© David Lomas, 2005

The Great Indoors

David Lomas

This essay was published as 'El gran mundo interior' to accompany an installation of the same name by Laura Ford commissioned for the newly opened Centro de Arte de Salamanca in 2002.

Fig. 1. Laura Ford, *Stags and a Boy*, 2002, steel, Jesmonite, wool, and mixed media.

From whence come these two diminutive polar explorers who have so thoroughly lost their way as to find themselves stranded in an art gallery in Salamanca? They are like sleepwalkers who, were they to suddenly awaken from their slumbers, would surely be as puzzled and confused as we are. The sheer incongruity of their presence here is compounded by the strange encounter with five larger-than-life stags who keep a silent sentinel over them. As one treads a wary path amongst these impassive beasts one becomes not so much a detached spectator of an art exhibition as an active

participant in the enigmatic scenario that Laura Ford has contrived for us. Like the adventures of Alice in Wonderland, one is propelled into a great indoors, a psychically-charged space akin to a dream or fantasy where the rules and strictures governing everyday reality are momentarily relaxed, and we too are free to explore.

In a manner akin to the dream, this work is woven out of memory fragments that are just as much the artist's raw material as the off-cuts of fabric, old clothes and other bric-a-brac she sews together. It is a densely-layered quilt or tapestry whose tangled threads are drawn from personal experience: her memories of walking in Richmond Park where the herds of deer over time have grown nonchalant about humans who stride determinedly through their midst. There are reminiscences too of visits with her young children to Regent's Park Zoo, and doubtless more remote ones of herself as a child playing with toy animals. It is worth noting as well that the viewer is not prevented from bringing to the work their own associations; indeed the very fact of concealment of the identity of the faceless boys and other characters who inhabit these psychically-charged spaces, and which lends the work its enigmatic allure, seems to invite or demand our intense affective engagement. Ford's installations can be regarded as a blank canvas upon which the beholder projects something of themselves.

Writing way back in 1967 the distinguished critic and art historian Michael Fried pinpointed an emergent trend in the minimalism of Donald Judd, Robert Morris and others. Fried at the time was a staunch acolyte and supporter of Clement Greenberg and what he objected to most about the new sculptural practice was the impossibility of defining its physical limits in flagrant contradiction of the modernist demand for autonomy and self-presence that modernism. Fried disparaged the new 'literalist' sensibility for its alleged theatricality, both in its orientation towards the space that surrounded the work and in the immediacy of its address to the spectator. 'The experience of literalist art,' he observed, 'is of an object *in a situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.'[1] In spite of the fact that minimalist sculpture is not figurative, Fried believed that the experience for the viewer was akin to being confronted by the silent, disquieting presence of another *person* – in part a consequence of the work's anthropomorphic scale. Though Fried's analysis drew extensively from Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological account of the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti in an essay that had been only recently translated,[2] his essay was nonetheless highly prescient in discerning a crucial turning point in the visual arts of the late 1960s. The passage of time has seen the definitive eclipse of modernism and the advent of a variety of postmodern art practices that

embrace the very conditions of theatricality that Fried so deplored. Ford, for example, cites as a formative influence upon her own practice the dancer and performance artist Pina Bausch. The replacement of the traditional conception of a discrete and self-sufficient sculptural object by a *situation*, one in which the beholder is palpably implicated, is a salient feature of much contemporary object-based and installation work. In Ford's case, the situation of installation art is typically inflected with connotations of a dream or phantasy. One can usefully refer here to the psychoanalytic model of phantasy as, according to Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, 'still scripts (*scénarios*) of organised scenes capable of dramatisation usually in a visual form.'[3] They add that the subject who experiences a phantasy, equivalent to our beholder, is at one and the same time *both* a passive onlooker *and* an active participant within the phantasy scene, where they invariably have a part to play and, crucially, where 'permutations of roles and attributions are possible.'

Fig. 2. Laura Ford, *Glove Boy 1*, 2002, steel, Jesmonite, sheepskin, and mixed media.

Animals crop up frequently in the dreams analysed by Sigmund Freud who ascribes to them the role of a surrogate for human actors, parental and other figures, whose true identity lies sometimes thinly concealed behind them. In the famous dream of the Wolf-Man, six identical white wolves that stare intently from a tree outside the Wolf-Man's window are interpreted by Freud as substitutes for a threatening, castrative father. Ford's animals function similarly. The elephant-headed

boys, based on the Hindu god Ganesha (who was decapitated in anger by his father and subsequently reassembled with the head of an elephant), are already a hybrid of human and animal. The stags are like a fivefold multiplied dream symbol and have about them the aspect of a pantomime animal which is a giveaway to the presence of a human, no doubt paternal, figure lurking within. One of the many sources of inspiration for the stags was Gustave Flaubert's short story, *The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitator*, a haunting and extravagantly violent, dream-like tale set in medieval times.[4] There is a scene in which Julian is out hunting and comes upon a great stag, 'a huge black beast, a sixteen-pointer with a white beard' grazing with its doe and a fawn. With a cross-bow Julian slays the fawn, next he kills its mother, and then fires his last arrow at the great stag which does not fall down like the others but bounds across the dead bodies towards Julian who recoils in terror at its approach. 'The huge beast stopped and with blazing eyes, solemn as a patriarch or a judge, and to the accompaniment of a bell tolling in the distance, it said three times: "Accursed, accursed, accursed! One day, cruel heart, you will kill your father and mother!"' Ford's stags are altogether more benign than this fearsome creature, but nonetheless the elephant boys are readily seen as Oedipal sons under the yoke of a terrible prophesy of which they themselves are blind. Close in spirit to the sense of the miraculous in Ford's installation is Pisanello's *Vision of Saint Eustace* (National Gallery, London), a sumptuous, tapestry-like picture that depicts the appearance of Christ to St. Eustace. Each of the dislocated sections of this darkly mysterious, nocturnal image has its own inconsistent perspective which fails to fully cohere with the others, and it is not farfetched to describe the overall patchwork effect as like a partially-condensed dream image.

Fig. 3. Pisanello, *The Vision of Saint Eustace*, c.1395, tempera on wood, 54.5 x 65.5 cm. National Gallery, London.

A good many of the associative connections that Ford supplies to this work pertain to childhood. One that she relates is of her son aged four at home dressed up in all manner of gear. In thrall to an elaborate private fantasy, he kept up this solitary game for hours on end. When children dress up or play with toys they actualise unconscious fantasies through the creation of extremely complicated scenarios, or *situations*, in a manner that bears comparison with Ford's installation practice. Pursuing the analogy, we can see her upholstered 'soft' sculptures as harking back to the cuddly toys, usually animals, which are amongst a child's earliest companions. The English analyst D.W. Winnicott coined the term transitional object to designate an intermediate realm of experience between the subjective and objective that such objects are said to occupy, somewhere 'between the thumb and the teddy bear.'[5] An unstable intimacy between the viewer and the sculptural object subverts the separateness and autonomy that modernism required of the work of art. Scale is skilfully manipulated to produce an ambiguous oscillation between the world of infantile experience and that of adulthood, thus further blurring the distinction between them.

Fig. 4. Eileen Agar, *Angel of Anarchy*, 1936/1940, fabric over plaster and mixed media, 520 x 317 x 336 cm. Tate Modern, London.

Apart from children's toys, there is an evident affinity with the surrealist object. One thinks of Meret Oppenheim's trussed up and fur-covered objects; or Man Ray's *Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, its suggestively human forms covered in fabric and bound in string; and especially Eileen Agar's blindfolded *Angel of Anarchy*, a memorable icon of English surrealism whose face is wrapped with assorted strips of brightly patterned fabric and festooned with beads and other decorations. The whacky, offbeat humour of Ford's sculptural assemblages combined with an emphatic anthropomorphism also owes something, one suspects, to the collective surrealist game of the *cadavre exquis*. One of the best known is a composite figure by Miró, Tanguy and Man Ray who balances on tennis rackets rather like the snowshoes with which Ford has equipped her would-be explorers. Commentators have been noticeably reluctant to admit any place for surrealism in the genesis of contemporary object-based art, yet all the indications are that such a parentage is irrefutable. As Michael Fried astutely observed in the essay 'Art and Objecthood':

© David Lomas, 2005

> There is a deep affinity between literalists and surrealist sensibility… both resort to a similar anthropomorphizing of objects or conglomerations of objects… both are capable of achieving remarkable effects of 'presence'; and both tend to deploy and isolate objects and persons in *situations*… This affinity can be summed up by saying that surrealist sensibility, as manifested in the work of certain artists, and literalist sensibility are both *theatrical*.[6]

One of the most disconcerting properties of the stags and elephant boys is their sightlessness. The blazing eyes of the huge stag in Flaubert's oneiric tale have been replaced by blank opacities. Yet paradoxically this does not lessen our sense of relatedness to these objects, the impression of being confronted by 'the silent presence of another *person*,' as Fried characterised his response to minimalist objects. It is as though Ford had pondered the question of how a sculptor can truly represent the gaze of another person and rejected as false the solution adopted by traditional sculptors who carved an ovoid shape from marble and drilled a hole in the middle to represent the portal of vision. Such coldly inert organs are the very negation of what they purport to show, since as Jacques Lacan states: 'The gaze I encounter ... is not a seen gaze, but *a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other*.'[7]

The blind driven-ness of the elephant boys illuminates the compulsive nature of the unconscious instinctual drives. If, however, they seem possessed of an excessive, almost demonic energy, the obliteration of their faces at the same time implies its converse, a cancellation of individual existence. Swaddled in protective clothing, it is as though they have been unintentionally smothered by a mother's love. Cocooned, in a state of suspended animation, they are poised between being and nothingness. Their intimate relationship to non-being is expressed above all in the way that space surrounds and envelops them. As Sartre wrote of one of Giacometti's many portraits of his brother Diego, though the same could equally well be said of the heroically striding figures that are among Giacometti's most brilliant sculptures (of which Ford's striding boys are like a demotic copy, half-serious, half-parodic): 'Nothingness encloses him, nothing supports him, nothing contains him; he *appears* all alone within the vast frame of empty space.'[8] Another of Ford's acknowledged literary sources of inspiration is a novel by Beryl Bainbridge, *The Birthday Boys*, based on the ill-fated Antarctic expedition of Robert Falconer Scott and his men in which the entire expedition party tragically perished.[9] Given these existential references, the all-consuming whiteness of the gallery space becomes synonymous with death and non-being. One little boy hauls along a motley collection

of objects: a wrecked bike, some horseshoes (possibly referring to the ponies Scott took with him). The other pulls something that looks ominously like a body zipped up in a sleeping bag wheeled along on a toddler's pushchair. Does this dead weight refer to an event from the past, the baggage of psychological traumas that all of us carry, or some future destiny towards which they trudge unknowingly? The fundamental aim of the instincts, Freud asserted, is to return the living organism to an inanimate state, and hence the evolution of life is only a series of ever more complicated *détours* along the same path. '*The aim of all life is death'* he famously concluded.[10] Ford's explorers may appear to have lost their way but we can be quite sure they will reach their inevitable destination.

No doubt Ford gently lampoons a familiar stereotype of heroic male activity with her hapless explorers, that Edwardian boy's own world of outdoor adventure and *bonhomie* that is ruthlessly dissected by Bainbridge in *The Birthday Boys*. Ford herself admits to parodying Joseph Beuys, the German artist who cultivated the image of a modern shaman and whose use of felt and fat as signature materials refers to his near miraculous survival under freezing conditions during wartime following a plane crash by wrapping himself in felt and by eating lard - a largely apocryphal story as it turns out, but one that is responsible for the enormous prestige that Beuys still enjoys, according to Ford, as a role model among male art students (until recently she was a teacher of fine artists at a London college). The elephant boys project an image of padded impregnability. Their trunk is a hypertrophied phallus that they display proudly and a luxuriant growth of pubic hair, likewise displaced from its anatomical locus, sprouts from their sleeves. But the mismatch between this overblown display of masculine virility and the actual diminutive (pre-pubertal) size of the boys has the effect of subtly deflating it, revealing its pretence. Neither are the stags decked out in macho combat fatigues quite as invincible as the impressive reach of their antlers indicates. The antlers, a highly visible sign of male prestige in the animal world, are rendered slightly tattered - notice also how some of the branches droop - and the pantomime aspect of the beasts makes them into a figure of fun, the butt of a joke.

Like the unseeing creatures who inhabit Ford's imaginary world, we too would be blind if we failed to recognise something of ourselves in their predicament. Their frailty and vulnerability as well as their defences speak of a more general, inescapably human condition. Ford is a modern day moralist who reminds us of our follies. She is every bit a worthy successor to Francisco Goya who was also, like her, an acute observer of children and the ways in which their world sheds light on ours. Her work is leavened by humour and a strong sense of absurdity. Theatrical, it is a theatre of the

absurd. The elephant boys struggling vainly under their impossible burdens recall the ludicrous scene in Dalí and Luis Buñuel's film *Un Chien andalou* of a man attempting to haul a rotten donkey atop a grand piano. Their efforts are wasted, futile. Midway through their abortive quest to reach the southern pole, Scott and his men discovered they had been beaten there by a Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, yet they pressed on regardless. When we laugh at the obstinate persistence of these little adventurers in the face of certain defeat we assuredly laugh at ourselves.

---

[1] Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' (1967), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, Oxford, 1992, 825.
[2] Giacometti's Copernican revolution, writes Sartre, was to shift sculpture away from the task of embodying *being* toward a sculpture of *situated* appearance. See Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Quest for the Absolute' (1948), in *Essays in Aesthetics*, trans. Wade Baskin, London, 1964, 101.
[3] Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London, 1988, 318.
[4] Gustave Flaubert, *Three Tales* (*Trois contes*), transl. A. J. Krailsheimer, Oxford, 1991.
[5] D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,' *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1953, XXXIV, 89-97; 89.
[6] Fried, 'Art and Objecthood,' 833-34.
[7] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Alan Sheridan, Harmondsworth, 1979, 84.
[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Paintings of Giacometti' (1954), in *Essays in Aesthetics*, 63.
[9] Beryl Bainbridge, *The Birthday Boys*, London, 1991.
[10] Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), *Pelican Freud Library*, vol.11, 311.

David Lomas is Senior Lecturer in the History of Art at the University of Manchester and co-director of the AHRB Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies.