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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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Under the Influence

Rebecca Warren



A few years ago I lived near a grim pub called The Skinner's Arms. It was usually empty, and its faded red upholstery was thin and damp. Every time I passed by, it reminded me of the appalling moment in my childhood when I first heard the expression 'there's more than one way to skin a cat'; in a flash the words untangled into a vivid blood-stained scenario of howling cats and bloody forearms - words and images strung together like splintered bones.

In time I discovered that there are several versions of this saying: 'there are more ways of killing a cat than choking it with cream'; 'there are more ways of killing a dog than hanging him'; and 'there are more ways of killing a dog than choking him with pudding'. Suddenly I understood: most phrases, images and ideas can be repeated with infinite variations, spun into something unique that clings to the mother-ship even as it forges its own identity. Such an awareness was intense and unsettling; one of those epiphanies which simultaneously change the colour and timbre of the world and make you feel slightly exhausted with possibility. Words need images to give shape to vague meanings, and images occasionally need words to prise linguistic reverberations out of abstractions - and it's an eternal and often incomprehensible game. Such revelations must occur to most people, most of whom do not, I assume, let it worry them. At that moment long-ago, however, trying to imagine the struggling, soon-to-be-skinless cat without the ricocheting monosyllabic words bouncing off my imagination would have been impossible. All of which brings me to Rebecca Warren. I have a feeling that infinite variations on a theme of metaphorical cats variously and inventively skinned have occurred to her over the years. Riffs on the origins of language, images and ideas occur again and again in her sculptures, yet, despite the weight of history on their sturdy shoulders, they play gently with precedence.

I first saw one of Warren's sculptures in a small group exhibition entitled 'It's a Curse, It's a Burden' (1998), curated by Glenn Brown at The Approach in London. Warren was the only woman in a show dominated by men reinventing the work of some very male 'masters': Brown's 'copy' of a painting by Frank Auerbach conversed with a brilliant throbbing Picassoid painting by George Condo. Warren's contribution - *Helmut Crumb* (1998), a giant-legged, high-arsed, high-heeled clay sculpture of a woman, influenced by a Robert Crumb drawing and a photograph by Helmut Newton - harangued its neighbours with the blunt exuberance of a drunken joke made flesh. That this was a work by a woman appropriating sexual images created by men about women lent it a certain ambiguous, inverted power that had much to do with the ways in which humour can, in the same breath, deflate authority and pay homage. Helmut Crumb is light years away from any suggestion of victimhood - these are the legs of a female victor striding forth, headless yet uncowed.

To backtrack a moment. Harold Bloom was, as far as I know, the first person to state famously and unequivocally that influence can make you anxious, and, although his thesis was referring to poetry, the anxiety he describes is applicable to most creative endeavours. It's a well-known argument, but perhaps worth reiterating here: that it is the extent to which an artist or writer struggles to find their voice in the midst of a precarious, agitated relationship with their influences that determines how interesting their work is. Bloom believes that however much an artist might admire someone else's work, to develop creatively they must perceive that work as somehow incomplete - as if there is still something left to be done. Bloom's point is difficult to argue with. What are you meant to do with the mishmash of words and images from history and history-in-the-making that swirl around your imagination - the ones that make you breathless with the desire to be able to do that too, but even better? Plough on regardless and see what sticks? Take what you need? Kill your darlings? Try to beat them at their own game? Let them paralyse you? Live with them in a state of unilateral jealousy? Love them all without inhibition (an impossible task)? And what do you do if you're a woman and, for reasons that you can't quite fathom, most of your art heroes are men - not just any old men but the big, macho ones at that? Are you meant to feel guilty?

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Warren, I think, has decided to embrace her anxiety, let her fingers, imagination and sense of humour rip, and not let herself be restrained by trying to deal with influence reasonably (not many good artists are reasonable). An artist whose imagination makes a daily practice of innovation, envy, self-flagellation and admiration, Warren, in one particularly anxious gesture, became so concerned about Martin Kippenberger's influence on her work (she says she wanted to discover, in her own head, the freedom that his work demonstrated) that she glued the pages of his Taschen monograph together, drilled a hole through it and impaled it forever shut with a beam of wood. Like a bulimic locking the biscuit cupboard, she believed that by physically separating herself from the thing she most wanted but couldn't have she would be free of the desire for it. It was a naive if heartfelt hope, and (fortunately) it didn't work - except as a sculpture that, like so many of her works, manages to be at once intimate and playful without being confessional.

Over the past few years Helmut Crumb has stayed with me. I like its humour and the eclectic, rough-hewn energy of its execution. I like its odd anachronistic qualities - how often these days do you see figurative clay sculpture that, weirdly, feels fresh? The second time I saw Warren's sculptures was in her 2000 show 'The Agony and the Ecstasy' (remember a Technicolor Charlton Heston playing Michelangelo?) at Interim Art in London. In the press release Warren declared: 'I think my approach to making art is a kind of non-didactic process of self-discovery. A making sense of the madness of things. I'm unafraid of the potential of my work to sometimes veer towards the grotesque. I suppose it is quite old-fashioned in a way, as much as it is contemporary. I see the work as free from irony.' I agree with her, but would add that her idea of making sense of madness is to contribute to it - in a good way. The show comprised a messy assortment of unfired clay sculptures: opulent doodles of amorphous, sometimes figurative shapes, thinly glazed with faint colour - think early Lucio Fontana with an occasional somewhat startled penis, labia, hand, breast or thigh emerging from the chaos. Yet there was also something more monumental: pepperings of quotes and references to a few hundred years of the usual sculptural suspects, from Michelangelo's trapped slaves to Auguste Rodin's maquettes, Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Picasso, Edgar Degas, Alberto Giacometti ... The titles of Warren's work spin meanings off into yet another direction - strange fusions of random words, song titles, musicians' and artists names, and non sequiturs: *Jesus, This is Iggy* (2000), *Every Aspect of Bitch Magic* (1996), *Honky-Tonk Chateau* (2000). One sculpture, *Croccioni* (2000) is a marriage of a Crumb drawing and Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913): a fusion of Vivienne Westwood shoes, thundering, bulbous-calves and thighs that curve like hams. As with Warren's best sculptures, it makes tangible her struggle with process and precedence; with irregularity and exploration; with looking and looking again, and then changing your mind just when you think you've got it. Warren, for all her art-historical capriciousness, presents bodies less as vessels for ideas than as messy containers of feeling - so full they're often forced to overflow the constraints that imprison them.

Warren's most recent show, at Modern Art in London, was entitled 'Fleischvater', a neologism that can be variously translated as 'flesh of the father' or 'meat father'. (She obviously has a thing about fathers - she quoted me from Marcus Aurelius' Meditations: 'Madness without ostentation I learned from what I have heard and remember of my father.') In the relationships she has formed with the artists she quotes in her creative life Warren is in many ways reminiscent of a rebellious, though affectionate, daughter: volatile, funny and intense - she always talks back. Although she never idealizes her influences, she never condemns them either; they are what they are, yet what they offer is ripe for the plucking. For a while Warren was obsessed in particular with early Modernist French artists but she recently has moved on to late 20th century Germans - even the press release to 'Fleischvater' was written in German and supplied without translation. She has also started making big clumsy pictures that vaguely recall German painting of the early 1980s. When asked about the difference in outlook between German and French artists, she replied that it's 'like the difference between drinking Jägermeister and absinthe' and left it at that. A title such as 'Fleischvater', however, strikes me as being as much about the difficulty of translation as anything else - about how to move an interesting image or an influence into the realm of articulation and exploration. If this is not much of an explanation it's because the most interesting art rarely is.

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