

Pre-human, Post-human, Inhuman

Teri Frame



Act I: Simians.

IN THE BACK CORNER OF THE CENTRAL HALL OF THE TAMPA Convention Centre sits a woman in white, elevated inside a simple plywood construction that resembles at once a stage and a vanity. There is a mirror before her, tools and clay. Her expression is static, her eyes empty; she is wearing a mask of raw clay. The fit is good, the illusion that the mask is her actual face, compelling.

She looks out over the small audience that has gathered, impassive, imperious. She takes a handful of clay and rolls it between her palms. There is a cadence to rolling a coil, the result of the modulations in pressure necessary to maintain roundness. These

she amplifies, subtly engaging her shoulders, torso and hips. The motion is fluid, almost serpentine. She lays the coil in a gentle wave above her right temple, ending in a curl – and is transformed. Her uncanny, living anonymity has become identity, specified by the simple suggestion of a fall of hair across her brow.

What follows is a succession of such transformations: she builds a head of tangled Grecian curls and is Medusa; she gouges deeply into her upper lip, remodelling her lower face and sculpting her hair into long, upright ears and is a woman-hare hybrid; she folds her ears forward to form a heavy brow, adds a broad protrusive nose, a jutting chin and

horns and is a goat-man, a medieval devil.

With each transformation, there is a subtle shift in mannerism that reflects the identity she is adopting. These shifts are performative amplifications of the different methods she uses to manipulate the clay: prodding, pulling, pinching, scraping, smoothing, slapping, brushing, scoring, carving. Not only does each of these methods involve distinctive physical actions, but each imparts to the clay a particular surface quality with its own tonal character. Material and method, accentuated by performance, are fluently integrated to illuminate the shifting identities.

Hybrids is the third in a series of six performances by Teri Frame, entitled *Pre-human*, *Post-human*, *Inhuman*. First performed at the 2011 NCECA conference

A Review by Mark Nathan Stafford

in Tampa, Florida, US, the series was subse-

quently recorded, with some revisions, at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

There is a basic chronological structure to *PPI*, which begins before the advent of humanity in *Simians*, progresses through the evolution of the species in *Early Humans*, the development of myth in *Hybrids*, of cultural aesthetics in *Proportions*, of the cultural politics of globalization in *Races* and, finally, through the possible end of humanity in the technological hybridization of *Posthumans*. Yet the series is not simply chronological. Each section of the performance serves simultaneously as a link in the over-arching depiction of humanity's biological,



Act II: Early Humans.

social and cultural development. And as a particular exploration of the various conceptual boundaries that humanity, both individually and collectively, has set for itself, the physiological and psychological limits to our definitions of personhood.

These explorations rely on our readiness to read external manifestations of form, surface and mannerism as metaphors for internal states. The pristine refinement of Medusa's skin, her elaborate, viperous coiffure and come-hither haughtier are abstractions; Medusa is a conceptual figure, the embodiment of dangerous femininity, of seductive death. There is a long-standing precedent for this kind of metaphoric leap in art and literature and it comes easily to us, perhaps even naturally. But there is another fundamental metaphor at work, one that must be accepted first – that of clay for flesh.

This too comes easily, as a host of clay-based creation myths attest from every habitable continent. Many ceramists, both professional and amateur, feel a transcendent physical connectedness with raw clay; its supple plasticity and smooth, uniform density, its fleshy pliancy and skin-like luminosity are almost irresistibly compelling. The intimacy of this connection, which is at the heart of our inclination to think of clay as flesh, is not easily captured, particularly in fired ceramic objects. Yet in the relationship between her sculpting hands and the material, in the process of rendering form from formlessness, Frame does capture it, conveying a visceral, almost vicariously tactile sense of clay's physical properties. By

whitening her skin with slip, Frame further blurs the distinction between her body and the clay, amplifying the impression that it is her own flesh she sculpts. The force of this impression is evident in the rapt attentiveness of the audience, a breathless engagement punctuated by murmured exclamations of delight as each successive figure resolves in the act of her sculpting

The evolution of humanity and of human identity from before we existed to after we have ceased to exist is a dauntingly ambitious subject. Such expansiveness could easily have resulted in a loss of focus and coherency were *PPI* not grounded in the constraints of material, process and design. Foremost among these are the material constraints, which locate the series within the conceptual framework of clay-as-body and body-as-mind metaphors. Yet this is not their only function; deteriorating clay is certainly evocative of physical degeneration and loss of stable identity, but it also serves as an effective time limit on each performance.

The sheer weight of the clay further limits the possible duration and dimensions Frame can achieve, though she pushes these constraints to a remarkable degree. Over the course of a given performance, which range from 33 to 72 minutes in length, Frame sculpts as much as 15 pounds of clay on to her head, arms raised, often exerting great force to manipulate the clay. The illusion that the clay is part of her body



Act III: Hybrids.

is sufficiently convincing that this brute physicality goes easily unnoticed, but the strength and endurance required are significant.

Numerous features of the process and set design provide additional continuity, from the tools Frame chooses (which limit the sculptural processes she can perform) to the search engine she uses to locate the reference images from which she sculpts. The majority of these features operate in multiple ways within the performance, often encouraging simultaneous alternative interpretations.

The depth of the eye sockets, a result of the mask's thickness, serves a dual function. First, it effectively conceals Frame's eyes in shadow. Though the shape of the sockets and of the cheeks and brow that surround them are in constant flux, the emptiness within is unchanging. The anonymity of this unreflective blankness accentuates the iconic quality of the figures, encouraging abstract, broadly conceptual readings. At the same time, the depth of the sockets requires that Frame continually cock and turn her head to see her tools, reference images and reflection. As she does, the hard, raking light, which is itself a constant throughout the series, throws shifting shadows across her face, giving the impression of changing expressions. This animation, in contrast to the impersonal abstraction of the eyes, highlights the individual character of each figure, encouraging more intimate, psychological readings.

In its combination of stage and vanity, the setting also suggests psychological interpretations, emphasising the performative quality of personal identity. It implies that, though each performance addresses a broadly different subject within the over-arching trajectory of the series, they all share an underlying concern with the ways in which individuals construct and assume their various selves. In the subsequent recordings, the stage has been replaced with a table, while the camera itself frames the scene; despite these changes, the same contextual intersection of performance and identity is invoked.

The visceral force of *PPI* is primarily a function of the material qualities of the clay, but it is in the subtle layering of performance and design details that the complex interplay of interpretive possibility is established, a multi-layered set of simultaneous interpretive structures binding the series together.

The majority of the performances in *PPI* begin with a press-mould of Frame's face, the physiological and conceptual ground against which her sculptural figures are positioned. Yet *Simians*, the first of the series, opens with the featureless facial structure of a generic ape: a prominent brow ridge above round eye sockets and a protrusive maxilla. This formal reduction is at once an acknowledgement of the long ancestry from which humanity evolved and a concession to the obscuring effects of evolutionary time. From here, Frame proceeds to specify in succession: a bonobo, a chimpanzee, a gorilla and an orangutan.



Act IV: Proportions.

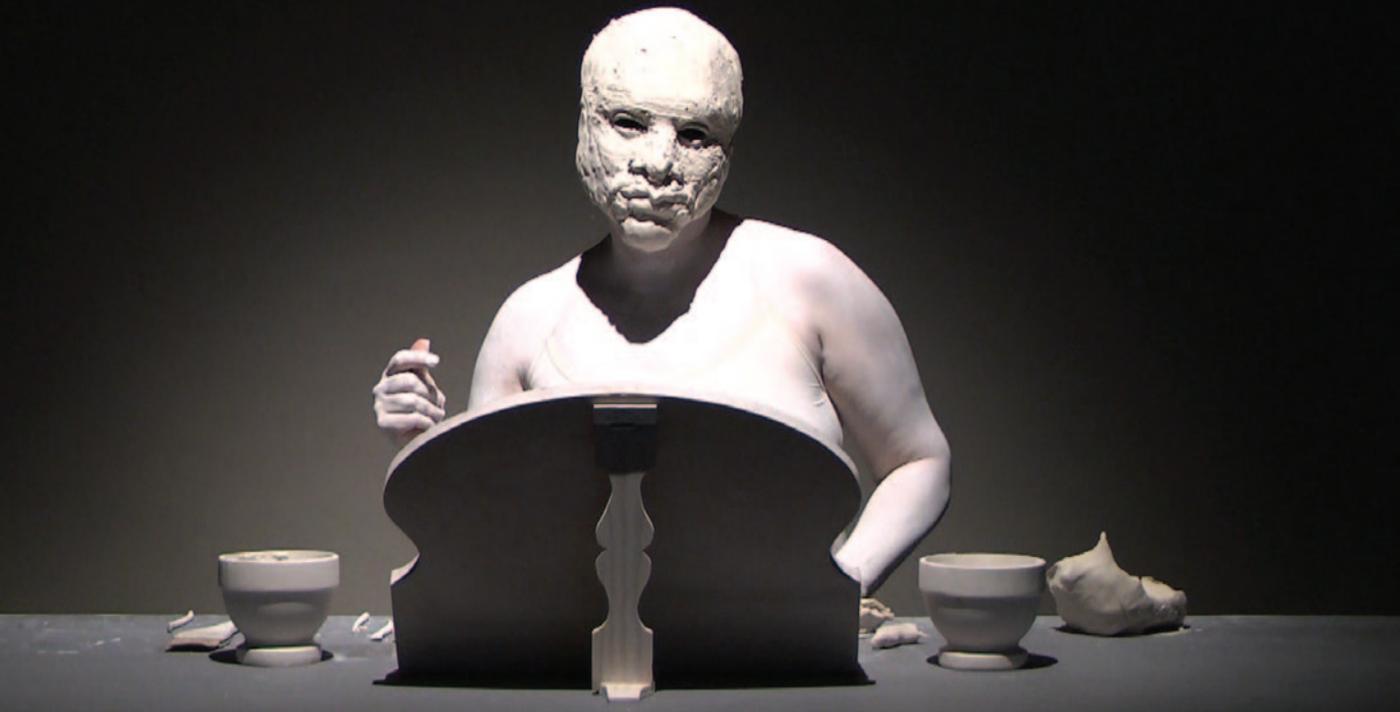
The sculptural style Frame employs in *Simians* is rough, gestural and highly tactile. Using few tools, she draws the sticky clay across the forms to build and shape them, vigorously tearing and pulling with her fingertips to create fur-like textures. She uses a variety of these active, unrefined surfaces, as well as subtle variations in the action of her sculpting, to capture the character of the different species. Over the course of the performance, as the defining features of each resolve, so too do their underlying commonalities and differences, both with each other and with the audience.

While *Simians* encourages us to contemplate the ways in which we see ourselves in our closest living relatives, *Posthumans* considers how we may, in time, become alien to ourselves. Over the course of the performance, Frame transforms her features into a symbolic representation of a technological chimera, a human-machine hybrid. Gradually she builds up three mounds of clay on her head, one above her brow, another over each temple. She works carefully, her motions small and intent, shaping the clay with a rib, smoothing it with her hands. The contact is delicate, almost sensual. She begins carving away her cheeks and the ridge of her brow. She pares down the flesh of her lips, flattening her mouth, and cuts away her nose almost completely. All the central structures of her face recede as she builds up the cranial mounds. Her ears are eventually subsumed as the mounds join to become one massive, lobed form. The resulting figure represents a direct inversion of

the essential features that defined the opening simian form. These are the same features that evolved to define our own faces, as we see in *Early Humans*, where Frame demonstrates, through a series of progressively earlier hominoids, how our facial structures derive from the more robust outlines of our predecessors. *Post-humans* follows this trend to its other extreme, where these identifying features are effaced almost completely.

This trend is not merely physiological, but stands also for the development of human social and cultural institutions. Despite their taxonomic specificity, the apes in *Simians* are anonymous, as easily one chimp or bonobo as another. The degree to which we find them foreign is less a matter of their physiological difference from us than of their proto-cultural isolation, their lack of easily recognisable social and cultural identity. The formal relationship that Frame establishes between the opening simian and closing post-human forms implies a similar post-social, post-cultural anonymity in the final figure of the series. It suggests that the post-human condition will be largely a function of societal and cultural transformations that move beyond what we would currently recognise as human.

The relationship between *Simians* and *Post-humans* reveals the subtle symmetrical structure of *PPI*, which begins and ends in the obscurity of the unknown past and future. As investigations into the



Act V: Races.

limits of our basic definitions of what is and is not human, these are the most speculative, least personal of the performances. Between them lie the more familiar territories of the social and the political, of cultural constructs and personal identity. These performances, which tend more strongly toward the particular and the psychological, are at once broadly human and deeply intimate.

This double coding is highlighted in the final figure of *Hybrids* which also marks, in this section, a transition from mythical abstraction to historical particularity. By this point in the performance, Frame has built up an enormous mass of clay on her head, which she now shifts to one side, prodding it into rough shape. She tears at her mouth, opening the clay in an exaggerated sneer. Her motions are clumsy and laborious. She allows her head to sink under the weight of the clay, which is itself sagging, submitting to the deterioration of use. She has become Joseph Merrick, the elephant man. The resemblance is clear, yet all the illusions are now failing; the clay, mounded and fractured, no longer seems flesh; the face, perforated by rough handling, is clearly a mask. The figure is so transformed as to seem less plausibly human than the myths and monsters that preceded it and, in its sunken, twisted posture, there is a shy self-consciousness of this. It is as if the figure pleads for our sustained belief, both in its humanity and in the underlying illusion of its reality.

It is the function of Frame's process that each performance tends towards dissolution. In use, clay dries out, crumbles, slumps, succumbs to gravity. Ultimate collapse is a feature inherent in the material, as it is in flesh. At the close of *Hybrids*, as the flesh does fail, the tension between the physiological and the psychological is brought to a head; for though Merrick's grotesquely cumbersome features are, formally, the least human of the entire series, they are also the most specifically expressive, the most emotionally recognisable.

The unique physical qualities of raw clay are central to the work of a number of contemporary artists. Shay Church's full-scale elephants and whales derive much of their emotional and political force from the changes the clay undergoes in drying: its deep gloss grows mottled, then dusty; it cracks and scales like hardpan desert against its supporting armature. As the water evaporates, so too does the semblance of life. Often set in industrial environments, the calcified husks that remain suggest both the consequences of human incursions into the animal world and the ongoing cycle of life and death. Artists such as Arun Sharma, Pip McManus, and Laina Seay have all used recordings of raw clay dissolving in water to evoke a similar sense of flesh returning to the earth, engaging concepts of the ephemeral, of the fundamental transience of both individuals and societies. J J McCracken's politically motivated live action installations employ raw clay in several forms to explore subjects such as global poverty, the production



Above: Act VI: Post-humans.

Below: Self-portrait as Joseph Merrick and the Man who tossed his pain to me on the subway from Seoul to Uijeongbu. Photo.

of cultural and material value and cycles of creation, consumption and decomposition. Benjamin Peterson's humorously irreverent videos and sculptures focus on what are typically considered clay's least attractive qualities, its cumbersome weight, its toxicity, its industrial sources. In *Now I Can Throw Two Ways*, Peterson is even more radical, eliminating the material entirely from the production of pottery forms. In this piece, two videos run side-by-side, one showing clay pots being thrown on a wheel, while the other shows the creation of digital pot forms by means of an infrared spatial operating environment. In removing the material from the process, Peterson highlights those fundamental qualities of clay that make it most desirable, while ironically undercutting ceramists tendency to fetishise those qualities.

Together with artists such as these, Teri Frame is working to map out the various uses to which this aesthetically versatile, metaphorically evocative and conceptually complex material can be put. These investigations have produced some of the most interesting and exciting clay art in recent years. *PPI* is a powerful addition to these works, embodying in the performance of material and process a many layered, shifting interplay of conceptual and ontological, personal and collective notions of human identity.

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