

The ears of trust and the awakening of awareness

Camille de Singly

"But we are all travellers in what calls John Bunyan the wilderness of this world,—all, too, travellers with a donkey [...]."

(Robert Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*, 1879)

By choosing the donkey to represent the figure of the confidant for the artwork she has designed for the Lycée Simone Veil de Gignac in the Hérault region, southwest France, Cécile Pitois revives the character of Modestine, Robert Louis Stevenson's cherished travelling companion as he walked through the Cévennes: a descendant of Cervantès' Rucio de Sancho that became the "light of his eyes". But here in the high school, there is no back to stroke, no rump to slap, no mane to caress; the animal is reduced to a pair of ears and a tail (the two parts of the body that Modestine "shakes"), each placed upon a plinth. Its references are to be found elsewhere, and fuel alternative interpretations of the work. There is the idea of opening a body, splitting it in two to invoke a reincarnation—an animal—that makes us sense the world. These big, willing ears arouse our trust, inviting us to share our desires and our dreams with them.

The source of the "Listening Donkey" is a local folk tradition where young people dress up as a donkey. To celebrate the memory of Martin, a donkey that saved the town of Gignac in the eighth century by braying to warn the sleeping villagers of impending danger, four young people parade through the streets in the streets in the guise of the "donkey". Two of them don a four-legged costume; a third leads the "donkey"; and a fourth holds its tail. Only the head and tail, which are independent added elements, truly identify the animal; its "body" is more like a piece of ritual garb, covered with inscriptions and flowers. For a long time, only boys took part; as the ethnologist Anaïs Vaillant explains, the event had the "ancient characteristics of folklore relating to enlisted soldiers, marking the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood", and reflected the gender and age of army conscripts (young men aged 18-20). In 1996, a young woman (called Stéphanie) took part for the first time. This modern appropriation of the event by girls (walking front and rear) gave a new lease of life to an outdated event whose original meaning had been all but lost.

By bringing the donkey inside the school at Gignac, Cécile Pitois connects it to its tutelary figure, Simone Veil, whose Abortion Act allowed women to freely pursue their educational and professional goals. Today, bringing girls into high school vocational curricula is a burning issue. It might seem paradoxical to use a variant of the Trojan Horse (this time, a donkey) to represent such a struggle; but we know that change takes place from the inside, and that resistance sometimes comes from the least expected quarters.

Cécile Pitois' donkey is also, as mentioned above, a sympathetic listener with whom the artist invites us to ritually share not only our "desires and dreams" but perhaps also our anxieties; this faithful companion does not judge, accepts trustingly, and keeps secrets. It's not only "an appurtenance of [a] mattress, or self-acting bedstead on four castors" (Stevenson). It has better hearing, as its ears can rotate through 180 degrees. We are put in mind of Anatole, the donkey belonging to Philémon (Fred's daydreaming hero who sets out to discover the geography of letters), who can talk and is one of the few who believe in his master's visions; or of Ariol in Emmanuel Guibert's eponymous series, an asinine embodiment of the good friend for a generation of French children.

One strange thing, which we also mentioned above, remains: the fact that the donkey is divided into two, and that only its most obvious attributes are visible. Twenty or so years ago, Damien Hirst challenged our perceptions with large cut-up animals presented in aquariums full of formaldehyde. Today, we struggle to understand how we have been able to consider the ten million other species on Earth as mere things, mere resources at our disposal, whereas we have so much to learn from them (Baptiste Morizot, *Ways of Being Alive*). Cutting into an animal is a way of finding a way inside it: in this case, a way of listening through its ears. How could we not see, in this gilt bronze donkey, a reversal of the great equestrian statues: the first monuments to grace our urban environments? Here, the scale is 1:1, and Man finds himself on the ground—far removed from the "great men", those proud warriors and horsemen who tamed horses and other mortals and to whom we pay tribute. Perhaps a whole donkey would have been too close to what we know: a mere duplication of reality. Taking something away can sometimes reveal a deeper truth. It can awaken our slumbering minds, making it emerge from the beautiful grey-blue Hainaut stone, as Rodin did to recall our origins—and the origin of sculpture itself.

Camille de Singly
Périgueux, 10 December 2021

Commissioned by Cécile Pitois
Catalogue L The Listening Donkey by Cécile Pitois