

## UNIFORM

What does a uniform signify? What does it say about us? What does it make us feel? Belonging from the inside? Conformity from the outside?

The inside and the outside balance and shift in the works of the artist Lisa Strömbeck. As she questions the boundary between the two, as well as probing their confluence in processes of identity and identification. Exploring the intimacy, warmth and genuine affection that coexist with a hard-eyed critique. Looking at us. And our relationship to pets.

*Uniform* shows different animals being embraced by their matching fur-clad owners. Animals – especially dogs, and especially her very own terrier Ivan – are central to Strömbeck's works, in which she shares her fascination with and examination of feelings, hierarchies and power. Changing power relations between women and men, between women, between dogs, between men and women and dogs – all against the backdrop of the power relationships of multinational capitalism and the growing dehumanization that forms the context for her socio-psychological studies of human nature.

### **Wolf in Sheep's Clothing**

The images in *Uniform* are immediately seductive. Glossy, luxuriant, and highly tactile. Full of feeling: the feeling of fingers buried in the fur of warm, breathing animals. Glossy, but not glamorous. Because the hands here are not the smooth, manicured hands of advertising. They are working hands - sinuous. They have a strenuousness that is part of the struggle. The struggle that emerges between the conflicting emotions generated by the work. Because do we see the animals in *Uniform* snuggling or confined? Are the cats stretching languorously or straining to escape? Is the poodle perfectly content or pleading for rescue? Is the terrier panting happily or feeling strangled? Pressed as they all are against the dead fur coat worn by the human. Stripped from flesh and devoid of a heartbeat.

### **Creature Comforts**

In *Uniform* Strömbeck juxtaposes the contradictions between slaughter (of the fur's animal) and love (of the pet animal) with piercing accuracy, exploring the needs pets can satisfy and the necessary questions this poses about human relations. The need for love and devotion free of the mesh of psychological complications that entangle our relationships with our two-legged friends and lovers. Complications and power struggles that are absent from the animal/owner relationship – the key word here being owner.

The role played by ownership and consumption in dehumanizing hierarchies is never far from Strömbeck's works. A dog lover herself, she is merciless in her investigation of the emotional complex that constitutes our relationship to our pets – unafraid to examine the comfort, reassurance and space for emotional expression offered precisely by the fact that the hierarchy between the animal and human is given. Here the human is indisputably top dog.

This sense of possession and longing is central to Strömbeck's accurately titled 2001 installation *I Love You – You're Mine*, which includes a 13 minute video where she insists on cuddling her dog Ivan while he tries to sleep. The video is accompanied by framegrabs

of four friends of the artist, rivals claiming that her dog loves them as much as her. The need to cuddle is not the dog's, who would quite frankly rather be left alone. The need is the owner's. The need to touch and express affection in this risk-free context is part of the artist's existential diagnosis of the human condition.

### **Love on a Leash**

Strömbeck offers no answers. She invites us to share her investigation, to ask our own questions. For hers is no easy critique of the pet as fashion accessory, nor does she revert to a simple pathologizing of the pet/owner relationship of 'all the lonely people'. Instead she is capable of embracing the contradictions with an empathy that generates affective appeal.

The intensity of this appeal perhaps peaks in another work from 2006. In a video trilogy we see the artist's dog lying on a pristine white background with slices of salami on all four paws, then with a slice of salami on his nose, and then sitting behind a huge pile of sausages. The dog's gaze shifts between the meat he dare not touch and the viewer in a heart-rending appeal of yearning in a grinding loop with no release. The viewer is subjected to the unbearable tension of wanting the dog to slip its mental leash and start wolfing down the sausages. The work's title is *In memory of all those who work without ever getting a reward*. The dog here, like the animals in *Uniform*, is a metaphor for power relations, hierarchies and the economics of love.

### **In Your Hands**

This tension in Strömbeck's works is a deliberate reflection of the tension lurking just beneath the surface of a global society based on increasingly blatant exploitation, where the 'rewards' are far from fairly shared. In the broader political context of her work, *Uniform* could be seen as solely condemnatory. But that would leave no space for the empathy and selfreflexivity that are always present and key to the complexity of the questions she poses rather than answers.

Strömbeck probes the longing not only for unconditional love and affection – an emotional haven in a harsh world - but also the longing for a different kind of life. We can fantasize – and project – that we too would love 'a dog's life', where food, warmth and love are all we need, or all that matters.

Anthropomorphization in reverse in a human world of dog eat dog.

The Danish premiere of *Uniform* was in a solo exhibition in Copenhagen the artist entitled *In Your Hands*. The title could be a maxim for her entire oeuvre. Because just as *Uniform* forces us to ask on whose terms the relationship is based, Strömbeck's work constantly interrogates the terms on which Western culture is driven and asks that we take our share of the responsibility.

It is – after all – in our hands.

### **Jane Rowley**

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