

## Vera Klute – Parallel Universes

Vera Klute's most recent work, to be exhibited in this show for the first time, is concerned with life cycles, with birth and generation, with gleaming white porcelain sculptures of foetuses in the womb and delightful combinations of portraiture and animation in short video works of three generations of women in her family, her mother, herself and her five year old daughter. But it is also concerned with the studio as a cockpit of creativity, a rich breeding ground where she can generate artwork about the biological process, using the fertile ground of her studio and her art as a way of thinking about the phases of life from birth to death, the mechanisms of the body and the underlying psychological states that are prompted by it. But this is not just a twenty-first century rehash of the Renaissance 'ages of man' theme. Klute brings an acute sense of the commonality between man and other living organisms and their shared vulnerability, a kind of democracy of living creatures that was never a feature of the Renaissance. The foetuses emerging from the womb, in the *Flesh and Blood* series (pages 5-9) look to the unaccustomed eye more like a delicacy for consumption than the biblical 'flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood'. The views into the womb are framed by sharply cut lines that suggest both the surgeon's scalpel and flesh on the butcher's block. No matter how seduced we are by the delicate, glazed and textured porcelain we cannot escape the brutal fact that flesh and blood signify more than family connections.

If the work evokes a democratisation of man and the rest of the natural world, it also offers an opportunity to think about a classless approach to art, an approach that is more likely to be influenced by the most banal of domestic activities, and techniques learned on the internet than any kind of reverence for art historical hierarchies. The work in this show could be said to be a direct, but subtle challenge to the 'good breeding' and propriety of that artistic canon. In earlier drawings, shown at the Butler Gallery in 2011, the *Public Pool* group (pp. 32-33), Klute presented the scantily clad bodies to be seen at beaches

and swimming pools with ghostly undertones of the architectural cartouches from Michelangelo's Medici Tombs or the baroque churches that she was taken to for religious services as a child. With the lightest of touches Michelangelo's idealised nudes – the highest achievement of Renaissance art – are equated to the unremarkable, ordinary body. Even when she is at her most serious, Klute cannot avoid those playful references whether to existence itself, belief systems or fine art.

Although still a very young artist, Klute has been building up an impressive portfolio of commissions, prizes, her own self-generated work, and inclusion in important group and solo exhibitions since she graduated from college a decade ago. People who see her work are amazed initially by her understated but seemingly limitless creativity, enchanted by her quiet sense of humour and then utterly blown away by the technical quality of everything she turns her hand to. *Breeding Ground* provides a good moment to take stock of the disparate directions of her creativity at this point in her career. Although only ten years out of college, she has enough established work, from previous exhibitions, to include some of it as a reference point for her contemporary work. So far Klute has drawn, painted still life pictures and portraits, made kinetic sculptures from card and paper, created animations with a modern take on collage – the digital engaging with the late medieval of Hieronymous Bosch - and produced tapestries and installations using found objects. For her solo exhibition at the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny in 2011, she entertained audiences with a pseudo- scientific travelogue, inside the human body, which managed to be both humorous and anxiety-generating.

For an artist of such intelligence and whose work alludes so deftly to grand concepts such as mortality, the parallel universes of science and culture, the relationship of the individual and the herd, the uncanny and the brutally scientific, it is particularly interesting that she has taken a course

diametrically opposite to that of the Conceptualists whose influence has been all powerful within Modernism and in art schools since the 1960s. The Conceptualists argued that it doesn't matter who made the physical artwork, it is the artist's underlying idea that is important. According to that view the hand of the artist is no longer central to the work. It is a measure of Klute's independence, that she could withstand pressures to conform to that from the outset of her practice and that she continues to value the process of making. Even when using found- objects like the dead birds in her installation *Birds* (pp. 42-43) at the Ashford Gallery in 2014, she taught herself taxidermy and personally stuffed every one of the bodies herself.

That does not diminish the value of the idea however. It is just that she recognises that the investment of her time and attention is also part of investigating and understanding the concept. Making the work is about her own learning as much as it is a desire to share the results with a wider audience. No surprise then, that she has perfected the art of drawing in a very individual style. There are no romantic gestures, no bravura flourishes. What makes the drawings so recognisably hers is, in fact, the absence of such personalised signs. Instead the scientific truth of the line in relation to its subject is everything and each hatched area of shadow is applied with short, measured, staccato-like pencil marks. Every detail of her finished work has been worked out over time and she can work on many projects simultaneously.

It's not unusual for contemporary artists to excel in a number of disciplines or to follow the advice of the conceptualists and use the work of others in the service of their ideas. What makes Klute different is that she can straddle the world of ideas but at the same time, perfect the making process for herself. She is an artist who is at once a painter, a sculptor, a new media artist, who also embraces many of the processes of modernism. Not

only that, however, she pursues different processes within each of the art-disciplines too, so she is both a carver (polystyrene), a modeller (clay and wax), she draws, she paints (still life and portraits), she adds animation and uses collage and video, she stuffs birds, and sews tapestries, she uses an exhausting range of materials and all as part of her own investigation of an idea and what is appropriate to it. She is a jack of all trades, impossible to pin down, but never compromising on standards of excellence and finish.

Although she studied art formally at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Klute taught herself many of the techniques she draws upon in her work. The way she reacted to the noise of the streets in Dublin's inner city was typically to comment on it in a medium that could hardly be more synonymous with silence and slow time. She taught herself tapestry and made a number of images where the sound is rendered more intrusive because it is tightly controlled, stitch by soundless stitch. Having, against strong competition, won the Hennessy Prize at the National Gallery of Ireland in 2015, with a portrait painting of *Anne Ryder* (p. 38), she used the prize money to buy a kiln and taught herself enough about ceramics to make the *Flesh and Blood* series although, like the tapestries, in a medium that the opposite of what might be expected, hard, not soft like flesh, and pristinely white. Even the process of firing involved in making ceramic sculptures has,

in this instance an uncomfortable association with cooking meat. Yet, at the same time she continued her drawing and painting practice with a group of kaleidoscopic drawings of body parts – hands, fingers, legs and heads - and a series of witty still life paintings of her kitchen window with children's toys, kitsch ornaments and weather effects. The net effects of all of this work is the *Cluster* drawings, the video animations, *Lara*, *Self-Portrait* and *Mum* and the still life paintings *Wolves*, *Unicorn*, *Skeleton* and *Gnome* (pp. 11-27). Yet there is no sign of

haste, no question of corner cutting, no wavering of the precise line.

The *Cluster* drawings can be read as a kind of modern Gothic, a witch's sabbath ritual of tightly compressed body parts, ready to burst apart from their own inner tensions, yet held together by the rational, mathematical arrangement of the kaleidoscope. That taut spiral of movement inexorably progressing to its end, is an underlying theme in much of her work. It can be seen again in the foetal struggles in *Flesh and Blood*, and there are hints of it in the video animations (pp. 13-15), where the steady gaze of the three sitters is mediated through the surrounding circles of pattern - colour and brightness for the child, more thoughtful and meditative for the older women, with subtle suggestions of time passing in the shrivelled leaves around the self-portrait. That hint of the gothic is mixed with humour in the paintings, a toy unicorn rearing up against a stormy sky, a miniature skeleton beside a knife block, reminders of mysterious or wild animal forces, but all contained within a domestic window ledge. It's as if the containment of the kaleidoscope has been removed and the separate, mysteriously incongruent elements have been allowed to spread horizontally, only to be held just as firmly by the architecture. The paintings relate to Klute's biggest video installation to date, *The Grand Scheme* (pp. 44- 45), shown at The Lab in 2015, where again, the circle of movement gave way temporarily to a series of horizontal zones, linked by an extraordinary Christmas tree, each zone interrupting the impact of the one immediately above or below, with moving body parts that never connect, clapping hands and a skeletal head. Meandering maggots and jet planes, interestingly presented on the same scale, flitted across the top and bottom registers, each at their own speed. It was at once a medieval garden of earthly delights and a frightening place where we want to be but cannot find a foothold.

It is hard to conceive of a more prolific output. Vera Klute had her first solo exhibition in The LAB in 2006, the year she graduated. In the intervening years, she has had many shows, at the Wexford Art Centre, in the Butler Gallery, the Ashford Gallery and the Lab again, not to mention her group shows and commissions. It is something of a relief then that she takes her inspiration from what is happening immediately around her, the street noises, the people she knows, the sometimes impolite and messy functions of the body, the objects on her kitchen window, the essence of the mundane. Her 2009 show at the Wexford Art Centre was simply called *Finish Your Plate*, a quasi-scientific and comic journey through the human digestive system. It's hard to imagine anything more banal; the exhibition of course, was incredibly inventive and entertaining. Except that no matter how much scientific knowledge we bring to it, and no matter how well we think we know the ordinary, the mystery is always there, tantalising us, exciting us, waiting in the shadows to catch us, feeding our anxieties.

### **Catherine Marshall, April 2016**

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