

# Marvelous Monsters

## Heidi Preuss Grew's Recent Works

*Article by Ricardo De Mambro Santos*

FROM HOMER'S RESOUNDING DESCRIPTIONS OF CREATURES up to the modern ghosts fabricated by Surrealists, an army of intentionally unnatural and sometimes deliberately grotesque figures have populated the world of art. Somehow recognisable and yet fully detached from the realm of nature, these creatures exercise a long-lasting effect over audiences through their capacity of awakening, disclosing and further stimulating a sense of wonder, amazement and even fear. Heidi Preuss Grew creates her works in this parallel universe – in which forms appear as the result of a dual process of careful observation and imaginative reformulation.

Located in a space in-between, where the representation of unnatural shapes harmoniously accompany notions of ambiguity, tension and metamorphosis, her 'marvelous monsters' could be justly identified as the Postmodern heirs of Renaissance grotesques. They display a superb

mixture of the natural and artificial but have the capacity to provoke surprise, bewilderment and a sense of joyful displacement in the viewer.

Apparently repulsive, in reality delicate and gracious in a special way, Preuss Grew's figures are the fruit of a quite attentive process of elaboration in which the final results intimately document the stages through which the 'matter' passes before becoming an accomplished artistic 'form'. This can be seen in Preuss Grew's powerful *The Force of Nature* from the *Black Drawings* series, where the moment of creation is palpably represented by the mass of white



pigments exploding in a fire-like symphony of transparent signs. The remnant splatter invites the spectator to distinguish, little by little, the almost invisible silhouette of a figure incised and further developed as a delicate drawing. An eloquent symmetry connects the haphazard shape-in-progress of the thrown porcelain pigment and, in the same unsuspecting manner, the gradual emergence of a female character. Significantly, the violence of this application technique does not contrast with the delicate rendering of the figure but, on the contrary, tends to emphasise the moment of transformation in which a not completely controllable raw material (the dense white porcelain) emerges as a more and more distinctive form. In another work, Preuss Grew's intriguing digging character depicted in *The Night Excavation* seems romantically searching for 'Otherness', creating a hole from which an entire New World could magically appear. The crude roughness of the brownish space that surrounds the little man reinforces the utopian value of the enterprise as well as its vital importance to the character. Roughness and delicacy, once again, present not contrasting elements but amalgamable oppositions. Each work of art appears, therefore, the most eloquent witness of its own process of elaboration and, not by chance, every single part seems to tell us stories about the emergence of its shapes, its stylistic devices. The morphological 'openness' of the forms furthers the 'ambiguity' of the images in Preuss Grew's works, without circumscribing their semantic implications.

In order to understand such a personal visual vocabulary, it is important to point out the remarkably precise rendering of all Preuss Grew's images,

especially in the depiction of details. She pays much attention to the representation of captivating elements such as the expressions of the faces or the curious gestures and postures attentively described in her figures' self-absorbed motions. Her pursuit of highly individualised features also contributes to reconciling any oppositional forces that might undermine her attempt to formulate a living, breathing set of imaginary creatures. Consequently, accuracy and vagueness in the rendering, roughness and delicacy in the style, as well as naturalness and deformity in the depiction of all characters become distinctive aspects in her iconography.

'Incomplete' according to a classically-oriented standard of resolution, these forms are, in reality, more than 'complete' from an expressive point of view. Any further modelling or retouching would have ruined their aesthetic potentialities.

In spite of the apparent swiftness of Preuss Grew's pieces – stylistic 'matter-of-factness' not dissimilar to the one developed by German Expressionists – her works are the arriving point of a rather intuitive method of execution, during which even the tiniest 'imperfection' or 'defective' element could be successfully incorporated in the final visual discourse. Accidental or intentional become two equally interchangeable labels of invention. A concrete example

*Facing page: Johannes and The Forest Dweller.*

*Below left: The Force of Nature.*

*Top right: Lost in Thought and Debris.*

*Below right: The Night Excavation.*





of this phenomenon would be the artist's *Last Straw*, where the two attentively delineated figures encounter the shape of a thunder-like line of cracked, fired clay: a physical element of disintegration that visually accentuates the sense of fragility and distance that permeates the scene. Is this a separation? An interruption? A missed encounter?

Preuss Grew's *Marvelous Monsters* reveal their own process of elaboration as an activity still in progress, transforming the pieces into living forms suspended in a timeless present. In fact, more than mere 'forms', her images should be considered as 'paths of formation'. Such a concept of ceaseless re(form)ulation orients our perception and invites us to reconsider the pre-established parameters with which we savour aesthetic experiences. The deliberate 'deformity' of Preuss Grew's creations is therefore more than a stylistic tool or a calculated morphological device: it is a necessary mode of expression, a premise as well as a consequence of her particular visual narrative. According to this standpoint, to 'deform' would mean more appropriately to de-form: that is to say, to prevent the forms from repeating only well-established paths of visualisation and attempt, conversely, to enlarge the horizon of manifestations.

Thanks to this process of incessant reformulation, figures that would have been most certainly considered 'ugly', 'abnormal' and 'grotesque' in other contexts can be radically transformed by Preuss Grew into the most charming and intriguing set of characters. Initially undifferentiated and vague spots on a fluctuating field of stains, this universe of undistinguished 'forms' are translated by the artist into a group of highly individualised *dramatis personae*, liberated from any fixed narrative frame. How could

one possibly define the captivating face of *Johannes* as either 'beautiful' or 'ugly'? And what about the delightful, meaningful vagueness of *Baroness in Distress*? Irony, melancholy and ambiguity play such an important role that the adoption of any kind of rigid scale of definition or evaluation (pretty, monstrous, charming, grotesque) sounds inevitably reductive and embarrassing. Living forms of fiction, flexible figures from the imagination, Preuss Grew's images are evocative characters in search of many possible narratives.

Irony and ambiguity intentionally occupy a central position in Preuss Grew's creations for, together, they are able to guarantee an effective degree of freedom to her images and open structural, physical and material frontiers towards the unknown. In order to reach such a goal, Preuss Grew paints and inscribes her images as though they wanted to appear indefinitely 'amorphous'. Never clearly outlined nor shaped in accordance with traditional mimetic principles, the dynamic articulation of these little beings, along with their most subtle emotional characterisation, is realised by the artist in such a manner that even the most perplexed spectators would be eventually persuaded that these creatures are more than just forms of clay, colours and fire. In spite of their unnatural, indefinable shapes, they paradoxically appear as vivid, breathing beings. Neither ethereal, nor simply terrestrial, these figures belong to a special state in-between.

Tangible yet remote, the artist's figures seem to come from the pages of a future tale or a forgotten fable. Even the colours reinforce such an impression of new-and-old. Delicately spread on a series of multi-layered veils, the general tonality of her pieces closely recalls the texture, the evocative uncertainty, used as illustrations in the books by the Brothers Grimm, Lewis Carroll, or even Jorge Luis Borges. In fact, the 'muddy' density of certain colours as well as their variable consistency and extension give her

*Baroness in Distress.*



images an air of palpable remoteness as if they had only recently been unearthed from a timeless ruin. On the other hand, the accumulation of chromatic veils contributes to an ungraspable vibration, a subtle tonal iridescence, thus magically reinforcing the sense of actuality as well as material tangibility of these fantastic creatures.

From a stylistic point of view, the artist explores a quite wide spectrum of morphological solutions: sometimes descriptive and meticulously detailed, her forms can also be roughly carved or quickly, barely modelled at all, alternating a fastidious attention towards the particular to more informal manners of defining volumes, shapes and poses. Structurally they are even harder to define according to pre-established categories: flat or fully round, they can assume the features of painted sculptures as well as the indefinable space of miniaturised installations. The status of 'object' seems, however, to constitute one of the few structural certainties of these pieces, whose disposition in pairs, couples or groups establishing potential points of connection, possible bridges of relation and even calculated distances. For this reason, Preuss Grew carefully plans the position that the various pieces will effectively occupy.

Technically, these works confirm Preuss Grew's outstanding dexterity in dealing with a large range of methods and working processes, in the attempt to obtain specific results and particular visual effects. She challenges the usual boundaries of this material with admirable versatility, adding grace where others would have been tough and barely touching the matter where others would have spent hours and hours describing parts of their images. Unexpected and unpredictable, she carves and models her works in a most variable way. The touching scene represented

in *The Forest Dweller* exemplarily demonstrates this notion by alternating areas roughly handled and others directly modelled with pigments.

How closely Preuss Grew's pieces recall iconographies codified by the aesthetics of Romanticism and, more precisely, by the members of the German Romanticism, such as Caspar David Friedrich. Not by accident, timeless dreamers, travellers without destination, indefatigable walkers, observers, wanderers and explorers of daily wonders surface as protagonists of some of her most outstanding works. For example, in the series of *The Black Drawings*, the transparent, nearly evanescent silhouettes of half-animal/half-human creatures are represented while performing all kinds of actions, ordinary as well as extraordinary ones: admiring a little hole, embracing a child, walking around toward an emptier space, or just standing as though captured within an invisible grid of expectations. In all these works, the raw texture of the clay is magnificently used to contrast the bright clarity of the white silhouettes, composing thus an exquisite visual oxymoron.

Particularly representative of Preuss Grew's *modus operandi* is the enchanting composition entitled *Lost in Thought and Debris*, where a solitary genderless figure, almost concealed by the large setting of brownish clay, walks absent mindedly towards a large white spot (the debris?): In the case of Preuss Grew's little creature, extremely simplified as a form and yet fully functional as a container of actions and emotions, this figure seems suspended in a never-ending performance, moving in an infinite

*Last Straw.*



'present continuous'. Such an image – immediate and detached, tangible yet unreachable – conciliates, once again, the concrete physicality of the representation with an atmosphere of almost metaphysical dilation, bringing together, in the most harmonious and unpredictable way, the material side of the artwork with its intelligible implications. Neither ethereal nor bluntly terrestrial, the artist's characters are intransitive presences of an emotionally-based exploration of actions always in progress, in a search never to be fulfilled.

That is, in fact, one of the most rewarding experiences for those who contemplate Preuss Grew's creations: to observe, fragment after fragment, the dissolution of any nihilistic system of oppositions within the fictional space of art, in which dichotomies such as darkness versus light, flatness versus roundness, roughness versus delicacy, action versus suspension, presence versus memory, attraction versus repulsion, grace versus monstrosity, seem definitely surpassed. As a balanced interplay of dissolved contraries *Lost in Thought and Debris* establishes a subtle equilibrium among different modes of depiction through Preuss Grew's capacity of reconciling well described details with elements of the composition barely touched at all. On the other hand, the title itself addresses such a vibrant tension of potential contraries by bringing together the ideas of 'high' (*Thoughts*) and 'low' (*Debris*) in a combination able to ultimately cancel any hierarchical divergence.

Programmatically, then, the artist alters the usual relations established among forms, beings and objects, reorienting them towards unprecedented paths of connection. Thanks to this shift, our perception of a generally despised element (the 'debris') will end up becoming as important as the 'thoughts' (so proudly announced in the title)

in the path of one's own appreciation of this work. The narrative encounter between 'thoughts' and 'debris' in the reinvigorating space of the artwork, consequently becomes the goal of such a touching image, in which the artist achieves a dynamic synthesis among quite heterogeneous components. Founded on intuitive grounds and

responding to the artist's personal agenda, her figures poetically announce multiple origins both from the past and from the present.

Preuss Grew's visual constructions seem to retrieve, in the German heritage of the artist, parameters of creation that significantly share principles pursued by protagonists of Romanticism. The concept of Beauty conveyed by her figures appears indissolubly linked to ideals extensively explored by German Romantic thinkers and painters. More than providing a mechanical iconographic revival, Preuss Grew's works seem to share, on a deeper level, moods and atmospheres that one can find in these master's compositions. Not a stylistic remembrance, but a 'spiritual', or *geistig* transposition of Romantic values into a Postmodern visuality.

In this sense, Preuss Grew shall be justly regarded as the multifaceted, capable and superbly skilled heir of both Renaissance forms and Romantic premises, seen from the lens of our Postmodern condition. Her works offer us the unique opportunity to explore unknown domains and distant, invented lands, leading us towards the rich promontories of the imagination. As Mary Shelley described in the introductory pages of *Frankenstein*: "I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man." The *Marvelous Monsters* of Heidi Preuss Grew invite us to explore the ever open space of aesthetic adventures, in which past and present are the coordinates of new temporalities of creation and here and there the invisible lines of a most fascinating geography: the land of Surprise and Beauty.

*Johannes (Detail).*

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