

Of Matriarchs and Decahedrons

Hili Perlson in conversation with Bonnie Camplin

HP:

How is your work informed by politics? And how, in turn, is your personal politics informed by world politics?

BC:

My background is non-conformist, atheist, working class. I've no sense of entitlement, therefore no internalised sense of deference to imposed or external power structures and value systems. My politics are basically anarcho-feminist but, as I've stated elsewhere before, I make it up as I go along; just now I thought of a new definition - "Bonobian". My position can be described as "Bonobian"! Meaning, Informed by the discovery in the 1920s of the Bonobo Ape. They were discovered only relatively recently because they are so discreet. Previously it was thought that the Chimpanzee was our closest relative. In fact we share 99.6 per cent of our genes with the Bonobo as compared with 98.4 per cent with the Chimpanzee. Bonobos are our closest relative and are a matriarchal society that maintains social cohesion with sexual contact. They enjoy sex for pleasure, not only for reproduction and are highly intelligent. What's known of their behaviour supports beautifully the matri-focal cultural history of three hundred thousand years of human development (as described in "The Great Cosmic Mother"). Politics is concerned with the nature of social power. The "Bonobian" position is that love is real power. For example, producing a simple framed picture is gently penis-fencing with pedanticism, and writing an academic text could be GG-rubbing cynicism into oblivion.

HP:

What are you reading these days?

BC:

Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth by Buckminster Fuller
Your Private Sky by Buckminster Fuller
Supernature by Lyall Watson
Mind and Nature by Gregory Bateson
Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercy
New Age Armageddon by Monica Sjoo
The Great Cosmic Mother by Barbara Mor and Monica Sjoo
The autobiography of J Z Knight

HP:

Do artists assume, in your opinion, the role of vanguards of society?

BC:

If you are asking, "do professional artists working within the art market/gallery system act as cultural leaders?" my answer would be "No". All ideas are fluid. If you're asking me a more general question about the value to society of certain individuals who are compulsively inventive, intensely intellectually curious, wilful and emotionally generous and with well-developed psycho-physical capabilities then I'd say that, yes, these individuals are of immense value to society.

It's always possible to produce work which implies a critique of a particular power-structure or value-system by just refusing to speak its language, by mentalizing at a complex and sophisticated level in developing one's own language. For the illegitimate or anomalous creative participant who may not identify with many of the experiences, assumptions and epistemologies of their "contemporaries" it is absolutely necessary.

One must be absolutely unafraid of being misunderstood, misinterpreted, derided or dismissed as stupid or ignorant or whatever by those who profess to being "in the know" of that system or language, whether it be the clueless Bourgeois Hipsterism of "art world"/ fashion/ media, or the teachers at high school. Continual improvisation is necessary; if you keep moving around it's harder to be nailed, it's harder for your meaning to be shut down, and it's good to keep it always, always opening out.

One could describe my way of working as a form of subjective emergence where theory is manifest in practice; living with uncertainty and riding the uncertainty. It is not about only applying to art the old pseudo-scientific procedures (such as reduction, separation, isolation and distillation) based on a static-universe concept. Rather it's "hotly" conceptual, incorporating intricate combinations of the cognitive, analytical, abstract, analogical, literal, mythic, political, pop-cultural, structural, whatever as one poetic synthesised whole process: the creative ritual. In this way, it's an expression of a deep ontological memory of ecstatic creative ritual of the Old Religion.

HP:

What are the ideas found in the Old Religion, or the ones described in the "Great Cosmic Mother"? It might be my reading, but from the book's title, it sounds a bit like the idea of the matriarch is necessarily linked (or relegated) to esoteric, New Age ideals.

BC:

In fact Monica Sjoo makes a thorough distinction in her book "New Age Armageddon" between the Pagan and the New Age culture. She says that the New Age belief-system is essentially male-Sky-God oriented, transcendentalist, White-light, mind-body dualism. As far as she's concerned, it's a development of patriarchal Christianity by and for the white middle-classes. New Age men grew up in Societies with Christian notions of contempt for the body and for nature. New Agers consider transcendence to be of a higher order than immanence, and that transcendence is a release from the Earth which they see as the prison of the soul. Politics and spirituality is one and the same thing for Barbara Mor and Monica Sjoo. Their politics are Feminist, Marxist. More precisely, they share a "Materialist" conception of history but not a mechanical conception of the universe. The etymological cognates of "material"-"matter"-"mother" are important to understanding the Old Religion which is that everything is alive (hence, we are able to experience the "thingness" of a thing). All matter is alive, all matter has a soul, but there is no such thing as a disembodied soul, there is no such thing as pure disembodied spirit. The idea of a soul without a body is completely meaningless, whether that "body" be a tea-cup, a leaf or a child. All matter and energy, the electro-magnetic nature of the universe is all the activity and expression of the universal soul. Humanity is one living, unified structure that is part of the unified structure of Earth that is part of the unified structure of Universe.

HP:

You describe yourself as a Feminist and a Marxist. For many women artists - and declared feminists on top - the fact of their femininity implies a certain reception of their work.

BC:

Humanity as we know it has existed for some three hundred thousand years as matri-focal/matriarchal. So Mor and Sjoo understand patriarchy as emerging relatively recently, some three or four thousand years ago, around the time of the Bronze Age. They detail causal events to do with growth of cities and how it affected the role of males as hunters etc. but they describe the consequences as a separation from the psycho-physical ecstatic rituals led by women, the sacred technicians/shamans that gave meaning to our life as part of nature. So, then, an ontological crisis; a denial of the fact that man is **of** his mother, that man is made of matter, that he will die and will exist no more except in the form of other combinations of matter.

Patriarchy is a kind of ideology grown out of a hysterical response to the reality of the death of the individual soul. So Patriarchal religion created mythical fantasy realms where you didn't have to die; you could somehow go on being "you" forever. Patriarchy was an example of one group of humans (males) setting itself against another (females) and attempting to dominate the other, creating for itself a belief system based on the idea of a separate, external, all seeing, all knowing, all judging, distinct and disembodied spirit, a male-gendered *creator agent* who lives in the sky. So the campaign for patriarchal rule is neither inevitable nor natural but political, and based in fallacy. Further, this relatively recent four thousand year old ideological basis informs hierarchical concepts of society, slavery, informs fascism, capitalism, the state, neo-con' politics, techno-capitalism and so on right down to the destruction of the earth.

P.S. I am definitely *not* a hippy.

HP:

In this exhibition there are three matriarchs in the collage "Mycore Matronae Consider the Triangle", and the paper sculpture is a decahedron (a geometrical shape with 10 faces), and then there's the painting "Nine Priestess Pipe Players Raise Five Megalith One Hundred Feet into the Air Using Only the Power of Sound". Do numbers and the mysticism linked to them play a role in the new works?

BC:

I'm obsessed with triangles and the number 3. Buckminster Fuller stated that the triangle is the basic structure of nature, that the triangle *is* structure. I'm interested in the language of mathematics and its cult of *the denial of uncertainty*. I'm interested in the meaning of geometry and Platonism and the whole tradition of mind-body dualism.

HP:

You mentioned that Plato banned the Dodecahedron with its 12 pentagonal faces for "being irrational" (to quote Carl Sagan). The crystal geometry of the Granet stone is a Dodecahedron. The cardboard Decahedron's geometrical shape "doesn't make any sense" since it looks lopsided but is, in fact, absolutely symmetrical. Is this an example of the denial of uncertainty by mathematics? Other structures too repeat in some of your new drawings. Are they means of reassurance?

BC:

Some of these works are really science fiction because you can live outside of time in dreams of thousands of years past or hence, and you know the impossible is real. In the Chauvet Caves there are drawings of lions that look as though done by the same hand but were done thousands of years apart. 30 thousand of years ago we lived a psycho-physical reality that was so unlike our experience of reality today that you can only imagine what a trip it was. This is how they were able to lift megaliths with only the power of sound and this is how it is possible to create a successful anarchy with those capabilities that are only even barely activated when we make art, music, or sex.

Remember that these works are not a direct line between myself and an audience. They are just the evidence, the remnants, and the traces of my creative ritual / inventive dialogue with the universe in the Amanda Baggs sense. The audience is a mere witness to the tapes of me thinking visually (in this case about stone age magic, geometry, modern femininity as systematised technique, cybernetics, waves and particles and much, much more). Yes my intellect was fully engaged throughout (in waves).

HP:

At the time of writing these lines, people are protesting on the streets of London. The riots, as well as the attempts to lull the masses with the media craze around a royal wedding, are reminiscent of the unrests in 1990 and '91 towards the end of Thatcher's office. Being an artist as well as an art teacher, do you feel your students are fighting the same wars you and your peers have already fought? What do you tell your students?

BC:

In 1990 I was 20 years old and in my second year of a Fine Art degree at St Martin's School of Art. 1990 was the poll-tax riots which I slept all the way through due to my, by then increasing nihilism, alienation, and political inertia, stemming partially from 2 years attending a bourgeois art-institution, being exposed to decadent cynicism and the whole "lost in parentheses" culture of the nineties so my response was generally to dance, sleep and dream my way through the whole decade. Although in the late nineties, some friends and I did form an affinity group. We were called the *London Scrubbers*. We had a few very interesting meetings but it all fell apart because of drug and poverty problems.

Many of my students have, of course come from relatively *materially* privileged backgrounds so when I talk about things in terms of *survival* they might not always relate so well at first because they might think survival is the problem of *others* and they might be more concerned with the idea of *success*, but the interesting thing about privilege is that it's not a simple case of "having greater access to resources as well as a massive and very useful sense of entitlement." It's rather part of a complex, symbolic and pernicious culture based on a denial that can actually be oppressive for the "privileged" themselves.

Denial is built-in to privilege. It's a denial of the reality that one is surviving in and is part of nature just like all the other animals, just like every other human being. Many "supported" individuals are to a great extent separated from and denied consciousness of the nature of their own survival and therefore denied the basic right to the *ownership* of themselves and their actions. In this sense they are as ontologically at odds with their situation as any un-politicised exploited person. Everyone needs to own their soul. Therefore I would encourage everyone from every background to dig deep and reach for a deeper political consciousness of their own situation. Keep reaching till the day you die. Remember you are ALIVE! Solidarity is growing amongst previously disparate groups because humanity increasingly shares a common enemy called "the end of humanity".