

Wilma Cruise The Alice Diaries



*Article by
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*Clay. It's rain, dead leaves, dust, all of my dead ancestors.
Stones that have been ground into sand. Mud. The whole
cycle of life and death (Martine Vermeulen).*

WILMA CRUISE (B 1945) IS A WELL-KNOWN AND established South African artist who sculpts in clay as well as in bronze and cement, often accompanying these three-dimensional works with drawings. She is one of the few South Africans who has managed to straddle the disciplinary divide between art and ceramics, which is still considerable in this country's art practice and discourse. She is, on the one hand, a productive and critically acclaimed artist whose works and commissions are found in numerous public and private collections and, on the other, a ceramics writer and historian who wrote the definitive book on



Facing page and above: *The Alice Diaries*. 2012.
 Ceramic installation. Dimensions vary.
 Facing page photo by Ant Strack.
 Above photo by Anthea Pokroy.

South African ceramics (*Contemporary Ceramics in South Africa*) and who participates in the ceramics world, for example, she exhibits in and judges national ceramics exhibitions.

Her approach to art making has long consisted of an exploration of large-scale figures, let's call them bodies, modelled in clay; of men and women, horses, sheep and other animals. No matter whose body it is, all are powerful in their simplification. Most of the extraneous details, even arms and facial features, are eliminated. This is most true of her human figures, which are generally armless, footless, faceless, hairless and somehow, although one reads them as either male or female, sexless. They are hunched and drooping, formless. By contrast, Cruise seems empathetic, more connected, to the animal figures she makes, which are more whole, often more alert and sometimes more detailed than the humans.

In a recent exhibition held in Johannesburg at the prestigious Everard Read Gallery, Cruise showed *The Alice Diaries*, which comprises a large installation of hundreds of figures made in clay. These various bodies relate to characters from "Alice in Wonderland" and "Alice Through the Looking Glass", although they are in no way illustrations from the stories. Cruise juxtaposes many clay bodies of humans and animals together in the installation, and the viewer walks through and around them, and must interact with them and their space. On this exhibition, the hare has eyes, paws, feet and genitals; a baboon has all her features, as well as fingers, toes and dugs. What connects them, human to animal, is that all are powerful, monumental, minimally modelled, all have loosely and even roughly sketched bodies that are strangely expressionless and mute, while they are simultaneously expressionist and suggestive of many potential meanings. All have a robust and undeniable physical presence and are

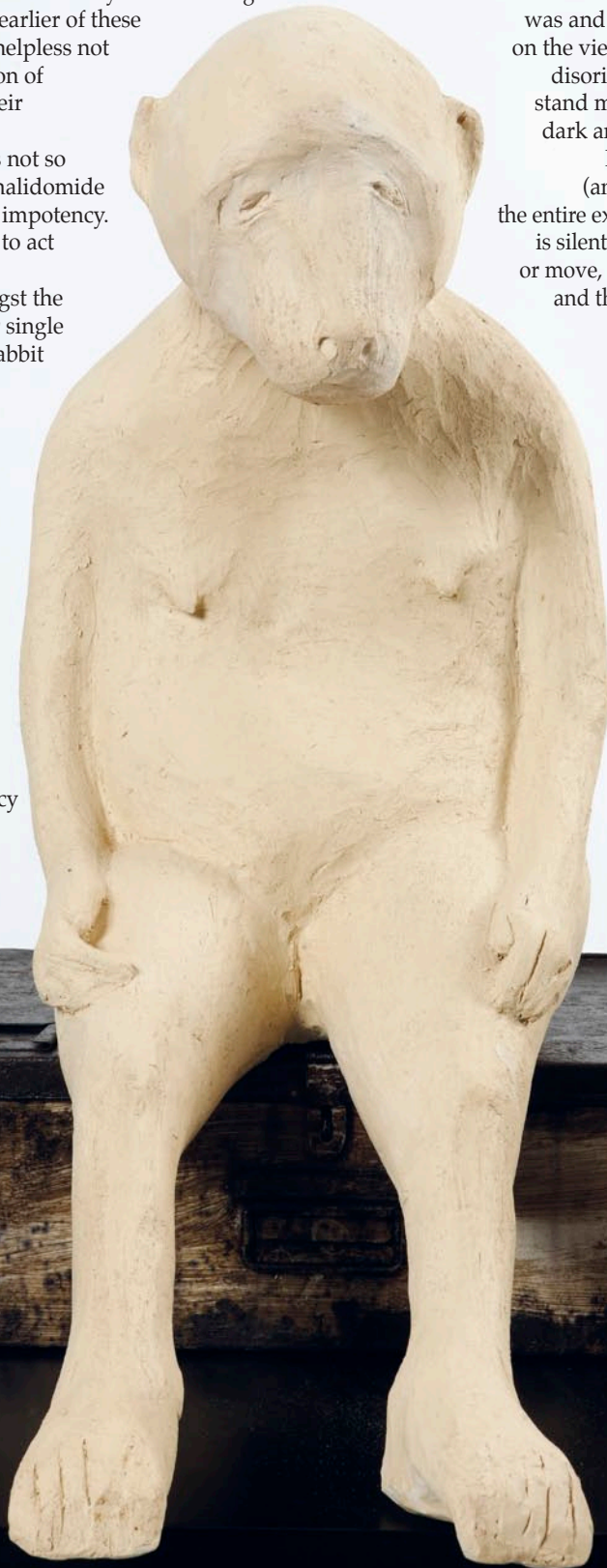
very much present in their materiality and mass.

In the rooms leading to the main gallery and the walkway past a pond outside the gallery itself there are both single and grouped figures, which reflect and anticipate the main installation. For example, in the approach to the main gallery, a dog, a cat and a rabbit perch rather jauntily on a pile of suitcases. Their pricked-up ears and alert poses give them a quizzical air: what do they observe about the humans who walk past and gaze at them? Who and what are they? Who and what are we? While they seem comfortable in their urban, architectural setting, this does not apply to the next figure, a larger-than-life-size baboon that sits slumped with his feet in the pond, gazing forlornly over the Johannesburg traffic below. He seems mournful, alone, despondent. Although lacking modelled details that would suggest some definitive meaning, these animals are expressive of some nameless condition, some way of being before or beyond language. It is difficult to name their mood or expression, but one feels it strongly. The baboon, particularly, appears as mute, tamed and, as an essentially wild animal, misplaced and, by association, mistreated.

In the main gallery, the installation itself consists of many figures, mostly 1000 clay babies, lying in ranks on the gallery floor. They have truncated limbs and their features are either blurred or distorted. Some have snouts and are transforming into piglets, in the way that the Duchess's baby did in Alice in Wonderland. Prior to this metamorphosis, the Duchess's baby suffers pepper, blows, shakes and sneezing. In a related way, these myriad distorted babies suggest helpless suffering and damaged lives, as well as distress and dislocation. They

could also raise contemporary problems such as mass production and overpopulation, and even the masses of homeless youth and children who live and beg on South Africa's streets. They are disturbing: Cruise herself wrote earlier of these babies as "rendered helpless not only by their condition of infancy but by their lack of agency. Their armlessness suggests not so much the horror of thalidomide deformity but future impotency. They have no means to act upon the world."

Around and amongst the clay babies are larger single figures: a watching rabbit that is more than life-sized; some altered and half-size humans, a playful pup; a pig-headed person. The puppy is the most animated creature in this still world, ready at any moment to pounce and chew. He is the happiest and most active of all the creatures, in contrast with the apparent dependency of most of them.



One's sense of logical scale is disturbed, as the relative sizes of these figures are unpredictable, and they are stretched or shrunk as Alice was and as Cruise wills. One effect on the viewer of this strange scale is disorientation. The figures lie or stand motionless, in the relatively dark and shadowy gallery space.

In addition to this stillness (and the gallery and, indeed, the entire experience of the installation is silent), the bodies do not gesture or move, except for the lively puppy and the entire gallery seems still.

These bodies seem frozen, unable to respond.

We walk through and are merely witnesses to some unspeakable and unspoken condition, almost certainly one of suffering. They are not alive but are reminiscent of what was once alive, more like the contorted, encased remains of Pompeii than like a representation of human babies.

They are shells, moulds or fossils, remnants of what was once alive.



Facing page and above: *The Alice Diaries*. 2012.
Ceramic installation. Dimensions vary.
Photos by Ant Strack.

An important aspect of the installation, and indeed of all Cruise's work, is their material. It is clear that the shapes are modelled: one can see on their surfaces the thumb or finger mark, the scrape of a tool, the shaving with a knife. These blackened, chalky or reddened bodies are raw, rough, dense and matte, are definitely matter; one is aware of materiality. This fundamental material, a mixture of water and earth, becomes something between solid and melting; moulded and malformed, almost amorphous, suggestive of basic tactile experiences. They are sensed by a kind of virtual touch, as well as visually. We may not actually touch them, but we sense the moulding and binding hand of the artist working the clay. We sense something of the mythical quality of clay as an element: the proverbial or archetypal mud or clay from which man is made, the stuff of us all.

Some critics have analysed Cruise's works as referring to a pre-linguistic or pre-conscious state, to the difficulties of communication and the failure of language. In this installation, the animals watch the humans, silently, in a mute stillness that seems absolute, that Younge (2012) refers to as "a condition of muteness. . . , an existential pause". The humans are less aware, half-alive, eyeless or seeing only inward. The animals are silent witnesses to the human condition, to its writhing abjection, its dumb suffering, its ignorant lack of awareness. The artist's sympathies almost certainly lie with the animals and they are more human than the mutant humans. She observes them more intensely and they are more expressive and just as important. As a viewer, one relates to the animals and regards the humans from a

distance. Their silence and inability to communicate or engage us is increased. They are unresponsive and the effect is both strange and somewhat chilling. As a whole, they suggest an in-between state, a liminal space, in an animal-human interface of mutation and inversion.

The exhibition unfolds as one moves through the various spaces of the gallery and both engages and repels us. In silence and shadows, we discover figure after figure, baby upon baby, animal after animal. This ambitious project leaves us unsettled, silent and almost mute ourselves.

REFERENCES

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