

Natacha Pugnet

Trevor Gould- *Peiresc and Friends*

Peiresc and Friends: as the title on its own indicates, Trevor Gould designed this sculpture in relation to the historical, cultural and geographical context in which it is set. A seventeenth century scholar at Aix-en-Provence, Pereisc – whom the philosopher Gassendi described as the “prince of the inquisitive” – notably studied archaeology, astronomy, law and geography, genealogy and heraldry, zoology and botany. Being fond of surrounding himself with animals from the East, this learned man had an elephant stay for three days at one of his homes, Belgentier, in order to study what was in those days a highly exotic living curiosity. However, with Gould the animal is ever-present, the elephant and the monkey offering a favourite motif of his. Born in Johannesburg to parents of European origins, he left South Africa to settle in Montreal, ten years before Apartheid became intolerable to the point of abolition. Although familiar to a South African, wild beasts are to this day seen as the emblems of a fantasized Elsewhere. Going beyond the Manichean opposition of nature and culture, many artists have given a major role to the animal, whether as the embodiment of beliefs or as a medium for scientific and ethical inquiry. With Gould, it is immediately thought of as a figure, combining a “being of nature” and its cultural and symbolic representations. More precisely, it is a metaphor for identity formation.

The second background element behind the design of *Peiresc and Friends* is the continued survival in Aix-en-Provence of many shrines set at a height on street corners. Mostly depicting a Virgin and Child, these small sculptures, decorating both public and private buildings, used to be boundary markers between neighbourhoods enabling believers to pray from their own homes. This link between the symbolic space and the “real” space, private beliefs and popular customs, suggested to the artist an unusual figurative group, also intended to feature as part of the architecture, that of the Non-Maison, which commissioned the work in 2012.

This group comprises three indissociable figures, an elephant serving as a base for a couple formed by a man and an albino chimpanzee. In addition to the Virgins with Child, this iconography refers back to heraldry and in particular to depictions of elephants bearing on their backs some building, obelisk or tower, common in all kinds of representations, Romanesque capitals and mosaics, fountains, coats of arms etc. While taking over certain conventions of these two symbols, Gould turns them into a new allegory. Of the former, the sculptor preserves the attitude: his character carries the primate on one arm while the position of their heads indicates another kind of closeness. From heraldry, he keeps the instantly identifiable profile, non-respect of proportions and the elephant’s function as a support. In the urban space, this relief appears as the substitute for one of the most

widespread (and popular) motifs of western art. While we know the meaning of this symbol, we are disconcerted at the singular interpretation of it provided by Trevor Gould.

Making use on this occasion of the crafts techniques traditionally implemented for shrine sculptures – ceramics and slip – he deliberately uses media generally avoided by contemporary artists for his own purpose. But this is not for him a way of adopting a “postmodern” stance involving the quoting or commandeering of religious iconography. There is nothing ironic about any alternative use going on here. The value of questioning such work and the refusal to impose any single unambiguous meaning lies in our needing to think about what we are being shown. Going beyond the field of art, such thinking seems more necessary these days than ever before. In our mostly dechristianized society, what meaning do these shrines still have, when many of them are latecomers and of dubious aesthetic quality? For the tourist, aren’t they the markers of a bygone age or even the “antique” relics of an old, superficially idealized town?

By depicting not a physical portrait of Pereisc but one of a scientist and traveller – does he not hold the world in his hand? – Gould reinvents an emblem that conveys universal values. The monkey that literally forms one body with him is the artist’s second narrative moving force. Its plastic treatment clearly makes it the complementary double of the character. Generally interpreted as a figure of otherness, the chimpanzee (genetically close to humans), here albino, to Gould’s eye appears as our *alter ego*. As for the elephant with its mutilated tusks, is it not more like a trophy than a symbol of strength? If the group seems out of place in this urban space, it is because where we expected to find a familiar symbol, we are confronted with an enigma. However, upon closer scrutiny, we detect a fable about the relationships between beings, and hence rediscover a form of humanity different from the form embodied since the Renaissance by a Virgin who has become a mother. Provoking this play of interrelations between past and present, here and there, identity and otherness, the artist offers us an opportunity to ponder over our own position in terms of origins, space culture and history. *Pereisc and Friends* operates within an open-ended fiction, designed like an oblique mirror.