

# ANITA TRAVERSO GALLERY

## BARRY THOMPSON *Peristereonas*

Interview with Rosa Maria Falvo 2010

**RMF** – I meet many artists in my travels and I'm always fascinated by the process of art making, especially in terms of the artist's psychological perspective, their life experience, and how it shapes their vision and their 'productions'. You've been a friend for many years and yet I feel there's much about what motivates you that remains untapped. So what does artistic process mean to you?

**BT** – I like the idea of a strong concept that can be built on. I'm particularly inspired by the early 20th century modernists – Brancusi with his pure forms, Modigliani and his mask-like faces – and the abstract expressionists like Twombly and his ritual fetishes. I like the idea of starting with a basic human form and then remodelling that structure. Process for me is about coming up with an idea and having that reproduce, multiple, even germinate others, much like a garden that keeps producing for you in the face of all the storms. The artistic process should be forgiving and regenerative, like Nature herself. And it changes as you change: some works are tranquil and others will be aggressive; some beautiful and others ugly. They can be lyrical or clumsy according to my state of mind. If a mistake happens, I think you should leave it – that's part of an honest method of creating. Matisse never tried to hide his process, he left the traces of change; you can see the inevitable mistakes and that's about spontaneity. A work just happens. It's like automatic writing; something just comes out and much like problem solving, especially with sculpture, you start and then sometimes you have to destroy it. As artists we'd all like to think people will sit and contemplate our work, but we know this seldom happens, especially in today's world of visual overload. I want people to reclaim the art of contemplation. Much of art now takes itself too seriously. The chance to be whimsical inspires me. Those impulsive, illogical turns of mind or phrase are often really telling and the most entertaining. We have made such celebrities of artists, but I think the best ones are simply using their heads and hearts to make things; no differently to those anonymous medieval craftsmen who filled the courts with masterpieces. We should just keep connecting to the craft and crafting. I don't agree at all with that Renaissance idea of the artist as some kind of anointed aesthete. A phrase by Lucian (an ancient Assyrian rhetorician and satirist) has hung on the walls of my various studios watching me work for many years: "All will praise your art, but not one of those who see your art, if he were in his right mind, would pray to be like you. For this is what you will be: a common workman, a craftsman, one who makes his living with his hands".

**RMF** – What are the simplified forms in this body of work all about?

**BT** - None of my figures have mouths or eyes. I've reintroduced ears in this series. The pigeon was the only animal depicted in Cycladic art, so that's why it has entered my work. The bird watcher is a very straight forward piece, but within this installation he's focused on a pigeon perched on the foot of a female figure with legs akimbo. She's naked. Originally she was a pole dancer, but after a while the pole 'disappeared' and I thought of her as a pigeon dancer. I suppose it's my interest in Surrealism - it's capricious and dramatic by nature. The birdwatcher has his back to a demure, classically nude female figure that I've called Paloma (after Picasso's daughter). I'm commenting on the male gaze. He chooses to stare at

the convoluted dancer instead of meditating on his unpretentious muse. What is the fascination, the distraction, the obsession, all about...?

**RMF** – It seems to me that there's a line of tension in your work between the process of paring down an image and accumulating its surrounding narrative; between finding a common thread or denominator and then elaborating, even complicating, the story. The apparent austerity of your figures belies the theatricality of their situation. Are you toying with them or with us?

**BT** - I think life is never as it seems, especially when it appears to be tidily sewn up by some kind of preconceived notion or commonly accepted culture. My figures are always changing, the image is developing in meaning and the sculpting is an additive procedure, almost an intervention. I get a lot of satisfaction from the protracted pace of drawing, cutting, pasting, plastering; constantly building in each layer to produce the pose and then choreographing the narrative. I photographed these pigeon houses last year in Greece. Abandoned, beautiful, ghostlike dovecotes dot the Cycladic island of Tinos, looking like a giant land art installation. From the 12th century they've been used for breeding – pigeons were an important food source – and collecting droppings. They are made of whitewashed stone and intricately decorated with slate. Their facades are full of rhomboids, cypress trees, suns, and moons. It reminds me of that postmodern pastiche you see on some otherwise modest buildings in our cities. Some of them stand alone against a barren landscape. Others form parts of gardens next to springs, nestled between pomegranates and lemon trees. In Roman times they were the prototype mausoleum, where the ashes of the deceased were stored in the pigeon holes. The secrets are always there to be found. Like some kind of huge archaeological dig, I think we have to delve into the truths of our own existence, no matter how well disguised or elusive they may be. I try to use humour whenever I can to reveal some of those personal and public mysteries.

**RMF** - You were an advertising man, an art director, for over 25 years. This must have shaped your creative vision and perhaps still informs your purpose today. You seem to love the ritual of theatre, the 'performances' inherent in contemporary living and its consumerist's beliefs.

**BT** – Yes, my days in the ad world have taught me a lot. I've been to the other side of constructed reality and I know how addictive the 'products' and even the production process can be. I can appreciate great ideas, but I also see the bigger picture and how it can fit into a body of work. An idea has to have legs. If I start from a basic form I should be able to have it go on forever. If it's a good idea, it should keep on producing; otherwise you need to bury it. I'm attracted to the engineering of an artwork, the practicality of the final outcomes, which should be built to last. I'm all for shooting analogue and converting it to digital and using multi-media. The tableau is important to me; having the story inside the frame and the figure.

**RMF** – Why have you chosen an ancient civilization as your metaphor for contemporary life?

**BT** - Initially I wanted to escape from Sydney and its materialist culture. Throughout the 1980s I visited the Aegean every year. It was the antithesis of my life in advertising. Village living was simple, stimulating, intimate, and public all at the same time. I remember my father asking me why I made the pilgrimage to Greece so often. When I first arrived I honestly felt like I had been there before. I told him I'd somehow use it in my art. What fascinated me most was the Minoan civilization of Crete with its Knossos Temple, the archaeological dig of Akrotiri in Santorini and the Cycladic excavations in Amorgos. All of which continue to kindle my spirit and I adopted these mysterious remnants as my creative reference point.

Although Cycladic culture flourished in the same period as the Egyptians, no recorded evidence has been found of their language or science. All we really know is that they grew crops, hence the pigeon feeding tray of Syros dating back to 2800-2300 BC, as well as other pots used for storing grains, which you can see in the Goulandris Collection in Athens. This ancient world is a source of artistic nourishment for me. These figures represent an enviable connection to nature and human contemplation. Their simplicity, ability to survive; the white against the turquoise sea, enriches my visual language.

**Barry Thompson** is a Melbourne based artist and lecturer at the Photography Studies College in Southbank. He has been working with various media for over 20 years and many of his best pieces form part of important collections in Australia, Europe, and the United States.

**Rosa Maria Falvo** is an Italian-Australian based curator and the Asia-Pacific Publications & Projects Consultant for Skira International Publishing in Milan. Her most recent projects include the 'East of Nowhere' show in Turin 2009, which showcased artworks from Central Asia and 'Korean Eye', an exhibition and book about to be launched at the Saatchi Gallery in London 2010, surveying 75 contemporary artists from Korea.