

## InDifference



For the sake of descriptive ease, we persistently refer to certain recurrent forms in Eva Rothschild's sculpture in starkly figurative terms. There are those long tubes made from woven leather strips that twist through the open frameworks of works such as *The Narrow Way*, *Old Masters* and *Natural Beauty*, and then there are the spheres, many of which are again covered with lengths of plaited leather whose ends are often left loose and trailing. More recently, she has made similar shapes from melon-sized balls of polystyrene and plaster, painted bright greens, reds and blues, and then wrapped in strings of small black glass beads. 'Snakes' and 'heads' we're happy to call them, both because that's a bit what they look like, and because that's how Rothschild herself refers to them in conversation. Not that we should be seduced into believing that just because she does so, that's actually what they are. They could be, if we choose to look at them that way, but the awareness that we are doing so throws into contrast that discrepancy between the objects themselves – their material substance, their form, scale, colour, their disposition in the space – and, in Rothschild's words, 'the things people want or imagine them to be'.<sup>1</sup>

*Nefertiti* is three towers of tapered cylindrical forms – truncated cones, I suppose – cast in Jesmonite and bioresin, and stacked wide end to wide end, narrow to narrow. The individual elements are of varying sizes, and in half a dozen or so places are separated by extra layers resembling knobbly doughnuts, as if they have been somewhat shakily bonded together with globs of mortar. One column even rests on a couple of these rings, and is thereby rendered radically unstable. None of these columns should stand up, and this one especially shouldn't. Yet they all do, so there is undoubtedly some central armature that prevents each of them from falling over or collapsing. This is not subterfuge, dissembling or pretence. In the same way as the obviously necessary central rods of works such as *High Times*, *Good Relations*, or *Town and Country* are largely concealed by the loose ends of leather trailing down from the heads they support, we do not need to see *Nefertiti*'s inner spines to know they are there. What we feel, rather, in the conversation between material and gravity, is the rhythm that runs both up and down the sculpture; we understand that the manner in which it occupies space is an active one, and that our own relationship to the work is similarly enlivened. In the course of a conversation with Rothschild, Franz West's name crops up as a useful reference point. It is not that she wishes her work to be touched, leaned on, sat on or otherwise used in the way that West often invites us to do with his. It is more as a way of emphasising the importance of the energised sense of self that her sculpture engenders – the self as a located, socialised, desiring bodily presence.

The surfaces of *Nefertiti*'s elements are figured with clean, diagonal shifts in level, as if they have been cast from forms made by rolling lengths of cut card or some such, and although the majority of the elements are black, several are other colours: grey, white, red, pink and beige. Though the colour range is restricted, and the constituent elements are much alike, the work is complex and visually ungraspable in the way that things assembled intuitively frequently are. The slight asymmetry in the uppermost element of the tallest tower chimes with the title, indicating the similarity between its shape and the headdress on the famous bust of Akhenaten's wife in

Berlin's Neues Museum. But noticing that likeness won't suffice as commentary on the sculpture as a whole. We might, for example, equally well think about the title track on Miles Davis' album, 'Nefertiti', in which he and Wayne Shorter repeat a single short phrase, with minor variations, throughout. And we might also not want to forget that a Nefertiti is the name given to a particular type of female genital piercing, or that the zigzag piles are reminiscent of Brancusi's *Endless Columns*. By declining to invest her sculptures with any specific narrative, Rothschild ensures that there is broad scope for constructing it oneself. This is not to say that, in the face of her work, anything goes; it is more that she recognises the degree to which our apprehension of form is shaped by experience. 'Geometric forms,' she says, 'are totally corrupted by sentiment and desire'. The purity of Brancusi's zigzag pyramids, or the severe geometric shapes found subsequently in Minimalism, cannot be relied upon as expressively potent any more. At least part of this inadequacy could be traceable to the muddying done by others such as Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor, a muddying which saw any wish for the cleanliness of engineered line being confounded by the gendered, crafting hand.

The hands are key. The frontispiece image in the catalogue to Rothschild's 2004 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich shows her hands reaching round from behind a plaited leather head. Perhaps the head is one of those that make up *Town and Country*, which was in that exhibition, but I'm not sure that this matters much. Tightly woven, with long, hanging strands, the leather suggests skin and hair as well as intimating all the ways in which we adorn and obscure ourselves in the name of sport, sex, fashion, ritual and magic. The forefinger and thumb of each hand are brought together to make a pair of eyes, while the remaining fingers are splayed out in an arc that is, at one and the same time, both protective and aggressive. Here, at once, there is playful inventiveness, material manipulation in the context of the beliefs and emotional investments of day-to-day behaviour, forcefulness and tenderness. That trade-off between imposition and enticement is recognisable in aspects of the sculpture as diverse as the jutting angularity of the wall-mounted corner pieces, *Empty Page* and *Mastermind*, in the impenetrable sheen of the black Perspex of *Diamonoid*, and the furiously intense tubular tangle that forms the suspended energy field of *Little Ghost*. Crafting something – which is to say no more than choosing to make something oneself – is, as Rothschild says, 'expedient'. It is the most direct and the simplest way to get something made. But the hinterland to that choice is impossible to ignore. Whether we track through it to the absurdity of Hesse's bandage-wrapped *Hang Up*, or, say, the wilful fabrications of Robert Gober, either way we have the sense that Rothschild's sculpture provokes questioning of the body and the space it occupies. The hand is indeed key, and it has its place on both sides of the making process. As well as being the guided instrument of making, it crops up as an image in several works from the first part of the past decade – in woven poster works such as *Hand and I*, *Dirty Work*, *Mehindi* and *Little Feather*, and in works comprising several triangular wooden frames, such as *Stairway* and *Heavy Cloud*. In these latter two cases, the frames are held overhead in casts of delicate female hands attached to ceiling and walls.

*Us Women* is a slightly precarious stack of black bead-covered heads reaching up the full height of the room. It is somewhat like a totem pole, though also unlike in that its connection of floor to ceiling gives it a quasi-structural feel (two versions of the work, one of twelve and another of thirteen parts were made for galleries of different

dimensions in London and Zürich). The body – your own body and the body in general, historically positioned, gendered, related, socialised – is once more, unavoidably, in play here. There is evidence of the importance of this dimension throughout Rothschild's work. A similar but smaller stack to *Us Women* has the title *Women of the World*, and elsewhere there are the circular, wall-mounted ceramic pieces *HomeWork* and *Arts and Crafts*, as well, perhaps, as the contrasting provocative jutting of the corner piece, *Mastermind*. All of these sculptures throw into doubt what might be thought of as the sites of production and consumption, and the character of the processes involved in their realisation. The conviction that *Us Women* is a sculpture rests upon the perception of its emergence from out of the complex production space that exists in the inter-relationship of studio, home, office and gallery. Rothschild speaks of the taking of the installation photograph, rather than the more prosaic point at which something is finished in the studio, as being the moment of a sculpture's completion for her. Prior to that moment of being, as it were, delivered over to the imaginative gaze of the viewer, the work's resolution is kept in abeyance, as if the sculpture were indeed not quite yet a sculpture, simply a sculptural potential yet to fully relinquish the qualities of something more like an accessory, a prop, an ornament, or some other kind of object that occupies a more obviously functional place within the space of one's existence. As one indication of this, small pieces made in the studio will sometimes be taken home by Rothschild. In that new environment their status becomes equivocal: does the shift of context cause us to perceive the object now as ornament rather than sculpture? And, if so, is that category distinction significant if in both cases we focus our attention on it in kindred ways? And what of the opposite end of the size spectrum?

In terms of dimension, *Cold Corners*, the large-scale work commissioned for Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries in 2009, dwarfs anything that Rothschild had hitherto completed. Comprising a sequence of 26 open triangles in black powder-coated aluminium, it ran the length of the Tate's central space. In the process it not only touched floor and walls, but also passed over the lintels atop the columns between each gallery and the central rotunda. The development of the sculpture occurred primarily in two places: the studio and the galleries themselves. Work in the studio centred on the scale model of the galleries into which Rothschild built the maquette for the finished piece. As is usual for her, the arrangement of its interconnecting triangular elements was made intuitively rather than through the operation of any pre-determined system. If anything like a rule could be identified, it would be only that the triangles are all either isosceles or scalene, and that there are no right angles. Both the right-angled and the equilateral triangle are too static; they sit where they're told to and stay there. Rothschild began thinking about her own project while the previous commission, by Martin Creed, was being exhibited. Creed's *Work No 850* required a succession of runners to sprint as fast as they could from one end of the galleries to the other, to work their way back through the building to the starting point and to sprint again. This work allowed Rothschild to see the galleries 'empty', which is to say free from any sculptures placed on the floors, and also to witness them being energised by the repeated passage down their length of the sprinters. She acknowledges that the luxury of having that uncluttered view, coupled with the sense of flow and return that is such a feature of *Work No 850*, helped stimulate her own response to the space.

The triangles at either end of *Cold Corners* lie flat on the ground. Those in between these two points are fixed in different orientations, some standing upright or at an angle, some leaning against the wall, some placed so that only their apex touches the floor, some fastened between two others so that no part of them reaches either floor or wall. There are precursors to some of this detail in aspects of, for example, *Fort Block* and *Stalker*, but the spatial command is unprecedented. If the flow and return of *Work No 850* is also present in *Cold Corners*, what Rothschild has given us is not just a sprint, but an exhilarating parkour. A free run that has us in a series of tac vaults, cat passes, swings, rolls and drops from one end of the building to the other. *Cold Corners* cannot merely be looked at, but must be walked around and through. It cannot be grasped from a single viewpoint. Instead, one's sense of its totality must be built up over time spent in the gallery that is understood as a period of shared occupancy. While there is no necessity to climb or swing on the work, or even to touch it at all, the sense that one is in a three-dimensional situation with it is important.

One does, of course, always need to move around Rothschild's sculptures, although not infrequently one finds that in doing so those three dimensions begin to disaggregate. *Yr Inner Child*, *Open Ends* and *The Perimeter* are irregular ovoid forms sitting not on plinths, but on Rothschild's familiar four-legged metal stands. Though they take up space, their shells are pierced in several places, showing them to be hollow, differently painted on the inside and outside, and therefore more like complex surfaces than solid forms. Surprisingly, while the holes appear to open up the forms entirely and to reveal their internal secrets, one is still drawn to circle them in order to see how distinctly and specifically that revelation is accomplished as the profile shifts. Though larger in scale, *Cold Corners* articulates and activates space in a manner similar to works such as *The Narrow Way*, *Old Masters* and *Natural Beauty*. All three use rectangular frames (sometimes painted wood, sometimes powder-coated aluminium as with *Cold Corners*), internally subdivided into irregular polygons. Plaited leather snakes twine through and around the frames. Serpentine in manifold metaphorical and otherwise suggestive ways, the line of the leather forms animates the structures. The T-shape arrangement of *Natural Beauty*'s two frames allows them to be free-standing and almost architectural in the way they organise the space around them rather than merely sit within it, while both *The Narrow Way* and *Old Masters* lean against the wall. Also using the wall as a prop, if in another way altogether, is *Phoenix*. This woven rug has been stiffened into a curve that rests in the angle between wall and floor, through being entirely covered in black resin. Only the variously coloured tassels spraying out down either edge remain free of the black coating. Under the guise of a light-hearted evocation, via the combination of word and object, of E Nesbit's children's book, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, Rothschild fashions a heavyweight nod to Richard Serra. This Middle Eastern carpet does not fly, for all the pressing reasons of which we are only too aware.

In a parallel mode, *The Narrow Way* impresses upon us the potency of that mix, which Rothschild relishes, of sculptural nous, mass cultural imagery, individual passion and the spiritual dimension, whether that spirituality be traditional religion, ancient myth, New-Age hippy, or a customised mix of them all. Does *The Narrow Way* prompt us to ponder Matthew, chapter 7, verse 14 – 'Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it' –? It might do, especially if we consider the snakes to have lapsarian overtones. But then it

might equally lead us to the bus-clogged shopping street near Rothschild's East London home, or to Dave Gilmour's solo section on the Pink Floyd LP, 'Ummagumma', both of which share the same name. We should not run from the obvious, I think; we come across these opportunities too often for them to be purely incidental or accidental. Apart from *The Narrow Way*, there are the upwardly branching, painted metal stem of *Every Little Thing*, the tall-standing groups of heads, *Higher Love* and *Meltdown*, the overhead cluster of triangular frames that make up *Stairway* and the downward-branching, leather-clad metal of *Ashes*, all of which titles reverberate within the more heavily trodden corners of the pop music field. It is perhaps the fact of pop music being broadly shared that is of most importance. With pop music we move beyond the individual into the realm of mass response, of easy recognition and collective movement. In this familiar field of packaged emotion, cliché and glib phrase-making, the specific characteristics and qualities of each sculpture exert themselves with force. The comfort offered by the reference is fleeting, and we are time and again left with the facts of the work and all the problems that their indifference to such reference poses.

The Kunsthalle Zürich catalogue image is just one of many in which Rothschild explores the sculptor-sculpture-viewer nexus. Prior to her 2007 exhibition at the South London Gallery, Rothschild staged a session in which people were photographed holding a snake. A selection from this series formed the publication mailed out to publicise the show. A photograph was also used on the announcement card for the 2009 show at Stuart Shave/Modern Art, this time of Rothschild's arm, on to which she had threaded a number of bangle-like rings, roughly shaped from Jesmonite. There are so many that they run right up her arm almost to the armpit, and the clenched fist visible at the bottom of the photograph makes it clear that there is considerable weight being carried here. As well as *Us Women* and *HomeWork*, that show included among other works the wall-mounted ring, *Good Times*, and the floor-based broken ring of *Do-nut*. Subsequently, another selection of the snake photographs was used as Rothschild's contribution to the This Long Century website, and on that occasion they were accompanied by a short text:

The people are holding the snakes, the snakes don't care. The people are fascinated by the snakes, the snakes are not fascinated by the people.<sup>ii</sup>

It is impossible not to be fascinated; it is impossible not to make connections, readings and interpretations; and at the same time it is impossible not to admit that just because Rothschild's sculptures lavishly catalyse such behaviour, this does not mean they are implicated in it. The ethical dimensions to all encounters with the work are ours to discover and to deal with.

---

This and other quotes are taken from the interview with Beatrix Ruf in *Eva Rothschild*, Kunsthalle Zürich and JRP/Ringier, 2004, pp. 2–18.

<sup>ii</sup> [www.thislongcentury.com/?p=2158&c=44](http://www.thislongcentury.com/?p=2158&c=44)