



DENISE DE
CORDOVA
Congregation

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DENISE DE CORDOVA : *Congregation*

*She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of – to think; well not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others.*¹

I want to tell you a story of an artist who disguised herself as a sculpture. Sculpture is nothing but a ghost. It rages against the object as a hermit rages against the world, retreating into itself in silence. But can a sculpture speak? Turn nouns into verbs, things into signs, words into thoughts half-formed and waiting for... who? You? Yes, you, dear reader. I've been waiting here for what feels like an eternity, to hear what you think about things, like words.

'Listen, then, Jane Eyre, to your sentence: to-morrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully, without softening one defect; omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, "Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain."

*Afterwards, take a piece of smooth ivory – you have one prepared in your drawing-box: take your palette, mix your freshest, finest, clearest tints; choose your most delicate camel-hair pencils; delineate carefully the loveliest face you can imagine; paint it in your softest shades and sweetest hues, according to the description given by Mrs. Fairfax of Blanche Ingram: remember the raven ringlets, the oriental eye; – What! you revert to Mr. Rochester as a model! Order! No snivel! – no sentiment! – no regret! I will endure only sense and resolution. Recall the august yet harmonious lineaments, the Grecian neck and bust; let the round and dazzling arm be visible, and the delicate hand; omit neither diamond ring nor gold bracelet; portray faithfully the attire, ærial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose: call it "Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank."*²

< *Doña Leonora* 2010–2011, mixed media, 110 cm × 58 × 58 cm

When we read, we can hear voices, draw pictures and portraits, and write, even. We can see in plain sight what normally appears invisible all around us. But we have known this all along because we tell stories to save our lives. Asked what she liked about reading stories, a young girl replied: "I like that I can see them, but they cannot see me."

Now the art of seeing while not being seen is, in effect, camouflage. Ostensibly a twentieth-century invention, the origins of camouflage lie in a deep-rooted past where memory and language conflict. Camouflage is a mimetic effect that gives rise to an appearance through disappearance. It merges the figure and ground. The mimetic effect can be seen in a chameleon as it changes colour, taking on the appearance of its surroundings, a dappling of hues that merge lightness and darkness. Mimesis can be affected in sound, as in a birdcall, or in the groaning and growling of onomatopoeic words. It is a play of one thing against another, and it can fold onto itself. It is as much a deception as a perception, and it is through the art of perception that its limits and functions are played out.

Amy Bird is the *nom de plume* of the artist Denise de Cordova, who created her much in the same way that a writer creates a fictitious character. Amy Bird first appeared when de Cordova joined a pottery class out of a desire to work in clay. Amy Bird loves everything about clay: its pliancy, its hollowness, the way it can be shaped, the sensual nature of the material in her hands. She loves the whole woman/vessel/pot thing without being ashamed of the cliché. The riddle of de Cordova's *nom de plume* is not just a clever pun of Bird/plume, it also refers to an earlier body of work that de Cordova made of a series of birds. Fabricated from a variety of media, they were carefully painted to deliberately camouflage and conceal the true nature of the underlying materials. The bird sculptures plunder a range of sources: Bewick's *History of British Birds*, Henning Mankell, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Conference of the Birds*. Different elements were individually made and arranged in tableaux.

This sense of staging and arranging is significant in all the works made by the artist. By grouping and regrouping objects, narratives shape-shift, adapting fluidly to different environments and situations.



For Amy Bird, this is vital. The work has to be as much at home on the kitchen table as it is in a church, a gallery or museum. She makes only women. Exploring facets of the female psyche, the ceramics refer to heroines of literature, historical figures or cultural models. They are *characters*, specifically named, steering deliberately away from the idea of archetypes.

So, dear reader, what is the significance of Charlotte Brönte's text? Certainly, it has remained in de Cordova's imagination for many years, becoming part of her re-reading habit (she keeps a ledger of all the books she likes to re-read – it is a curious thing).

"For me, these words have always suggested a starting point I didn't know how to use. A kind of ache that needed attention – but I didn't have a voice to say it. I recognized their potential as a state of mind. Not only is this passage harrowing and vulnerable, it is a moment of self-awareness that we can all identify with, as well as being an exorcism. The narrative construct also appealed to me. It is a sort of chain. A woman creates a woman, who creates a woman, read by a woman. The real and the imagined converge. Becoming Amy Bird gave permission to an approach that allowed an indulgence in material. You touch clay and it immediately responds. It is *malleable*: dirty, sticky, stuff that becomes hard through fire. The appeal is the wetness, the lack of resistance, the potential to collapse, or blow up. Much happens in secret behind the kiln door. And glazing – colour as material – that is dipped, poured, runs and bleeds. It is quietly terrifying and completely at odds with the painted sculptures. Their surfaces are constructed obsessively – a form of control.

Working as Amy Bird may be something of a traitorous act but it is not a complete defection. Both kinds of work have a particular approach to surface that draws inspiration from graphic field guides, traditional ceramic patterns, and the detailed embroidery of ethnic costumes. The tension between form and surface engrosses and plagues me. What is becoming clearer is that somehow paint is a concealer, while clay is a revealer. It's not for nothing that the first work made by Amy Bird was *Jane Eyre*."³

DR PATRICIA LYONS, 2013

1. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*
2. Charlotte Brönte, *Jane Eyre*
3. Conversation with the artist, 2013

Amy Bird
Atoning Mabel 2007
earthenware and terracotta
50 × 31 × 58 cm



Amy Bird
Stern Marie of Bezier 2008
crank
43 × 38 × 30 cm



Amy Bird
Proud Marie 2008
crank
49 × 31 × 32 cm

Amy Bird and Peter Abrahams
Narbonne Bertaille with Ash 2011
archival pigment print
34 × 51 cm (image)



Amy Bird and Peter Abrahams
Shackle Anne with Scourers 2011
archival pigment print
34 × 51 cm (image)



Amy Bird
Marie the Beautiful 2011
earthstone clay and glaze
55 × 30 × 30cm



Amy Bird
Arctic Stones 2011
crank and glaze
48 × 30 × 20 cm



Amy Bird
Olga – cuffed, sans pierres 2011
earthstone clay and glaze
98 × 60 × 60 cm



Amy Bird
Grows her Own Sticks 2011
earthstone clay and glaze
80 × 57 × 57 cm



The Secret Between I and I 1995
Museum of Classical Archeology,
Cambridge



DENISE DE CORDOVA

- 1957 Born in Birkenhead, UK
1975-76 Laird School of Arts & Crafts, Birkenhead
1977-80 Brighton Polytechnic, BA Hons 1st Class
1980-83 Royal College of Art, MA Sculpture

Solo Exhibitions

- 1985 *Sculptures and Drawings* Camberwell School of Art, London
Reveries Unit 7 Gallery, London
1988 *Recent Sculpture* The Showroom, London
1990 *Small Sculpture* Prema Arts Centre, Uley, Gloucestershire
1992 *Sculpture Show* Whitefriars Museum, Coventry, two-person
1993 *Sculptures* Dunchurch College, Coventry
1995 *Confluence* Museum of St John, London
2003 *Cell Fire* Flowers Central, London
2007 *Re-Reader* Eagle Gallery, London
2009 *Doubletake* Eagle Gallery, London, two-person
2010 *Women I Know* (AKA Amy Bird), Eagle Gallery, London
Contemporary Sculpture Programme, Clifford Chance, London
2011 *Doña Stones and other stories* Eagle Gallery, London
Secret History, Salon Particulier No.6 (AKA Amy Bird), London
2013 *Congregation* Jesus College, Cambridge

Awards & Scholarships

- 1981 Royal College of Art, Travel Scholarship to Carrara, Italy
1983-84 Scholarship to the British School at Rome
1984-85 Henry Moore Foundation Fellow, Camberwell School of Art & Crafts

Residencies

- 1986 Artist/Architect project at Willesden Green High School, London
(Funded by G.L.A. and R.I.B.A.)
- 1987 Sculpture residency at the Europaischer Skulpturenpark,
Willebadessen, Germany
Artist in residence at Seven Kings School, Ilford
(Funded by G.L.A. and Redbridge Teachers' Association)
- 1990 Stanley Picker Fellow, Kingston Polytechnic, Surrey

Commissions

- 1987 Winner of the Norwich Crown Court Sculpture Commission,
Norfolk (P.S.A./Eastern Arts)
- 1989 Sculpture for Battersea Park Old English Garden
(Public Art Development Trust/Wandsworth Council)
Public sculpture for Council Buildings, Angel Hill,
Bury St Edmunds (Eastern Arts/Borough of St Edmundsbury)

Recent Bibliography

Bronze Works 1994

Essay: Fenella Crichton ISBN 0 94 8327 96 0

British Figurative Art – Part Two: Sculpture 1998

Essay: Norbert Lynton; Flowers Gallery, London
ISBN 1 873362 83 8

Model 1999

Essay: Jonathan Wright

Published Centro Cultural Borges, Argentina.

Girl 2000

Essay: Angela Kingston; New Art Gallery, Walsall
ISBN 0 94665 25 38

Royal Academy Illustrated 2010

Edited: Stephen Chambers RA ISBN 9 781905 711567

'Doña Stones and Other Stories', *The Week*, 23 July 2011

The Threadneedle Prize For Painting and Sculpture 2012

Essay: Lewis McNaught ISBN 978 0 9560219 6 0

Interview with Pierre Naquin for *AMA* (Art Media Agency),
October 2013

Published on the occasion of Denise de Cordova's
exhibition *Congregation*, Jesus College, Cambridge, 2013

Images © 2013 Denise de Cordova

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Photography: Peter Abrahams, Lucid Plane

Design/typography: Neil Crawford, typoG, London

Typeset in 9.25/13pt and 8/11pt FF Angie and Gill Sans

Cover: *Doña Leonora* 2010–2011 (detail)

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