South of France to stay with the artist for a few days, and see her recent paintings for myself in her studio.

EARLY CAREER

Beer's early art education was at the Farnham School of Art, where she studied traditional drawing techniques under Bryan Ingham (1936–1997). She went on to study at the more experimental Walthamstow School of Art, where at the time they were exploring an interdisciplinary approach to art education, leading to collaborations between the sciences and art. Her contemporaries at Walthamstow included performance artist Brian Catlin and the illustrator Min Cooper. She later shared a studio with the Lancastrian born painter Bernard Heslin. Beer's early work focussed on non-figurative painting and installations, which were exhibited at venues including The Royal Festival Hall, The De La Warr Pavilion, The Barbican Concourse Gallery and Halima Nalecz's Drian Gallery.

FOOD PAINTINGS AND ESPERAZA

Significant commercial success came to Beer with a series of 'food portraits' made in 2006. She had recently left London and moved to Esperaza, an area in the rural South of France of historically important medieval villages, with a vibrant bohemian community. Beer has become very much a part of this creative and unconventional neighbourhood, starting up the local life drawing group and exhibiting in the regional galleries. After enjoying a few days in her company, I became accustomed to expecting the unexpected, from the tortoise that was lodging in Beer's house (on loan from her friend who is a sorcerer) to wandering into a tiny rural café and finding the walls filled with Beer's artworks.

Vanilla lives and works in two interconnected townhouses. Her vast studio takes up the attic of both premises and is filled with rambling plants and sunlight, which floods through skylight windows. Life drawing sketches are pinned to the walls, paints and canvases are dotted around the studio and at the easel we find Beer's version of a Ripley Scroll, a work in progress that is customarily rich in symbolism.

When Beer moved to France and found herself in these quite unique surroundings, it had a dramatically liberating effect. 'I have never felt so integrated. I live and work here and I feel at ease in this countryside, with the buildings and with the people' she says. Having previously laboured over a single painting for 18 months, she was now producing a completed painting each day. Working quickly the artist faithfully painted a visual diary of the food she ate then painted French phrases across the canvas. Through these paintings Beer explored the cultural differences of language and diet between her birthplace and new home. In the mornings at the local market she bought the food for that day's painting, grappling with French phrases, which she later committed to canvas.

The series was exhibited predominantly in France and received an overwhelmingly positive response from the art buying public, which wanted these quirky studies for their homes. In short, the series was 'a hit' and Beer was faced with the age-old question of 'what next?'

THIS HUMAN CLAY

Wary of self-pastiche, the artist then turned her attention to the nude figure. Throughout Beer's career, she has been attracted to the containment that the painted figure offers. Having spent 40 years learning to draw accurately, she set about trying to disentangle and un-pack these technical skills. Initially this involved experiments with wax and invisible marks, which progressed onto using multiple drawing instruments at the same time. Picasso is quoted as saying that it took him 'four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child'. Beer faced a similar challenge with unlearning her classical training and finding a new balance between the intellectual and the instinctive. Laboriously she painted exact copies of her sketches, focussing on the movement of the paint. Moving away from miniature size of the food paintings, Beer started to work on large-scale canvases,



CATWOMAN, 2011, Oil on canvas, 73 x 60cm



HERMAPHRODITCAT GOD, 2009, oil on canvas, 61.5 x 50cm



CHRONOSETTE, 2009, oil on linen, 102 x 81cm



THE NAKED CELLIST, 2011, oil on canvas, 80 x 200cm



SERMON ON THE MOUNT, PRAGUE, 2011, oil on canvas, 1 x 1m



THE FATES, 2011, oil on canvas, 1 x 1m

experimenting with iridescent paints and new techniques.

Beer has been working on *This Human Clay* series for six years, and gradually over this period a coherent collection of artwork has emerged that explores the Western language of mythology. 'It is a mixture of classical mythology and my own personal mythos that interests me' Beer explains.

Hybrid creatures started to appear and shape-shift or morph throughout the paintings. At first in *Sermon on the Mount (Prague)*, we find a half-horse, half-man figure, looking like a modern Savile Row besuited version of the Greek centaur. He appears next as the male harpy in the *Naked Cellist*, a winged beast that claws the air in front of him, playing an invisible cello with his hands frozen in motion. Next he is a boy trapped in a tiger's skin in *Shaman at Nice*, then as Pan, the horned god who dances naked by the river in *Seven Maids Move in Seven Time*, finally morphing into a two-headed fox in the *Sunset Thief* painting.

Beer's work is based in classical, historical and personal mythologies. This in itself can present the modern audience with a difficulty. There was a time in the 18th century when the art cognoscenti all came from the same class. They had received a similar education, which equipped them to easily understand allusions to classical Greek and Roman mythology. History painters at this time could refer to myths, stories from the Bible, and increasingly to historical events, knowing that their audience would understand their coded meanings. Those days, however, have passed and we no longer have a shared mythology and so the audience now has to acquaint itself with the intended references. When autobiography is turned into personal mythology, and mixed with classical elements, poetic, yet at times ambiguous, messages are created.

How can the artist help the viewer to decode their iconography? One means is by using words in the form of titles, captions, lectures and catalogue texts. Beer herself is very articulate at explaining the intricacies of her paintings. Here we find ourselves in the terrain explored, sometimes to his personal cost, by the artist R. B. Kitaj.

Beer spent a number of years as Kitaj's studio assistant and remained close friends with both the artist and his wife, the painter Sandra Fisher. Beer's friendship with the couple has had a noticeable impact on her work and this is especially apparent in

the paintings of *This Human Clay* series. We see in particular Kitaj's influence in the brightly coloured figurative paintings with their richly layered compositions, historical references and complex use of iconography.

Kitaj ran into difficulties with the critics by being a little too articulate about his pictures, especially in regard to the 1994 Tate retrospective where the critics seemed to resent him stepping into their territory, the written word. The idea that a picture's meanings are not immediately evident and exhausted at a single glance is key to the traditions to Western narrative painting. It is only with some forms of late Modernism, decorative art and quasi-advertising art, that such instant messages are conveyed.

And so we, as viewers of Beer's work, have to be prepared to do a little work ourselves on the subjects that she depicts. The title of this series, for example, seems to refer to the title 'The Human Clay' that Kitaj used for an exhibition that he organised in 1976. Kitaj brought together Francis Bacon, Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud and Leon Kossoff, to demonstrate the power of what he termed 'The School of London'. The essential argument that Kitaj was making through this exhibition was the recurrent importance of the human figure in life, experience and art. Fundamental to Kitaj's practice was drawing from the figure and this, as in so much else, one can clearly see in Beer's work.

Beer's painting *Palais de Danse Macabre* is a typically complex, ambiguous and enigmatic image, juxtaposing a skull with Vanilla's pet hen Bella; a ballerina with a person in a wheel chair; and a priest with a platinum haired woman wearing Dior-style sunglasses, within a somewhat barren landscape. Our first real clue as to its meaning is the text 'Palais de Dance Macabre' which appears at the top of the fairground carousel, on which the subjects are arranged.

The Danse Macabre, or dance of life and death, has been a richly potent and recurring theme in the visual arts since The Middle Ages. All walks of life are seen as equal in death, from the religious figurehead, to the working man or child, no one escapes the reaper who dances amongst them. Historically it has been used to give to visual form to the unthinkable; that life and death are intricately entwined and inevitable.

Beer has mixed the still resonant image of the Danse Macabre, with her own personal references. We see here the cycle of life, from



PALAIS DE DANSE MACABRE, 2012, oil on canvas, 100 x 160cm



SUNSET THIEF, XIV, UNION, 2011, oil on canvas, 74 x 60cm



LA VOYEUSE, 2009, oil on canvas, 90 x 60cm



JOB OF UZ, 2011, oil on canvas,
120 x 80cm



SHAMAN AT NICE, 2011, oil on
canvas, 120 x 80cm



SEVILLE WOMAN, 2013, oil on
canvas, 51 x 71cm

the charming youthful ballerina, who is based on Beer as a young woman, to the elderly man in the wheelchair, who is based on Beer's father. The blonde woman with the mystical symbols on her dress is based on an American called Marilyn, who organised tours of the French region where Beer lives, for people interested in Mary Magdalene, 'the patroness of wayward women'. The skull in the left hand corner of the painting offers a constant reminder of death, while the bishop, smiling like The Joker, can be seen as symbolising the promised, although maybe dubious salvation of religion.

In *The Fates* we are introduced to the Greek myth of the Moirai, or 'The Three Graces' as it is sometimes known. These three women are destiny incarnated, weaving and playing with the thread of life that is passed between them. From birth to death, they predict the outcome of one's existence. At times they can be nurturing and protective, at others savage, whimsically inviting death with the snip of a cord. Often associated with witchcraft, The Fates have historically been portrayed as unforgiving and stern characters, perhaps suggesting an underlying suspicion that arises when a group of women congregate. What exactly are those women gossiping about as they sit under the tree spinning? What power does the female collective hold?

Beer's version is more fragile and compassionate. Set in a lush, natural oasis that is based on the local region where the artist lives, two naked female figures and a skeletal bird are grouped together. The flowing thread of life links the characters; in this instance it appears as a vibrant red cord.

We should never lose sight of the fact that a painting is not just a collection of iconographic images, but it is also a physical object, made by the artist's hand, with elements based firmly in an observed reality. This is very much the case with the foreground figure, who looks away from the viewer, and seems based very strongly on observation. Here again, Beer emphasises the importance of life drawing, which is a discipline that the artist practices every week in the local village hall, where friends and neighbours take it in turns to model for the group. It is an anatomically accurate drawing and yet the elbow of the left arm seems of a different order, as it becomes about the application and qualities of paint, rather than just depicting structure.

This painting also witnesses the artist's commitment to the 'first marks'. By allowing the discrepancies between the depiction and

the object to show, Beer does not hide but in fact emphasises the artifice of the process. How often has one stood in a gallery and heard an amateur critic announce that the artist has got the perspective or the hands and feet wrong? To do this misunderstands the artist's intention and freedom of expression. The artist, it could be argued, is not tied to a photographic reproduction of the world. They are at liberty to shift and change perspective, or play with scale in order to fit their poetic conceptions and the compositional imperatives of the image.

Much like the figures in *The Fates*, Beer has woven the threads of her dream world, with classical mythology, archetypal motifs and her own personal experience. 'I want to explore the true essence of the psyche, what is real, what is learnt and what is imposed' Beer explains. 'Something may appear in a dream, or it could be an animal or person that I have met which triggers a series of associations that I will work with. Everybody has these experiences where they stumble across things that interest them and you can let it go, or let it grow'.

Finally, let us consider Beer's painting of *Job of Uz*. The biblical figure of Job, despite being a man who lived righteously, had God's protection removed from him to test his love. Satan instructed God to take his wealth, his children, and his physical health in order to tempt Job to curse God. Beer explains that 'the Book of Job is an important book in The Bible as it has been used as a text to examine the nature of suffering and how one bears it'. The painting shows the anguished, abandoned man kneeling in the desert. Job's eternal suffering is referenced in the symbol of eternity that is etched into the painting. His body is undifferentiated from the surrounding earth, apart from the drawn line that defines his outline. In Beer's treatment, as the earth and the body merge, Job truly becomes the stuff of human clay.

Beer reflects on *This Human Clay* and the path it has taken, saying that 'the thing about painting is that it isn't about the solitary painting, but a continuum; where you have come from and where you are going; the influences along the way; the work of others that you have taken on board; and the way you are always looking towards the next painting. I guess that is why one does it really. God knows why else!' the artist laughs.

Zoey Goto



BLANQUETTE NIGHTS, 2012, oil on canvas, 51 x 71cm



SEVEN MAIDS DANCE IN SEVEN TIME, 2007, oil on canvas, 60 x 72cm



LA MAGDALENE, 2011, oil on canvas, 61 x 98cm



PARENTS, 2012, linen mounted on wood, 23 x 20cm