

Smotherland - Alison Erika Forde

Bryony Bond

“The two horses came up close to me, looking with great earnestness upon my face and hands. The gray steed rubbed my hat all round with his right fore-hoof, and discomposed it so much that I was forced to adjust it better by taking it off and settling it again; whereat, both he and his companion (who was a brown bay) appeared to be much surprised: the latter felt the lappet of my coat, and finding it to hang loose about me, they both looked with new signs of wonder. He stroked my right hand, seeming to admire the softness and colour; but he squeezed it so hard between his hoof and his pastern, that I was forced to roar; after which they both touched me with all possible tenderness. They were under great perplexity about my shoes and stockings, which they felt very often, neighing to each other, and using various gestures, not unlike those of a philosopher, when he would attempt to solve some new and difficult phenomenon.”

The above extract, from Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, is an apt description of the strange encounters that take place in Alison Erika Forde’s paintings. Like the islands that Gulliver discovers, Forde’s world is a place where the accepted status quo has been turned inside out and the divisions between man and beast have melted away. In Gulliver’s case, the country of the Houyhnhnms is dominated by an intelligent race of horses, who have built a society entirely based on reason and practicalities. Swift’s Houyhnhnms have no word for lying and war is an alien concept. Yet this seemingly idyllic society lacks emotion; no one has their own name and no feelings beyond politeness and civility are ever expressed, or apparently experienced. Hybrid people-like-animals and animal-like-people populate Forde’s work; hers too is a world where wolves can have feet and hands, where people move around on all fours, where whole archipelagos are filled with marooned and disturbingly similar girls.

Much of Forde’s work resides within an uncomfortable vacuum. ‘and she said’ portrays a group of ‘feral people’ who stand or crouch on all fours, their limbs strangely arranged, bodies flattened like a medieval painting. Surrounded by a cloud of mischievous crows, a startled bear is carried in on the back of one of the people. Another figure, three times the size of the others stoops, hands on knees, watching the scene unfurl. Frozen at the moment of introduction, the encounter is tense and unclear.

‘them bones’ looks like the aftermath of a terrible event. Huts surround a clearing in dense vegetation, a pile of cartoon bones lie in the centre. A group of figures hold hands and watch, as one of their number edges towards a sleeping figure who embraces the skeletal remains of a humanoid creature. The skeleton lies on its side in a human-like sleeping position, hugged around the waist. All the bones appear normal, except for the skull, which is too elongated to be completely human. But just what sort of non-human is impossible to determine. All we can deduce is that it was some sort of human-animal amalgam, quite unlike the figures around it.

Forde’s figures combine human features with animal and mythical anatomies. Associations are deliberately ambiguous, or conflated; a giant could be friendly or cruel, a bear cuddly or dangerous. These deliberately confused residual traits create an air of uncertainty; we’re not in a clear-cut world of wrong and right. Combined with the scenes she portrays, the moments of silence just before or just after, when everything is clear but nothing can be done, Forde’s worlds become simultaneously idyllic and sinister. Travellers must beware, something might bare its teeth, or burst into tears, at any minute.

Smotherland is Forde’s first explicit venture into installation and three-dimensional work, although her approach to painting already borders on the sculptural. She rarely creates a flat picture plane. Many of Forde’s works are interrupted by the found object that provides the support and often the background for the work. A cross-section of a log with two knots in it creates the contours and eyes of a monstrous woman-eating owl, and two holes in a wooden tray become the open mouths of two women separated by a bear and a fox-deer-squirrel creature. These ruptures serve to make Forde’s

paintings into physical objects, and her oneiric tales all the more pertinent, rooted, as they are, by the mundane reality of the everyday.

Gulliver's Travels was heavily censored when it was first published. The printer found Swift's satire too dangerous to publish in full, adding material in defence of Queen Anne as an extra precaution. But as a critic at the time stated, once published, Gulliver's Travels was read "from the cabinet council to the nursery". It was a popular and engaging story that commented on the hypocrisy and inequalities of English society. Forde's works are similarly layered; their naïve appearance belying a wider critical reading and engagement of her work. 'if I close my eyes' can be seen in many ways as a variation on Angela Carter's tales of sexual liberation, with the dark skin and pink hands in Forde's work adding further tension; alluding to feminism, sexuality and race.

Forde also deals with the same themes as the contemporary writing of an author such as Margaret Atwood, or the work of artists like Kara Walker. She reconfigures histories as futures, placing the familiar alongside the fantastical and invoking traditional, or stereotypical images and tropes in order to reevaluate societal norms and prejudices.

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Bryony Bond is a freelance curator based in Manchester. She is currently working for National Museums Scotland, developing a major commission for 2011, and for the Whitworth Art Gallery, where she recently curated an exhibition from the Musgrave Kinley Outsider Art Collection. Bryony has worked previously for Camden Arts Centre and A Foundation in London and Liverpool, and ran the Alchemy residency programme at The Manchester Museum.