

Lucy Skaer

Gilda Williams

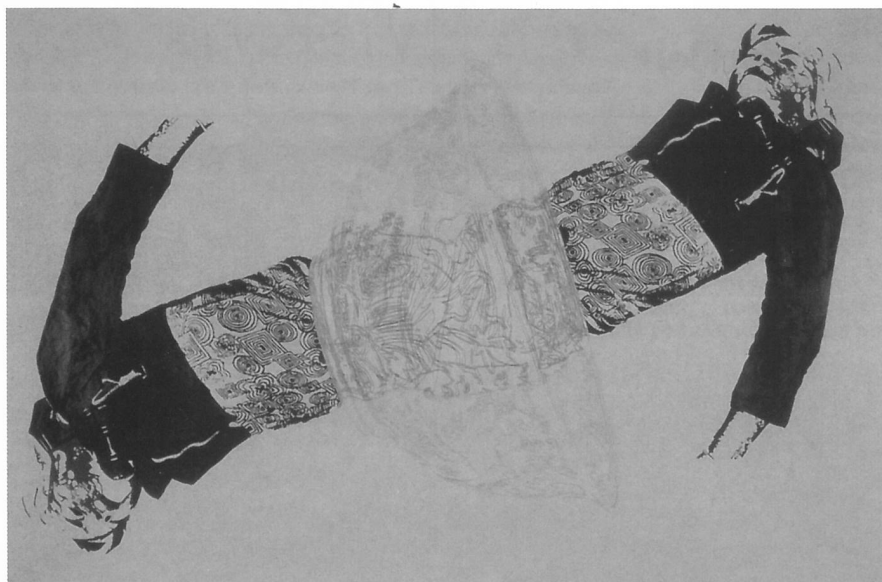
'THE EXQUISITE CORPSE DRINKS THE YOUNG WINE.' This was among the many sentences generated by the Surrealists in borrowing an old parlour game, the one which eventually gave the name to the Surrealist technique known as the Exquisite Corpse. The game is simple to play: fragments of a sentence (or an image – say a body, starting from the head) are written (or drawn) at the top of a sheet of paper.

The paper is then folded over and the first contribution concealed, then passed to the next player, who adds her own words or images. The process is repeated three or four times, ultimately resulting in an absurd construction by unrelated fragments.

Lucy Skaer's drawings are like riddles which can be resolved by inventing exquisite corpse-like titles, forcing the disparate elements at least into verbal proximity. 'The Ming vase bleeds across the dying liquid mouth of modernist cubes' suggests *Diagrams and Banners (Blood)*, 2004; 'The scarred skin of Hiroshima streets drips upon the primitive black vessel' points towards *The Problem in Seven Parts, part 6*; 'Rorschach cadaver and Nefertiti reign above circular hedged mazes and the winding snake' provides a word picture of *Venn Diagram (Nefertiti/Rorschach)*, 2001. Yet

there is a logic binding together the layers of graphite, red Humbrol paint, gold leaf, and black ink which make up Glasgow-based Skaer's mostly very large drawings – which, despite the overlapping of various contrasting materials, remain extremely flat. For one thing there is a strange, recurring symmetry, as in *Diagrams and Banners (Blood)* seen at the Whitechapel's 'Edge of the Real' painting show, in which blood flowing from paired corpses trickles into the decoration of a central Chinese bowl, to form a kind of hourglass composition. Changes both in form (from body to vessel) and substance (from blood to glaze) occur when the indefinable liquid is poured from one end to the other – eventually spilling into a kind of schematic modular city. And like the sands in an hourglass, everything in Skaer's universe is shifting in a perpetual state of instability and in-betweenness. The fresh cadavers, still warm and bleeding, are suspended between life and death; the fragmented pottery between wholeness and shattering; a spider somewhere between its own body and the snakeskin pattern below which generated it. Similarly in *The Problem of Seven Parts*, snakes moult; walls are bent into screens; drops of wine are poured into a glass and yet emerge beneath it. Everything is moving towards some other state: liquid and solid; animal and mineral; whole and fragmented; the living and the dead.

Skaer's graphite-based technique is occasionally reminiscent of MC Escher – of all artists – in the almost kitsch play between the two-dimensional paper and the believable illusion of three dimensions in her skilfully drafted drawings. Like Escher, Skaer gets some mileage out of tessellation, the mosaic-like visual transformation of, say, the patterning on the dead body's clothes into the decorative markings of an etched glass bowl in *Tragedy no us touched has*, 2001. 'My main interest lies not in the co-existence of decoration and brutality', says Skaer, 'but in the interrelation of the image



Lucy Skaer
Tragedy no us touched has
2001



and the real, the true timescale of the vase spanning generations of mortality.' In fact Skaer lifts (or 'shoplifts', the artist likes to say) images from trustworthy sources – such as photoreportage, or in the kind of technical or scientific drawings found in encyclopedias or the margins of dictionaries – to create her rebus-like pictures. Behold the Nigerian sculptured female head in *The Problem in Seven Parts*, part 7, whose intricately scarred skin denoted status and beauty in the 12-15th Centuries, or the stages of pupæ development (suspended above a pair of sprawled corpses in *Untitled*, 2001); or details of heraldic dragons in *Untitled*, 2003; or a gunwound to the back of the head, matted hairs and all in *The Problem in Seven Parts*, part 6.

But Skaer does not remain pinned to the paper like the birds and reptiles of an Escher drawing. She also creates public works in the three-dimensional fullness of everyday life, and in these works too the artist hovers in her chosen state of in-betweenness and metamorphosis. In a public artwork from 2003 Skaer planted living pupæ in a courtroom of the Old Bailey, hoping they might hatch mid-trial. On another occasion Skaer placed a scorpion and a diamond on an Amsterdam street – rather like the umbrella and the sewing machine Lautréaumont famously proposed be set on an operating table. Her interest lies only in their incongruous, exquisite corpse-like proximity, not in the consequences, either civic (scorpions can be poisonous) or economical (was the diamond picked up and set in a brooch? Or is it languishing at the bottom of a Dutch sewer, while baby scorpions are being born all round it?). Here Skaer forces together animal and mineral, as well as the unpredictability of human good and evil, but she is not interested in documenting or orchestrating the results. Like her drawings, all the elements will eventually settle into their rightful place, however unexpected, however wrong.

Like snakes and scorpions, Skaer's drawings cling better to the horizontal ground than to the wall. She makes her drawings on the floor, and does not see them from any distance until they are exhibited, until they are forcibly stood up

vertically, like bodies brought to life. (Many of the drawings are roughly human size.) But much of her work remains most comfortable on the ground, like the stacks of offset printed photographs – of the scorpion with the diamond; of a chrysalis nestled in the palm of a hand; of blackened wheat (an image between nourishing life and toxic death) – on the ICA gallery floor, posters to be taken away by visitors at Beck's Futures in 2003. 'If you flatten an object onto the horizontal field,' writes Rosalind Krauss, 'you've moved it away from the *visual*, from the condition of form.' Krauss associates the vertical artwork with the upright, seeing body; in fact, in Skaer's horizontal practice, sight is often stripped away: faces are bandaged or eyeless (*The Problem in Seven Parts*, part 1); the eyes of sculptured heads are missing, replaced by fatalities (*The Problem in Seven Parts*, part 7). Skaer never depicts a human head full on, fully seeing, but only in $\frac{3}{4}$ view, or from the back, with an open bullet hole staring out like a kind of wet, unseeing eye. ■

Lucy Skaer
The Problem in Seven Parts,
part 5 2004

Lucy Skaer is showing at Doggerfisher in Edinburgh from August 6 to September 25, and at schnittraum in Cologne from September 10 to October 15. She is a participant in Henry VIII's Wives in 'Romantic Detachment' at PS1 in New York from October 23 to November 27. She also featured in 'Now Then Now Then' at The International 3, Manchester, July 3 to August 15.

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Lucy Skaer
The Problem in Seven Parts,
part 1 and part 2 2004

