

*Channa Boon: thinking about a conversation between the monkey and the freak*

The Dutch artist Channa Boon's work has a fantastical cast of characters that take us through the history of art. Her characters interact with our world, disrupting our experience, drawing us into their world-views. Initially a painter, Boon's work has developed to encompass performance, sound and most recently film. Her characters exist within the frame of the film and the gallery, but whilst the medium de facto contains them, they bounce back into the world, imbued with an almost tangible sense of space and life.

Monkey: I was thinking about painting.

Freak: Wow, a talking monkey!

Monkey: Hey! Don't use that tone of derision when you talk about me, you freak.

Freak: Well, I'm not any freak, I am *the* freak.

Monkey: Well, I am *the* monkey. And I'm in a rock band. I play guitar.

Freak: I play.

Monkey: What do you play?

Freak: I just play. Hey, are you a painter?

Monkey: That is a difficult question.

Freak: Arcadius told me more about the painter called Sasha. I might tell you as if I am Arcadius.

Channa Boon's 2009 film *Sasha* stems from questions about painting, a line of enquiry that threads through much of her work. For example, *Limpiar el Museo (Cleaning the Museum)*, 2008, filmed in Bolivia, depicts the plight of an absurdly driven cleaning lady. She is seen collecting mud from the volcanic slopes, cleaning her mop in the placid shallows of the lakes, and scrubbing pristine white walls of the gallery with the muddy slush. Each shot is clearly composed, proportions are balanced and the angles of the setting consciously utilised for effect – the open horizontals of the lake, the dramatic diagonals of the hills and the boxed-in volumes of the gallery. Her futile topsy turvey approach to an unending and impossible task, to clean the world, elevates her. The cleaning lady, reminiscent of a Vermeer figure becomes a hero for trying so persistently, but she also becomes a painter through the marks she leaves with such rigour on the gallery walls.

Freak: But tell me about your band.

Monkey: But Sasha...

Freak: Never mind that. We'll come back to that. Tell me – who is in your band?

Monkey: Are you asking as you or Arcadius?

Freak: Both. None. All. You. The future past. Me.

Monkey: That sounds like chaos. But I'm the monkey, I bring the chaos!

Freak: Well I'm the freak, the fool, I speak the truth, a truth. Here is a simple truth: I am asking as the freak. So tell me.

Monkey: If you insist. We are The Reincarnations! We are a trio and we rock hard. The White Priest, the Black Priest and me.

Freak: When did you form?

Monkey: Oh, well, I am very old, before all you lot, and the priests, well, they're a lot younger than me but still we are steeped in time. We formed in the ancient times when we were really bored, so rather than being by-standers slotted into doctrine, we decided to drop in and out of today. Our music is improvised, so why not extend that to when and where we perform! An orgy

of improv. We combat what has come since our times by saying hello through our gigs on the streets, hopping out of our van, playing, diving off to another venue. We played in the low countries, the White priest received the most looks.

Freak: Looks?

Monkey: Yeah, double takes. Everyone assumed he'd make one sort of music, when actually he's into another. I was hearing about the Grecian Gods, they're pretty playful, but they have that rep, for some reason my guys, the German and the Eastern, they don't have that image, at least, that's what was passed on to today's folk.

Freak: I think I saw you elsewhere...

Monkey: In Korea? Oh that wasn't me. Well, it was sort of, but there was a Korean girl inside.

Each of Boon's characters has a back story. Although they are ultimately tools for communication, they have motivations, histories, and their own agenda's. During the making of *Sasha*, Boon would easily talk about the desires and past experiences of the characters. The film, made during a residency in Vilnius, both imposed her vision onto the city and responded to the sets provided by the geography of the place. The locations wove through the city, the action pulling together yards and side-streets, working industrial nooks and preened botanical gardens to hidden theatres and cells. The film has a clear narrative that echoes the question of the death of painting through the downfall and illness of the titular protagonist. Sasha came in part as a way for Boon to find a way to work – by painting as Sasha, she created canvasses that started as narrative tools but ultimately became pieces in their own right. These paintings feature in the film (supplemented by leftover work from the stores of high-school students, an embryonic counter to the supposed end of painting) and become a talking point for Sasha's doctor.

Freak: Say what? Are you schizophrenic?

Monkey: Look, it was a crazy time. I was far far away from home and the city around me kept mutating. I couldn't get to grips with it.

Freak: It was mobile? Like an emergence? A creature?

Monkey: Like a self-replicating sculpture. The citizens were like ants, like a consciousness reshaping what was around them, sometimes so slowly, but at other times things would just spring up in an instant.

Freak: But those ants, the citizens, they're all individuals, they can't all agree can they?

Monkey: No, but each holds the same agenda, to cope, to respond and so they either move themselves to a place that works or they shape what is around them, on a micro or macro. And the city as a whole, it can clash with itself, it can display its political tensions through the different manifestations of the different priorities.

Freak: So nothing is static.

Monkey: Well even if it is, it doesn't stay that way for long. Our ever-present foe, entropy, takes care of that.

Freak: And you? Why were you there? Were you rocking out with your Dark Priest?

Monkey: Oh he was probably around there somewhere, but no, I was City Monkey. I was reminding them of where they came from. I hung out, explored, wandered. I reminded them of their heritage but I liked freaking out, no offence, and showed them the insanity of their ways.

Freak: What of the Korean girl.

Monkey: She was local, she was simply using my skin to express her relationship to the place as well as it being a little bit of a break from her skin. She was free in my skin. Primal, well, as primal as could be. She could do what she couldn't in her own. She could be the city, just for a while.

Freak: Do you often let other people use your skin?

Monkey: Ah, sometimes. I let Channa from time to time. She made a film of our city sculpture.

Sasha's illness harks back to Raskolnikov's *Crime and Punishment*. In the film, Sasha receives visitors from his dream world who intrude on his daily life as do his split-personalities, encountering one another in an innocuous bakery. Whilst the doctor might day-dream, it is only in Sasha's hallucination that they actually meet. Both Sasha and the doctor are visited by the freak, so is the freak in their reality or are they both in the feverish world of the freak? Which world does the doctor belong? Where does representation start and finish? The doctor is a pompous character prone to monologues including a self-indulgent musing over Sasha's painting of a caged bird when asked to provide a prognosis as to Sasha's condition. He is only seen to observe Sasha once but that is within Sasha's sleep in the theatre, although the eye of the lens doesn't not explicitly tell us whose point-of-view we are privy to – a game that disrupts the clear narrative and installs an enigmatic uncertainty.

Perhaps the freak can tell us more about Sasha's background

Freak: are you asking me to tell you what Arcadius told me?

I am inviting you to, yes.

Freak: Hum. You've ignored me and my monkey friend up until now.

I was busy introducing elements of Channa Boon's work to the readers. You were providing disruptive interventions just like your roles in her works.

Freak: Well it came across as plain rude to me. You sound so imperious, as if you know everything. Pfft. But very well. Tra laa. I shall assume the voice of Arcadius. Ahem. *He looked like his father very much: so slim, pale, both with theatrical tendencies and heavy hearts. Sasha only knew him through his encounters with the looking glass – he did not know his father who had hung himself, so sad. Sasha's mother found him hanging after many years of drink failed to cure his depression. She ran a soup kitchen for the homeless. Her patrons were most worried for the boy – too vulnerable for this world. Mother and son were counterparts: whilst he sat for hours studying the universes painted by nature from the yellowing rings of damp from next door's leaking bath, projecting himself at the 'you are here' centre of the concentric circles, his mother would sigh heavily and fix the leaking bath.*

Monkey: What happened to him?

Freak: I will continue as Arcadius, *He moved from Seskine to a small studio to live and work. They called him Raskolnikov because he lived in his own paintings.*

What else can you tell us? What else did you see during your visits to Sasha and his visitors?

Freak: I was dancing when Sasha fell. It hurt with the weight of inevitability. We collapsed onto the ground, he cut his head, but two good Samaritans rescued him. Arcadius must have been talking a lot – they knew where to take him.

Monkey: Where?

Freak: Plato's Cave...his studio, where do you think?! He lay amongst his paintings, or at least paintings that were attributed to him.

Yes, we have established that.

Freak: His paintings were like the doctor, trying to cure him. Sasha thought about death, his own and his paintings'. He made a grave for them, but it turned out it was impossible to escape them, ultimately he didn't want them to die, and also...they wouldn't die.

Monkey: You're not making sense. They are Zombie paintings?

Freak: They're not un-dead, just not dead. Not these ones anyway. Everything folded in on itself.

Monkey: I'm confused.

Freak: You're chaos, that's what you deal, so surely you can take some of it yourself.

Monkey: I'm not sure if Channa would be happy with that.

Freak: Hey, you've taken on your own existence now. She can only lead you so far.

Monkey: The same goes for you.

I've taken you on now.

Freak: Shush. So, Sasha, he was ill. His malady...

Monkey: Like guilt? Like a guilded gilt guilt?

Freak: Why not. Could have been. Channa gave me clay to play with so I could use it to look back through the lens, poking through the material to make contact with those watching.

Monkey: What, are you Brecht or something? What's your manifesto?

Freak: It's not that simple.

It started with painting, but its more than that.

Monkey: Don't lay it out completely

Freak: I don't think our author wants to. Is that why she returns to the film time and Again?

I'll just show these paintings to you and then let's leave it to the reader to do some work.

Monkey: Paintings? By Sasha?

Freak: They used to be.