

## **All Living Creatures**

### **In Memoriam Julia Schrader**

*And the Lord God formed man of a lump of clay,  
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;  
and he became a living soul.*

*(Genesis 2, verse 7)*

Julia Schrader was a born potter. After completing an apprenticeship while still at school she studied ceramics in London, first at the Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts and then at the Royal College of Art. During that time she underwent step by step transformation from an applied ceramicist to a freewheeling artist – and simultaneously emancipated herself from clay (and porcelain). After her studies were over white ceramic “spines and spikes” of different shapes and sizes still referred directly to her training and became an important element in her early work. They were also used time and again in later phases of creativity. She hadn’t shared some fellow-students’ alchemical obsession with the most refined glazes and exotic ways of firing, but it was then that she developed an exceptionally refined feel for beguiling surfaces and exceptional sensitivity in using a multitude of materials, and, above all, elaborated diverse possibilities of unconventional combination, underlying the particular fascination of so many of her artworks. A large number of the works produced in London and shortly afterwards – particularly a meticulously detailed series of “Items of Clothing” (shoes and dresses) – came close to being “Design”, especially as they were made almost in their original size.

However even though there exist photos of how at least two of these pieces were “worn”, this obviously did not signify fashion. In addition their component parts were clearly too fragile and uncomfortable. Instead they served the artist as a means of representing – for the observer directly comprehensibly – fictitious wearers’ diverse states of being. Ceramics are both hard and breakable, and as spikes also aggressive. In this series of works Julia worked her way through various expressive possibilities. An early dress, consisting of little ceramic squares, each embossed by a button, might still be reminiscent of mediaeval armour, simultaneously promising both security and isolation, and burdensome through its sheer weight, but later copies seem at first sight considerably lighter. Nevertheless the thousands of spikes carefully incorporated in a dress create uncertainty, depending on whether they are turned inwards or outwards, imbuing this object with a self-assertive, belligerent, or auto-aggressive, masochistic aspect.

In all such instances Julia’s way of elaboration constituted a deliberate contrast with her chosen archetypal form of a widely-flared dress as basically only worn today by dolls, fairies, or story-tale princesses. In fact many of her early works presented a mysterious fairytale-like indication of, or direct reference to, worlds of childhood experience. An entire series of teddy-bears was produced where the essential function of being cuddled is made impossible by the incorporated spines; and a doll’s pram suffered the same fate. With these spikes all such

works seemed to be afflicted by an epidemic, and thereby placed under a spell and made dysfunctional. Here we already encounter a liking for macabre and grotesque monstrosity, which was enjoyed to the full in many of the artworks that followed. Deployment of childish references, gestures, and props pointing towards a supposedly intact nursery world made these horrors all the more effective. There came into existence a series of life-size human-animal hybrids whose surfaces consisted of peas, lentils, sunflower seeds, or rice: a lizard-like woman and man keeping a watchful eye on us, a number of babies and infants who to their horror are attacked by dragon-headed protuberances from their own bodies, and other monsters which take possession of various items of furniture and toys with brazen impudence.

We encounter all these monstrosities with mingled fascination, abhorrence, and pity. With their powerful physical presence they can potentially pursue us into our sleep. Each single one might have arisen in a childhood nightmare. Small works, created out of puppets' limbs, plastic animals, beads, crab-claws, rubber tyres, and innumerable other elements, emerged at the same time. Creation of a panopticon of storybook beings offered chimaeras formed out of dismembered humans and animals, often releasing Julia's abundant imagination. There are autonomous individuals such as a high-heeled pig, a cow-headed flamingo flower cavalier, a butterfly-winged baby maestro, a coquettish toad-in-boots, and many others. We encounter little groups of interacting figures on square floor-tiles (sometimes also covered with silicon), and also an entire populated landscape consisting of these squares combined in various ways. The artist often concealed the extent to which her work was an assemblage of various materials by covering objects with a layer of white paint. That may create an impression of well-made ornaments, but then her abstruse motifs immediately disturb and puzzle us once again. From what realms do these figures come ? Do they originate in fairy-tales or ancient myths ? Are we encountering a freak show presenting particularly bizarre mutants ? Are these antediluvian scenes or visions of post-apocalyptic horror ?

These are mysteries which ultimately remain unresolved because Julia seldom made any direct reference to traditional literary figures and knew how to perfectly balance the uplifting and the disturbing impact of her visual world. As originator of these works she might slip into the role of a Dr Frankenstein or an excessively ambitious manipulator of genes, but from around 2008 a new kind of animal came into existence where its creator seemed to vanish completely. As a passionate frequenter of zoos she was time and again filled with wonder at a fascinating abundance of forms – from a round-eared elephant shrew to an Asian Tapir. Her artworks began where evolution (up to now at any rate) left off. That is so in the *mermaid's purses* series, named after the English term for shark or ray eggs which form a fundamental body for most of these creatures. The first generation of mermaid's purses (over a hundred) were pinned, like valuable butterflies, on textile-covered boards. Later examples were presented under glass domes, making possible ever-more sweeping gestures and allowing an observer to wonder at these creations from all sides.

Tadpole-like cephalopods form another group of creatures, often equipped with antlers varying in extravagance and usually pony-hair skin, producing a particularly life-like impression. In the course of her work on this natural history collection Julia increasingly renounced such industrially produced components as dolls heads and arms. The outcome was

hardly satirical or hybrid any longer. Such creatures formed a unified whole, but of course they were also assembled constructs, often out of particularly many different elements. Alongside the well-tried ceramic components Julia collected innumerable objects from nature whose diversity was directly translated into an impressive heterogeneity of animal realms.

It wasn't only Julia's persistence and meticulousness in collecting material that was truly admirable. She also possessed a visionary eye for discovering things intensively sought, for instance, along diverse beaches in Europe, but unexpectedly too during everyday activities when she would come to a halt and open her bag to accommodate something worth collecting – things that almost anyone else would have missed because they were so inconspicuous. As winter set in and the heating was switched on in Julia's flat, radiators were covered with, for example, amaryllis stalks, pin-cushion blossoms, or the inner-skin of a grapefruit. If at some private gathering or in a restaurant, fish, poultry, or, even better, sea-food were eaten, then coveted parts – particular bones, claws, or even very delicate shrimp feelers – were acquired. Only in that way over many years could Julia assemble a rich stock of material in her studio, allowing the artist, whenever she wished, to draw on abundant resources for her creations, always immediately finding the right thing without having to look around. The sensitive observer will hardly need to ask about the artist's decisions regarding the assembly of elements in any specific artwork, but may instead reflect, with a quasi scientific involvement, on the nature and way of life of the individual creature: the living space, eating habits, locomotion, coupling, etc, of whatever is exhibited. If one or other of these creatures should respond to the observer out of its larger or smaller glass eyes, something almost akin to empathy might even arise. So the glass domes used for the last generation of mermaid's purses don't only serve protection of exhibits against dust or damage. Rather they seem to prevent this horde of extremely agile little creatures from flying, creeping, or crawling away.

Sadly Julia is no longer among us. However she has left behind an oeuvre that can still speak to us of her temperament, her originality, and her sense of humour. In the final stage of her life she – as the best kind of artist – created with extreme sensitivity and a remarkable capacity for empathy an entire cosmos of forms of life: as animals apparently so self-sufficient and as works of art so autonomous that they are capable, to just a tiny extent, of representing their originator, which may provide us with at least some slight degree of consolation.

Hans Pfrommer

(Translated by Tim Nevill)