

Possible Worlds

On the Fantastic in the work of Julia Schrader

Capacity for fantasy is one of the great riddles of the human mind. Each one of us is equipped with that capacity, and yet such a resource is clearly unequally distributed among human beings. However even more interesting is the question of its origins and potential limits. Where do our inner images and stories originate, and how far can they take us ?

Faced with the wealth of ideas we encounter in Julia Schrader's works we gain some idea of their dream-like range. At the same time the artist's creatures throw light into the black hole of our imagination.

If, as is maintained, there is no limit to our fantasy, then this is simultaneously both fascinating and disturbing. After all the dividing-line between what we call fantasy and a pathological state of delusion is perhaps somewhat less clear-cut than we might like.

Our evaluation of imagination also determines the answer to the question: who is in control of our inner narratives – the fantasising subject or the creation itself ? Mastering fantasy is a very great challenge, and deploying it as a means for art an even greater one.

That state of affairs probably provides an explanation for the fact that pure fantasy has become very rare in the visual arts. Of course every artistic process is a creative act of the mind, but the great majority of artists deploy forms of synthesis where what is new arises out of combination of a great diversity of input. Yet the products of fantasy appear to be output without input, even though every inner image makes use of our brain's great store of data. So that is an especially attractive source of creativity but at the same time makes great demands. By implication this generation of images can be controlled from within in carefully-selected doses, and also grants all of us a very direct, and to some extent a private, view of another mind. For an artist this can be a risk which must be well-considered.

Julia Schrader always engaged with that risk. Her oeuvre constitutes a rare and fortunate exception since it is unmistakably a narrative process whose unconventional dealings with such everyday objects as lentils or ray-eggs can build a bridge between the inner and the outer world – but above all because her work is in every respect grounded in fantasy.

Her growth as an artist becomes apparent in looking retrospectively at her work as the history of a researcher of nature who has encountered a new world into which she is drawn ever more deeply while attempting to come closer. Nevertheless there is a great difference. The artist's search for intentional relationships are not so clear-cut as a scientist's. If a creator and discoverer were combined in a single person, in the sciences that would justifiably provoke great suspicion. In art attitudes are completely different. In such a context it becomes obvious that activities can only become more interesting if a research project does not have to be cut off at the natural limits of the possible, and can also incorporate the realm of imagination in absolute freedom.

Schrader's creatures originated within their creator, but somehow there remains an impression that they didn't enter this world completely passively, without any action on their part. With their fantasy-based autonomy it is difficult to believe they weren't determined to be created by someone in one form or other.

This story began directly after the artist's years of study in London. Before that she was still concerned with a process of abstraction where utilitarian objects were deprived of function. Then signs of life suddenly appeared with her process of artistic unfolding changing course towards figurative creation. Her early Clothing Objects consisted of innumerable ceramic spikes, fixed onto a frame, but here already the body indirectly became the central motif.

Shortly afterwards her characteristic composite-creatures made themselves at home in Schrader's work, retrospectively indicating that something more ambiguous than the human body was already intended. In the first decade of the 21st century, entire hordes of chimaera very quickly came into existence in her studio. Some of these were life-size with skins created from the fruits of leguminous plants while many small sculptures combined synthetic and natural objects she had simply come across.

These were not anonymous beings. They had the task of telling the personal story of their inner wishes and compulsions and the external threats facing them. If we look, for instance, at the three lentil-covered creatures (dating from 2003) apparently being devoured by hands transformed into snakes, the artist's highly detailed studies of fear and its gestures become apparent. The bodily postures are both staged and authentic. Their drama is almost reminiscent of the exalted gestures of Bernini's Baroque sculpture, and yet in their context they are essentially less heroic. That also makes their inner state more comprehensible – and their vulnerability makes them more like human beings.

Ultimately that gives rise to a subtle challenge whose surmounting superficially characterises Julia Schrader's work.

In 1970 Masahiro Mori, the Japanese specialist in robotics, coined the phrase *Uncanny Valley*, referring to reservations about progressive humanisation of the outer forms of fundamentally inanimate beings. Contrary to our expectations, readiness to accept such creatures generally does not develop in linear recognition of increasing similarity to humans. Instead there is a level, a zone, which provokes within us a puzzling rejection. This phenomenon, discovered in the realm of robotics and mainly of popular relevance in animated films, can also be applied to Schrader's creations since these are figures which undoubtedly want to offer themselves as objects of identification for us while at the same time obvious obstacles impede that. But what characterises our individual response? Do we experience these creatures as being uncanny? Or do they arouse feelings of sympathy?

There isn't any clear-cut answer. They exist in an ongoing state of ambiguity. Some aspects activate feelings of identification, while simultaneously their constituent elements – scissors, mouths, spikes – come from the realm of horror.

These creations thus unite an attracting and a repelling force, maintaining them in a floating state as far as aesthetic impact is concerned. You don't get to know Schrader's creatures in passing. They are made for prolonged contemplation as they keep us enthralled while they maintain balance, with blind assurance, along the abyss of an Uncanny Valley.

We can learn much from them about the way in which we generally approach the unknown, and about how quickly our criteria can change or obliterate one another.

These creatures define themselves in terms of their otherness. In addition their gestures betray to us that they are not only aware of their bodily existence but are sometime more and sometimes less happy with that, differing from individual to individual. In that respect they are very similar to human beings since we too all try to develop ourselves uniquely and yet constantly seek role-models where we can fit into society – models that regularly lead to personal failure. That applies to both an individual and to the collective norms underlying our judgement of others.

From the start the almost obsessive attention Julia Schrader devoted to the surfaces of her creations also led our attention in precisely that direction – towards the covering or outer appearance in both an immediate and an expanded sense. That makes of her art a critical mirror, primarily of a superficial look at something unaccustomed through which the observer allows himself to be guided. This state of affairs raises questions about our aesthetic limits. To what extent must a creature be remote from ourselves and our innate ideas about normality to be seen as repulsive ?

This artist's works expose some of our most unpleasant instincts. Alongside our impulse towards voyeurism there is the revulsion aroused by something we don't know or – as shown in the explicit nature of Schrader's oeuvre – something about our own bodies that we should know but often prefer to ignore. This paradoxical intermingling of interest and aversion is symptomatic of many initial experiences, and yet the inbuilt scepticism underlying antipathy is always a dubious impulse which can and should be suspended. Julia Schrader's creatures do that beautifully since as artworks each of them received from her the same unconditional attention. They are thus ultimately not freaks but rather advocates of taking a second look and of the immutability of existence.

Julius Tambornino, 2019

(translated by Tim Nevill)