

Freddie Robins – Body, Nobody, Somebody, Anybody

Essay By Dawn Ades.

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More or less simultaneously with her first solo show at firstsite Freddie Robins is exhibiting as a finalist for the Jerwood Applied Arts Prize (Textiles). There is no demarcation between the types of work she is displaying in the two exhibitions. This may not seem surprising, given that a media-based distinction between "art" and "craft" is hardly viable any longer given that artists have absolute freedom to choose the medium they work in and practitioners of all kinds can lay claim to the creative imagination. Nonetheless there are still significant differences not just in their training but in the commercial and cultural context in which the "Applied Arts" practitioner operates and within which their work is received. Robins is very aware of the ambiguities in her position, and indeed exploits them with great ingenuity and panache.

Knitting is perceived as a comfortable, reassuring activity, and the cosiness of the product is fully matched by the domestic images it conjures up of fireside, cats, old women. Notwithstanding the fact that in some communities it is a male activity (among certain fishermen, for instance) it is by and large regarded as a female activity, 'womenswork', sedentary and useful. Recognising that such expectations will accompany the reception of her work, Robins gives free reign to a macabre and humorous imagination to subvert them. She works to counter its "cosy" associations through the more experimental technologies that are being developed, which serve to remind us that knitting in fact has other quite different properties usually overlooked, such as its highly mathematical character, its strong links to computer technology and to the internet. She is interested in the "similarities she sees between instructions for programming and for knitting. Both involve a complicated series of moves condensed into arcane shorthand; a false move or dropped stitch along the way can cause both to unravel."¹ For her most recent work *Anyway* (2002) she has worked in collaboration with the William Lee Innovation Centre at UMIST (University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology) on experiments with computer-aided pieces ("hundreds of seamless knitted bodies"). The possibilities of working on a vastly increased scale excites partly because of the way it flouts the traditional image of the homely small-scale knitter. Although for the present the body

still provides the scale for most of the pieces, whether multiplied or fragmented, there are possibilities for constructions of a different nature.

At the heart of the issues her work now engages with is the problem of the power of conformity, social, physical and moral, and the constant pressure of the notion of the "normal". The *Odd Gloves* of 1997 were among the first of Robins' work to refuse to conform to the standard body as 'mould'. A commission for a public art project for Shoreditch library, *Hands of Hoxton*, (1998) prompted an inventive series of gloves symbolising notable inhabitants of the Borough: Kate Greenaway, for example, is represented with a pair of scarlet gloves joined from the little fingers to the wrist in the gesture of hands holding an open book.

The ambiguity of Robins' knitted objects in terms of functionality recalls in some respects the Surrealists, who called for the substitution of everyday utilitarian things with objects that 'functioned' not rationally but at poetic and emotional levels. Surrealist objects came in many guises, whether fabricated or chosen, but it was their challenge to the perceived need for utility in the objects of our daily surroundings that the surrealist poet André Breton emphasised in his first sketch of the idea of a "dream object". "I recently proposed to fabricate, in so far as possible, certain objects which appear only in dreams and which seem no more useful than enjoyable...I would like to put into circulation certain objects of this kind which appear eminently problematical and intriguing...Perhaps in that way I should help to demolish these concrete trophies which are so odious, to throw further discredit on those creatures and things of "reason".²

Hand of Good Hand of God (1997) is a metre-high blue knitted glove each of whose fingers becomes another glove, and in the imagination this could be endlessly repeated enlarged or in miniature. There is an echo here of an object found by Breton in a Paris flea market, which like the "dream object" responded to an unconscious need. This was a large wooden spoon of peasant manufacture beneath whose handle was a tiny wooden high-heeled shoe, the whole object thus itself resembling a delicately arched slipper. For Breton this recalled an object he had asked Giacometti to make for him, a slipper in grey glass which he planned to use as an ash-tray, inspired by the fragment of a phrase that lingered from a dream: "Cendrier-Cendrillon". The recognition of the spoon-as-shoe suddenly disrupted the scale of the object, so that "The real length of the spoon was no longer fixed...it reached towards the infinite in the sense of magnitude as of minuteness..."³ Although

the *Hand of Good*, *Hand of God* does not involve metaphorical transformation in the same way, it shares the sudden dizzying change of scale.

Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon *Fur Breakfast* (1936) is a favourite of Robins', and one can appreciate the similarity between the function denied, the suffocatingly sensuous softness of fur displaced from touch to taste and such recent works by Robins as *Billy Wool* (2001). Unlike the fetishistic character of many surrealist objects, however, which play with erotically charged substitutions for fragments of the body, hers are "surface apparitions". The body itself is the absent object, "like a kind of mirror image *looking* as if it were used for the making of this object, like a mould..."⁴

Titles, it will have become evident, are important to Robins. Puns often generate or play into a visual image, as in *Headlong* (2002) the sweater with the immensely long neck, or *Anyway* (2002) whose identical limb extensions join up, down and horizontally to create an immense three-dimensional web. *Forearmed* (2002) is a four-sleeved piece like a crossroads, while *Forewarned* (2002) turns the cross into a crucifix. Like the surrealists, she welcomes word-play, as with Breton's *Cendrier-Cendrillon*, for its capacity to liberate words from their mechanical utilitarian functions to spark unexpected and revealing associations.

In these distorted body pieces: sweaters with immensely elongated sleeves, for instance, or three arms, a third sleeve in place of a head the fact that some 'body' is still implied speaks to our fascination with the monstrous. Robins' objects are in dialogue with the human body, but a dialogue distanced from or in a new relation with a body's functional needs. She engages with notions of the normal and the deformed, and has confronted the awkward relationship between fantasy and actual bodies differently formed, moving between surrealism and science fiction to the medical and anatomical.

Her recent involvement in an exhibition centred on disability, *Adorn, Equip*⁵ focuses on the bodies of people whom society treats gingerly and with polite contortions to avoid offence. She has made a sweater for Catherine Long (the model for a recent sculpture by Mark Quinn), who has one arm, with an inscription reading "At one", and a glove with the banner "one up". For Mat Fraser, whose body was affected by the thalidomide drug, she has made a sweater with short-sleeves - emblazoned with the words "Short Armed and Dangerous". Her work here is at the other extreme of the

rejection of the functional norm: these are garments that are not strange at all for the human bodies that will inhabit them. They are extremely precise and careful as to their function, but are one-off. They are, in a sense, celebrations of difference, creations for people who have no choice but to be non-conformist.

Robins' ease with the terms 'monstrous' and 'freak' is the result of a process of thought not dissimilar to that of Georges Bataille who made some sharp psychological and philosophical observations about our assumptions of the "normal" human form. In his essay *Les Ecartés de la Nature*, he examined the paradoxical nature of the human fascination with the monstrous or 'unnatural', which derives from a notion of the natural, which is in fact its opposite. To arrive at an idea of the perfect form is to reduce human individuality to a common composite of perfect beauty, which resembles geometrical regularity. Anything deviating from this norm must in a sense be 'monstrous'. The profoundly seductive fascination of the 'fairground freak' derives from the fact that the elemental and constant impression of incongruity speaks to something that everyone experiences: any individual as such differs from the 'norm', which itself is an unnatural construct. To have a sense of one's own individuality is to attempt to measure one's difference from this norm. The monstrous appears to be at the dialectical opposite of the norm, but the affirmation of individuality must logically share difference from the norm with the monstrous. "Every individual form escapes the common measure and, to some degree, is a monster."⁶ Bataille's purpose in referring to deviations from nature was both to unsettle assumptions of 'beauty' and to account for the fascination and terror with which people observe 'the prodigies of nature', so disturbingly close and so distant from their own experience. Through this dialectical opposition between geometrical regularity and individuality Bataille destroys common assumptions about the natural, just as Robins does.

Robins' imagination is nourished from many different sources, and her passions sketch out a very individual kind of black humour, which reaches from surrealism to science and natural history. Magritte's *Red Model* (1948), the laced leather boots whose feet become flesh was a favourite painting, and informs her exploration of the interface between the body and its coverings. *Billy Wool*, for instance, is based on mummies like the Lindow man. She is fascinated by the medical specimens preserved in formaldehyde that featured in the "Wunderkammer" collections of Peter the Great, and the wax anatomical models revealing the body's innards. These preserved or fashioned bodies or body fragments were sometimes ornamented out in

what seems to our eyes inappropriate accessories: a foetus in the Leiden Anatomical Museum has bead bracelets, a baby's wears a lace cap. In Robins' extraordinary *Skin - a good thing to live in* (2002) where the 'second skin' becomes itself a skin, flayed and flattened, the edges are crocheted. The conjunction between the grim reminder of the body's mortality and pretty decoration is difficult in our more squeamish age, and Robins does not flinch from probing this.

Craft Kills (2002) its title inscribed on the chest, is a grey wool seamless figure; pierced with arrows, it is a St Sebastian, the stricken woollen body as poignant as a Guy Fawkes' dummy. A computer was instructed to make the torso (in Robins' own size) but the head demanded detailed hand knitting to construct the curves of the head and the disturbing, closed features of the face. Violence here runs a strange gamut of associations, from toys mutilated by children to the victims of Christian sacrifice, while the fact that the body is Robins raises the possibility of a certain occluded form of self-representation.

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¹ Ruth Pavey *Unwearable Tension* in *Crafts* magazine no. 160, September/October 1999 (p.39)

² André Breton *Introduction to the discourse on the paucity of reality* (1924) in *What is Surrealism?* Ed. F. Rosemont London 1978 (p.26)

³ André Breton *L'Amour Fou Paris* 1937 (p.38)

⁴ Marcel Duchamp *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* ed. M Sanouillet and E. Peterson OUP 1973 (pg.85)

⁵ *Adorn, Equip* exhibition organized by the City Gallery, Leicester 2001

⁶ Georges Bataille *Les Ecartés de la Nature, Documents no. 2, 2nd year Paris* 1930 (p.82)