

C E R A M I C

S E R I E S ●

Zoë Whiteside

Aberystwyth Arts Centre



JULY 1998 number 90

# Zoë Whiteside

A grainy black and white photograph of a small child sitting astride a rhinoceros, taken some years ago, is an image which Zoë Whiteside returns to time and time again. It stands as a sort of totem of humankind's relationship with the animal world. In this picture, the child jubilantly raises her arms, and the rhino, far from appearing cowed, has its head lifted, gazing upwards and forwards, apparently enjoying the relationship. The image is open to a wide range of meanings, referring as it does to the symbiotic relationship between animals and humanity, but for Whiteside its significance lies in its optimistic and positive mood, qualities which are, she says, a vital part of her work. Zoë Whiteside is part of the growing number of artists working in clay who model animals. After years of neglect, the animal world has become a fascinating and legitimate area, challenging artists to do far more than focus on external appearance but to aim to get beneath the skin, to tell us more about the animalness of creatures who have existed alongside humankind for thousands of years.

Animals in sculpture have been imbued with many meanings, ranging from heavily symbolic such as Leighton's python evoking the threat of engulfing sexuality, to the saccharine whimsicality of Bambi and the world of Walt Disney. Such considerations have little importance for Whiteside who shys away from psychobabble in favour of a more physical relationship with animals, more concerned with how they are structured, the way they stand, and how one part informs the other rather than what they signify. Like many artists working with clay, Whiteside approached her chosen area slowly. As a student on a two year B Tech art foundation course in Basingstoke there was plenty of encouragement and opportunities for experiment. Although torn between glass and clay, it was the tactile, direct quality of clay which finally caught her imagination because it could be handled, as opposed to glass which could only be manipulated with tools. It was the possibility

of working with both clay and glass which prompted the choice of Stoke for her degree, as the course offered the option of working with both materials, but again it was the clay which won, and by the second year she had started to model animals. Interestingly, this grew from wanting to decorate a pot with a design of a monkey, and slowly the monkey turned into a relief until it became an object independent of the vessel. Ever since Whiteside has continued to explore the animal kingdom. At Stoke there was time to visit the excellent museum where the variety and range of animals modelled by potters continued to impress her. These ranged from Staffordshire nineteenth century flat-backs to the highly stylised Tang horses and camels in their shiny glazes and rich colour. Inspired, Whiteside finished some of her animals with richly coloured glazes, a technique she has temporarily abandoned in favour of matt surfaces obtained through the use of softly coloured slips. There was also an involvement with environmental issues prompting Whiteside to become a vegetarian. One series of her pieces at Stoke were models of circus elephants placed on plinths. These were misinterpreted by animal rights enthusiasts, alerting Whiteside to the sensitivity of her chosen subject matter. Following Stoke came two years at the Royal College of Art, an experience which though continually challenging her to question what she was doing, seemed to offer little that seemed positive, and after she had left she felt she had to find herself again. For the final show at the RCA she focused on three animals - a bull seen regularly in a field in Stoke, a cat and a Staffordshire bull terrier both belonging to members of the family - each of which was rendered in a completely different style. It caused her something of an identity crisis, and for some time it was necessary to go to ground to re-establish herself. For a year she worked in a tiny studio in Shepherds Bush, London. This offered cheap accommodation but with a kiln little more than a foot cube, it restricted the size of her pieces. Though limiting in many ways it proved to be a useful framework, and here Whiteside began to develop her familiar vocabulary of modelled animals, all constructed rather like the animals themselves on a sort of skeleton

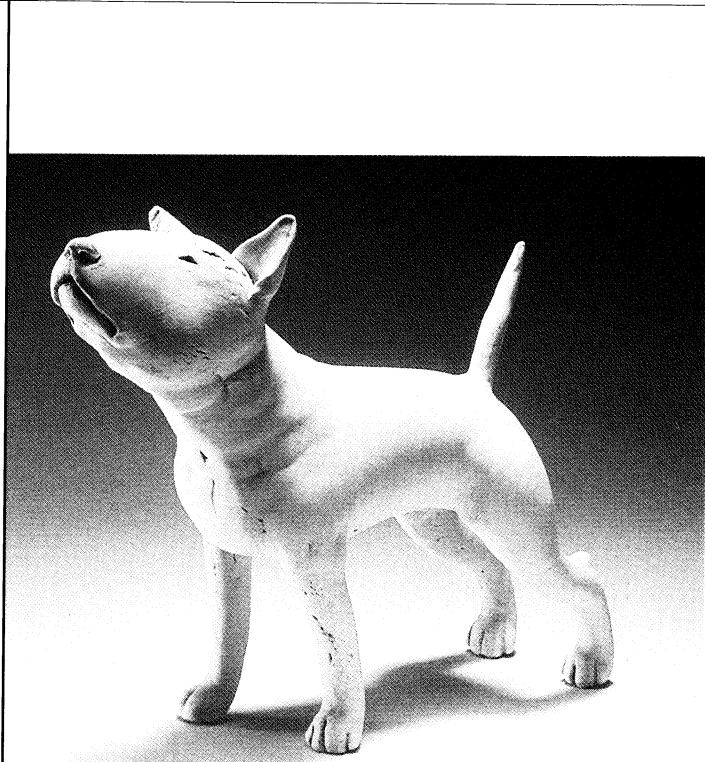
structure with the skin of clay made up from large slabs or smaller pieces placed over it to conceal but suggest the structure lying beneath. From London Whiteside moved to Coventry some three years ago and a larger studio. With the help of a Crafts Council setting up grant she acquired equipment and a kiln which enables her to fire creatures up to 36" high. Potting is combined with part time teaching at Liverpool Hope University on a broad-based three dimensional design course.

Like any artist working from life, Whiteside is continually making reference to the creatures themselves. In London there was the opportunity to spend time at London Zoo, and see at first hand elephants and rhinoceros, two of her favourite animals. The rhino, graceful and strong despite its great bulk, remains a challenge she enjoys. Other animals, though less exotic and more domestic, such as goats, dogs and horses, are also the subject of her work, each portrayed with an air of independence and dignity.

With deft skill Whiteside avoids any hint of sentimentality, while capturing the sense of the animal created in clay. Such qualities are beautifully captured in her drawings, carried out confidently with soft pencil, which describe the shape and contours of the animal. Such drawings lying casually on her table when I visited and smudged with clay, are the functional working drawings of an artist analysing the subject and rendering it in two dimensional form before creating it in three. For Whiteside, they are an essential part of the process of both looking at animals and coming to terms with what and who they are.

One of Whiteside's often consulted books is Peter Beard's 'The End of the Game' (Thames and Hudson) of photographs of dead animals and endangered species. The graphic all too real imagery disturbs cozy notions of sweetness and sentiment in favour of a gritty reality which seeks to alert us to facts rather than fantasies. Such images encourage Whiteside in her aim of celebrating the qualities and characteristics of the world of animals, enabling us to see again the strength, power and beauty of creatures whose mystery never fails to engage our imagination.

**Emmanuel Cooper**



Dog 18x15x7



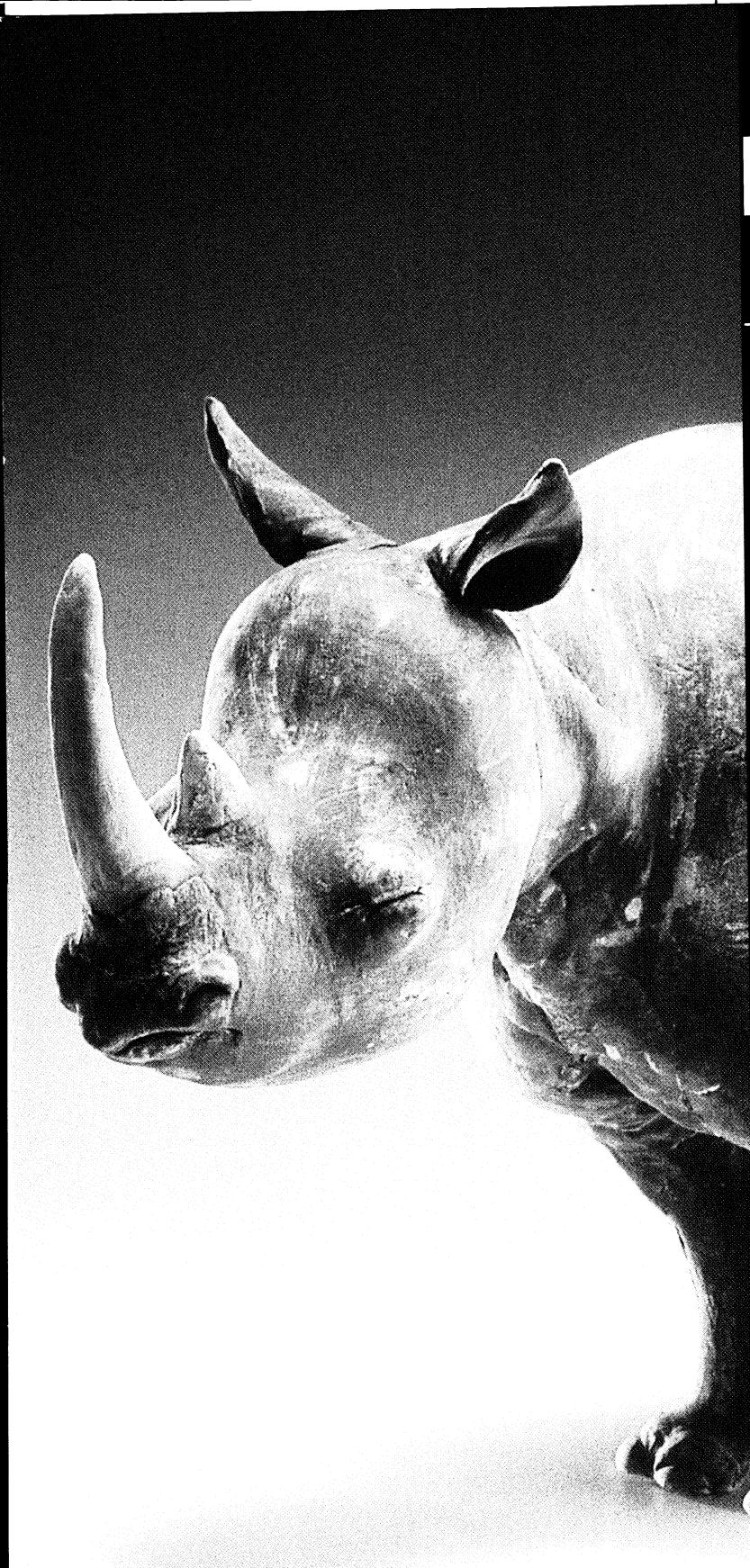
Zoë Whiteside

**July 11 - 29 August 1998**

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C Y F R E S O

G E R A M E G

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Delwedd y bydd Zoe Whiteside yn dychwelyd ati o hyd ac o hyd yw ffotograff du-a-gwyn graenog a dynnwyd ychydig flynyddoedd yn ôl, sy'n dangos plentyn bach yn eistedd ar gefn rheinoserol. Saif fel rhywfath o dotem i berthynas dynolryw â byd yr amfeiliaid. Yn y llun hwn, mae'r plentyn yn codi'i brechiau'n llawen, ac mae'r rheino, yn lle edrych yn ddarostyngedig, wedi codi'i ben ac yn syllu i fyny ac yn ei flaen, ac i bob golwg yn mwynhau'r berthynas. Mae'r ddelwedd yn agored i amrediad eang o ystyron, gan gyfeirio at y berthynas symbeiotig rhwng amfeiliaid a dynolryw, ond i Whiteside, ei arwyddocâd yw'i nawr optimistaidd a phosifif, priodweddau sydd, meddai hi, yn hanfodol i'w gwaith.

Mae Zoe Whiteside ymhlieth nifer gynyddol o artistiaid sy'n gweithio mewn clai sy'n modelu amfeiliaid. Ar ôl blynnyddoedd o gael eu hesgeuluso, mae byd yr amfeiliaid bellach yn faes rhyfeddol a diliys, sy'n herio artistiaid i wneud llawer iawn yn fwy na chanolbwytio ar ymddangosiad allanol yn unig, ond i fynd o dan groen yr amfeiliaid er mwyn sôn mwy wrthym am natur amfeilaidd y creaduriaid hyn - creaduriaid sydd wedi cyd-fyw â dynolryw ers miloedd o flynyddoedd. Mae llawer iawn o ystyron wedi'u hymgorffori mewn cerfluniau amfeiliaid, gan gynnwys gwaith hynod symbolaidd fel peithon Leighton sy'n atgoffa rhywun o'r syniad o rywioldeb sy'n mogi, hyd at Fambi siwrglyd, smala o fyd Walt Disney. Nid yw ystriaethau o'r fath yn fawr o bwys i Whiteside sy'n cadw draw rhag malu cachu seicolegol er mwyn sicrhau perthynas fwy ffisegol ag amfeiliaid; perthynas sydd a wnelo'n fwy â sut maent wedi'u strwythuro, y ffordd y maent yn swnio a sut y gall y naill ddarn ddylanwadu ar y llall, yn hytrach na'u harwyddocâd.

Yn debyg i lawer iawn o artistiaid sy'n gweithio â chlai, yn ara' deg y daeth Whiteside at y cyfrwng o'i dewis. Fel myfyrwraig ar gwrs celf sylfaenol B Tech yn Basingstoke, roedd yna ddigon o anogaeth a chyfle i arbrofi. Er ei bod rhwng dau feddwl ynglŷn â gwydr a chlai, yn y diwedd, natur gyffyrddadwy, uniongyrchol y clai a daniodd ei dychymyg oherwydd y gellid ei drafod o'i gymharu â gwydr. Dyma oedd y sbardun i ddewis Stoke ar gyfer gradd oherwydd bod y cwrs yn cynnig yr opsiwn o weithio â'r ddau ddeunydd. Ond, unaith eto, clai a orfu,

ac erbyn yr ail flwyddyn, roedd wedi dechrau modelu amfeiliaid. Yn ddigon diddorol, deilliod hyn o'r awydd i addurno pot gyda llun o fwnci, ac, yn ara deg, dyma'r mwnci'n troi'n gerfwedd nes iddo droi'n wrthrych ar wahân i'r llestr. Ers hynny, mae Whiteside wedi dal ati i archwilio byd yr amfeiliaid.

Yn Stoke roedd yna amser i ymweld â'r amgueddfa wych lle y bu amrywiaeth ac amrediaid yr amfeiliaid a fodelwyd gan grochenyddion yn parhau i'w rhyfeddu. Ymhlieth y rhain oedd cefnau gwastad swydd Stafford o'r bedwaredd ganrif ar bymtheg, ynghyd â cheffylau a chamelod hynod arddulliedig Tang gyda'u gwydreddau sglein a lliwiau cyfoethog. Wedi'i hysbrydoli, gorffennodd Whiteside rai o'i hanifeiliaid gyda gwydreddau lliw cyfoethog; techneg a esgeuluswyd ganddi dros dro am arwynebau mat a gafwyd drwy ddefnyddio slipiau lliw meddal. Hefyd, bu'n ymweud â materion amgylcheddol gan ysgogi Whiteside i fynd yn llysieuysedd. Un gyfres o ddarnau ganddi yn Stoke oedd modelau o elifiantod syrcas wedi'u gosod ar blinthau. Camddehonglwyd y rhain gan ymgrychwr hawliau amfeiliaid, gan dynnu sylw Whiteside i sensitfrwydd ei deunydd.

Yn dilyn Stoke, daeth dwy flynedd yn y Coleg Celf Brenhinol, profiad nad oedd, er ei fod yn ei herio o hyd i gwestiynu'r hyn roedd hi'n ei wneud, yn cynnig fawr ddim a oedd yn ymddangos yn bositif, ac ar ôl iddi adael, bu'n rhaid iddi'i chanfod ei hun unaith eto. Ar gyfer ei sioe olaf yn y Coleg Brenhinol, bu'n canolbwytio ar dri anifail - tarw a welid yn rheolaidd yn y meysydd ger Stoke, cath a daeargi tarw swydd Stafford, y ddau'n eiddo i aelodau'r teulu - pob un ohonynt yn cael eu gwneud mewn dull holol wahanol. Bu'n achos rhywfath o argyfwng hunaniaeth iddi, ac am beth amser bu'n rhaid iddi swatio a'i sadio'i hun o'r newydd.

Am flwyddyn, bu'n gweithio mewn stiwdio fach, fach yn Shepherds Bush, Llundain. Roedd y stiwdio yma'n cynnig llety rhad, ond gydag odyn heb fod yn fawr fwy na throedfedd ciwbig, bu'n cyfyngu braidd ar faint ei darnau. Er ei fod yn ei chyfyngu mewn sawl ffordd, bu'n fframwaith defnyddiol, a dechreuodd Whiteside ddatblygu'i geirfa amlwg o ran amfeiliaid wedi'u modelu, pob un ohonynt wedi'u hadeiladu ar ffurf ddigon tebyg i'r amfeiliaid eu hunain ar rywfath o sgerbwdd, gyda chroen o glai wedi'i greu o slabiau mawr neu ddarnau llai wedi'u gosod drosto er mwyn cuddio ond, ar yr un pryd, awgrymu'r strwythur yn gorwedd oddi tano.

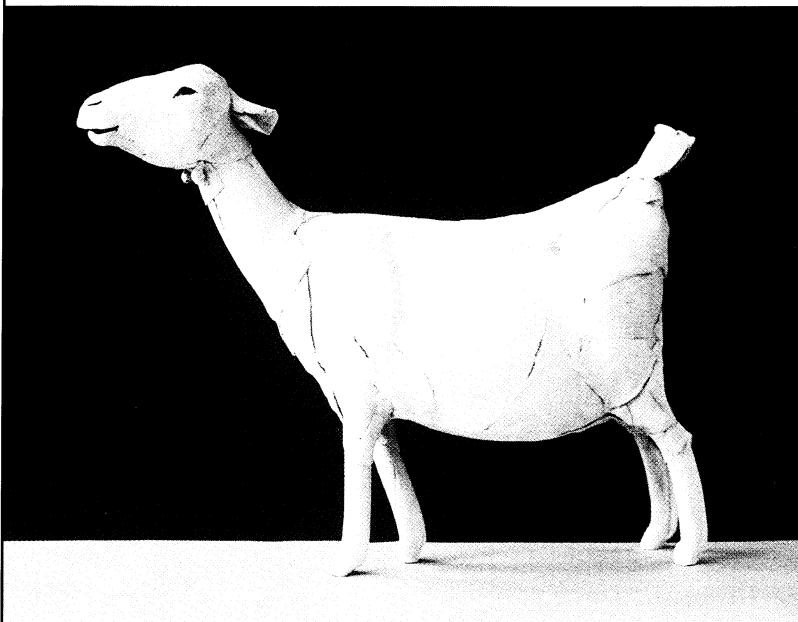
O Lundain, symudodd Whiteside i Coventry ryw dair blynedd yn ôl, i stiwdio fwy o faint. Gyda chymorth Grant Sefydlu gan y Cyngor Crefftaw, llwyddodd i gael offer ac odyn a oedd yn ei galluogi i danio creaduriaid hyd at 36" o uchder. Bydd hi'n cyfuno'i chrochenwaith â dysgu rhamser ym Mhrifysgol Lerpwl Hope ar gwrs eang ar gynllunio tri dimensiwn.

Yn yr un modd ag unrhyw artist arall sy'n gweithio o'r byw, bydd Whiteside o hyd yn cyfeirio at y creaduriaid eu hunain. Yn Llundain, bu cyfle i dreulio amser yn swâr Llundain, er mwyn gweld drosti'i hun elifiantod a rheinerosos - dau o'i hoff anifeiliaid. Erys y rheino, sy'n osgeiddig ac yn gryf, er gwaethaf eu swmp sylweddol, yn her sydd wrth fod ei chalon. Bydd anifeiliaid eraill, er yn llai ecsotig ac yn fwy domestig, megis geifr, cŵn a cheffylau, hefyd yn destun iddi. Bydd pob un yn cael eu portreadu â naws annibynnol ac urddasol.

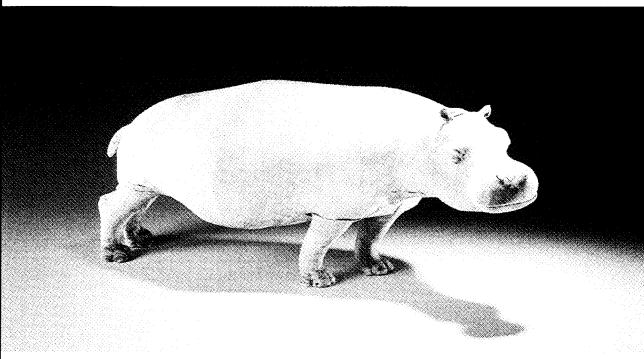
Yn fedrus iawn, bydd Whiteside yn osgoi unrhyw arlliw o sentimentaliaeth, tra'n dal y teimlad o anifail wedi'i greu mewn clai. Delir y priodweddau hyn yn wych iawn yn ei harluniau a dynnar yn hyderus gan ddefnyddio pensil meddal, sy'n disgrifio siâp ac osgo'r anifail. Lluniau artist yw'r rhain, a oedd yn gorwedd driphlith draphlith dros bob man yn ei stiwdio pan fues i'n ymweld â hi, wedi'u smwdjio â chlai, sy'n dadansoddi testun gan ei gyflwyno ar ffurf ddau ddimensiwn cyn ei ailgreu mewn tri. I Whiteside, dyma ran hanfodol o'r broses o edrych ar yr anifeiliaid a dygymod â'r hyn y maent a phwy ydyn nhw.

Un o'r llyfrau y bydd Whiteside'n troi ato'n aml yw *The End of the Game* (Thames a Hudson) gan Peter Beard sy'n cynnwys ffotograffau o anifeiliaid meirw a rhywogaethau sydd mewn perygl. Mae'r delweddau graffig hyn, yn dryllio unrhyw syniadau clyd am anwyldeb a sentiment gan gynnig realiti hegar sy'n ceisio dangos y ffeithiau i ni rhagor na ffantasiâu. Bydd delweddau o'r fath yn annog Whiteside yn ei bwriad i ddathlu priodweddau a nodweddion byd yr anifeiliaid, gan ein galluogi i weld unwaith eto, gryfder, pŵer a harddwch y creaduriaid y bydd eu cyfriniaeth bob amser yn llwyddo i danio ein dychymyg.

## Emmanuel Cooper



Goat 20x18x9



Hippo 48x22x20

11 Gorffennaf - 29 Awst 1998

Cefnogir Gan Gyngor y Celfyddydau

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