



By Carlos Gamerro and Victoria Noorthoorn

### **Elly Strik: the skull, the face, and the mask**

In front of the face is the mask, beneath it the skull.

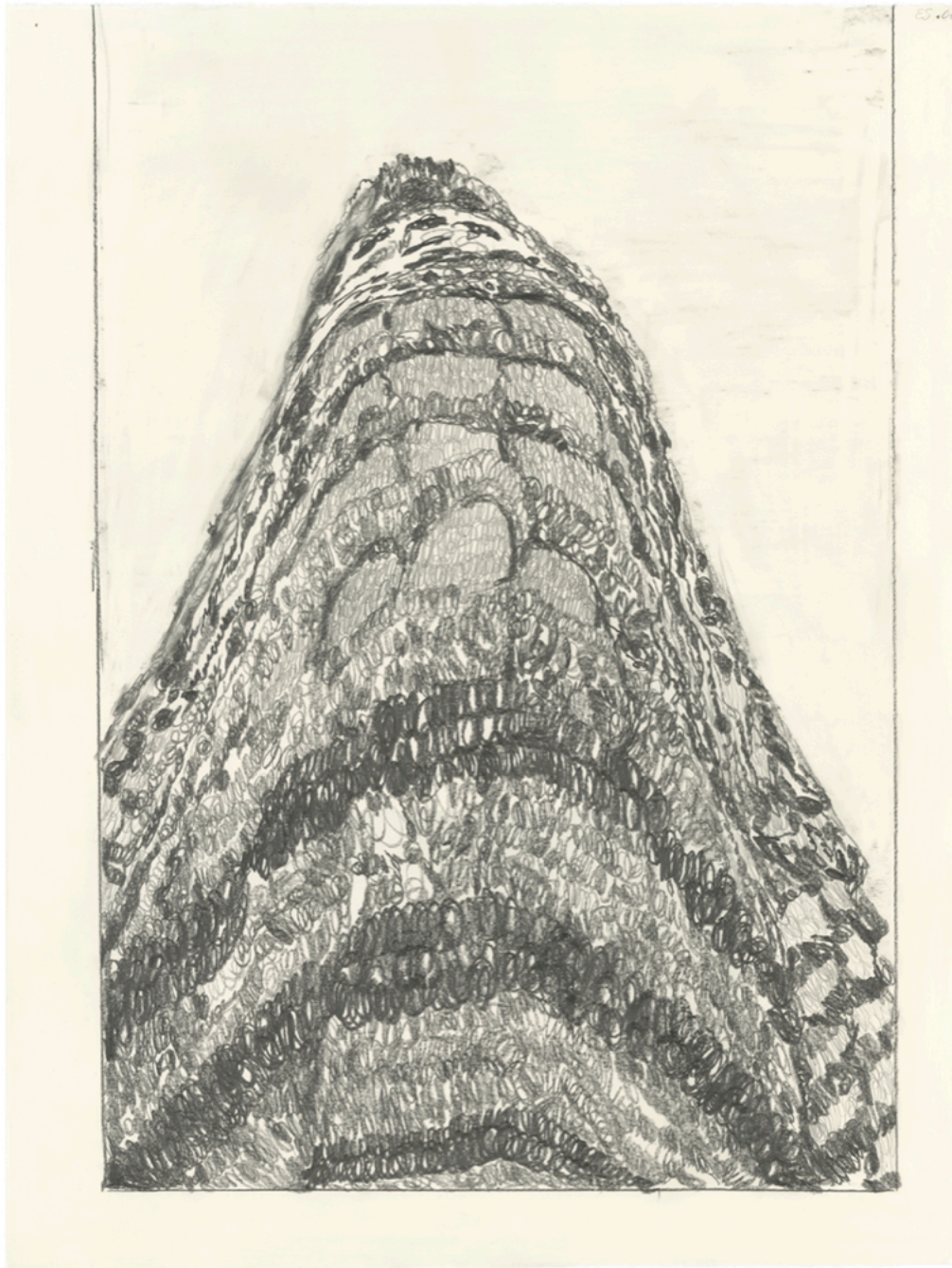
Even in the everyday world, the image is always much more than the optical impression; it is the light that strikes the retina, the shape in which our mind organizes and composes it, and other images, more or less ghostly, that the imagination and the memory evoke... One of the ambitions of art is to reveal these other appearances and apparitions that abound in everything we see, be it as tangible presences, or as nascent possibilities, vanishings, reminiscences, or echoes. Like a shaman, or like a medium, the artist yearns to invoke them, to make them appear. To summon them.

As the great Cuban writer, José Lezama Lima, summed it up: "the image is the reality of the invisible world". In one of the most memorable and moving sequences from his novel, *Paradiso*, three children are on the floor playing a game of 'Jacks', or 'Yaquis' (also known elsewhere as *Payana* or *Tinenti*) and when their mother completes the circle, the figure of the recently deceased father gradually starts to appear, literally *drawn* by the desire of the players and the choices in the game.

At times a lot of patience is required, one of the greatest virtues to which an artist can aspire: that of knowing how to wait the right amount of time for the image. Elly Strik has referred to the appropriate temporal processes for a drawing's coming into being and the exhaustive investigation that the drawing implies – to this constant search for the image that it is gestating – asking, as she does in a conversation included in her book *Oracle*: "*Because what are you actually doing as an artist? It is not ourselves, but about the movement we can lay down. The hand does things that you don't know about. Luckily, because the hand doesn't lie, the head does.*" (*Oracle*, page 86-87). And she goes on to add: "*I thought for a long time that, after completing a drawing, I would become increasingly lighter, but that is not the case, because you keep on learning to look better, and because it becomes more and more difficult to develop things from the place of not knowing. [...] The challenge is in the not knowing.*" (*Oracle*, page 87).

It is not enough not to know and to look better; you also need to be able to listen. To listen to what the image wants to tell us. The artist confesses that her own works are, for her, incredibly noisy. Strik reveals that she had problems with her hearing as a child, and indeed, the look that her pictures suggest is that of a person trying to read in the face that which they are not able to hear. We are all in a similar position. All reality is silent; it has been so since God ceased to talk to us through things, at some point between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. That must be the reason why we have since learned to look better and better, with greater intensity.

Strik demands from the viewer the same committed gaze that she herself constructs in each picture: "*In ideal circumstances the portrait becomes a kind of landscape, an expansive space in which you don't immediately recognize a figure. In many of my drawings I try to evoke a hollow space, into which the viewer can be absorbed. I would like to have the impression that the image is touching you.*" (*Oracle*, page 78).



It is a matter of reducing the distance between each portrait and the spectator by way of a forceful proposal: the bid for the power that the image itself is able to assume if it manages to go beyond the norm to constitute a relevant, consolidated and purposeful image. On the one hand, the work directly confronts whoever addresses it, using a scale that usually envelops the viewer in the image, making it impossible to be distracted from the work. On the other hand, Strik works tirelessly, exhaustively searching for the image itself to appear. *"I like to bring the drawings to a kind of autonomy. I work on until the image has such an extent of realism, that it starts to lead a life of its own, that it has brought its own existence into the world. That takes a long time. The danger is often that you stop too soon. [...] But you must*

*continue, and pump up the image until nobody can escape the feeling that is being evoked. Sometimes months go by in the making of such a drawing. It also has to do with wanting to understand myself what is in it.*" (Oracle, page 79) And she reflects: *"If I touch something of that essentiality, of what it means to be human, then I am satisfied."* (Oracle, page 86).

In a work painted with this same patience and tenacity in the period from 2000 to 2009, *Your Look Will Give the Angels Strength*, the skull seems to strain to emerge through the layers of skin or paint (smalt, oil paint, and graphite), as if illustrating the famous line by T.S. Eliot on the Jacobean poet John Webster: "Webster saw the skull beneath the skin". As in X-ray plates, the face is a dark silhouette that has lost all individuality, and is nothing but bones: the visible and the invisible have exchanged their fields of jurisdiction. The concave and the convex are also inverted: the protuberant nose has disappeared and in its place an archaic vaginal cavity seems to draw us toward its womb. Time and again, in the works of Elly Strik, these holes or fissures appear that perforate the paper and appear to suck us in toward the other side, like the holes that open up in the films of David Lynch and irresistibly draw the camera in to penetrate them. "In my pictures there are parts in which it seems that you could put your arm in up to the elbow, and other parts that are more solid", says the artist. The eyes, on the other hand, have survived this operation in which the flesh is stripped away: they are eyes that are alive, more alive than those of the living – as a result of the contrast with the skull – and they project outwards, contemplating us with an hallucinatory constancy. In the art of the Mexican, José Guadalupe Posada, and the popular Mexican art that nurtured him and which he nurtured in equal measure, 'the skeleton that lies beneath the skin' carries out all the activities of daily life, as well as those of art: there is a Don Quixote skeleton charging mounted on a skeleton of his horse, Rocinante, a Boticellian Venus that emerges like a skeleton from a sea shell, surrounded by her equally skeletal companions (all of which, in a gesture that would doubtless please Elly Strik, are wearing carnival masks). In turn, the characters of Ensor and Grosz wear skull masks, beneath which, at times, it is possible to make out living people. The inversion is simple in these cases: what is dead comes alive, what is in the background comes to the fore, what tends to be forgotten or hidden is revealed, the veil of life is pulled aside to reveal the truth of death ("in the midst of life we are in death", as is written in the funeral oration sanctioned by the *Book of Common Prayer*). In the works of Elly Strik, we can never be sure if the skull is fundamental or mask, if it is emerging from the depths, or is being moved in place and superimposed like a veil or a curtain. Most likely both at the same time, as is the case in that famous shot in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, in which the camera both advances and recedes simultaneously: thus, in the face and the skull covered by a fine tulle mesh, embroidered with living eyes sunk in orbits of bone, in *Beaucoup de fleurs* (Many flowers), and the disconcerting *Als je dit leest, allerliefste, ben ik dicht bij je* (When you read this my darling, I'll be near you), a self-portrait by the artist in which the skin



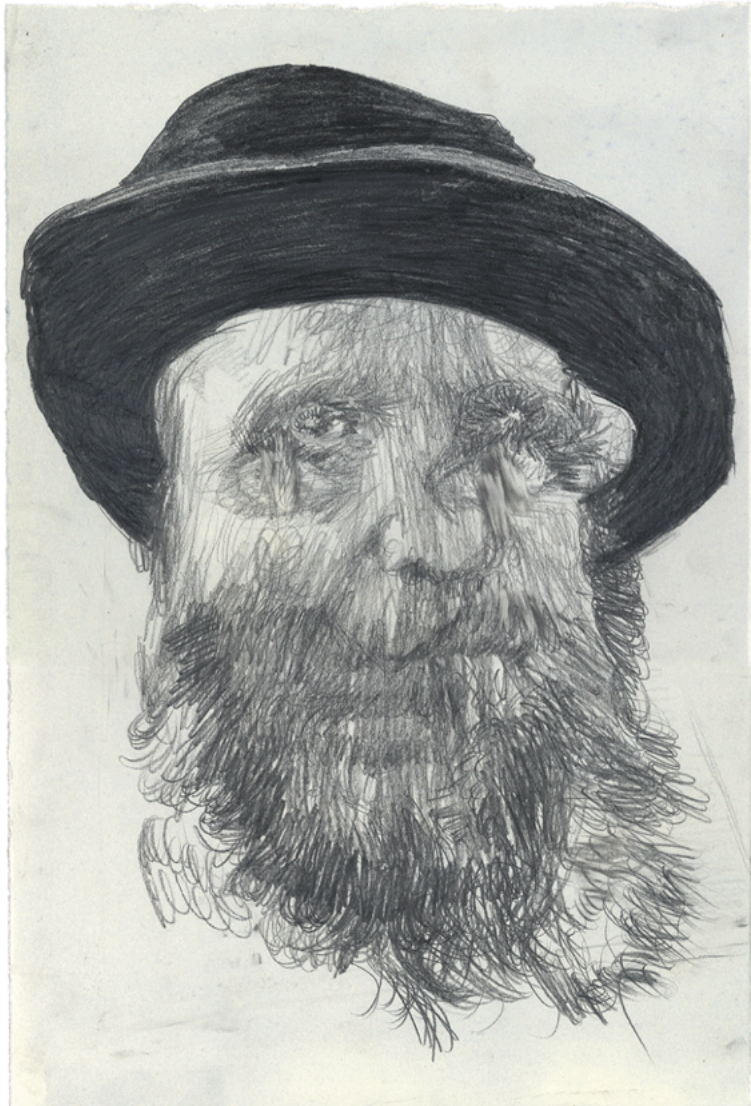
seeks the bone, and bone seeks the open air; as if reminding the recipient of the words in the title that the time that separates the departure and arrival of the message is also a time in which death specifies its advance.



There are also pictures that feature not skulls, but their opposite, hair. But this opposition is relative: skull and hair are opposed within a spatial order (the hair is above the skin, the skull beneath). In the vital order, however, they are allied: the skin and the flesh are what is seen, the skull and the hair what remains. In the first part of the *Oracle* triptych, a ghostly face seems to emerge from a tangle of lines that also want to be hairs; in the third, this face appears to have given up, or merely turned away. Something similar takes place in the second, fifth and sixth pictures in the series, *The Difficulty for a Monkey to Throw off Its Instinctive Fear and Hatred of a Snake*. What we see on the paper suggests the methods of automatic drawing: a series of lines that are added without a conscious purpose until at some point, the figure emerges that was always lurking within.



The figures' hair suggests ungovernable undergrowth, the invasion of the human by the animal, or the voracity of some secondary sexual characteristics that want to become primary. In the fourth drawing in the series, a mass of pubic hair seems to advance towards a horizon that might be the curvature of the planet, as if it wants to cover the Earth, and yet might also be the belly of a pregnant woman, as if the animal wants to wipe out the human.

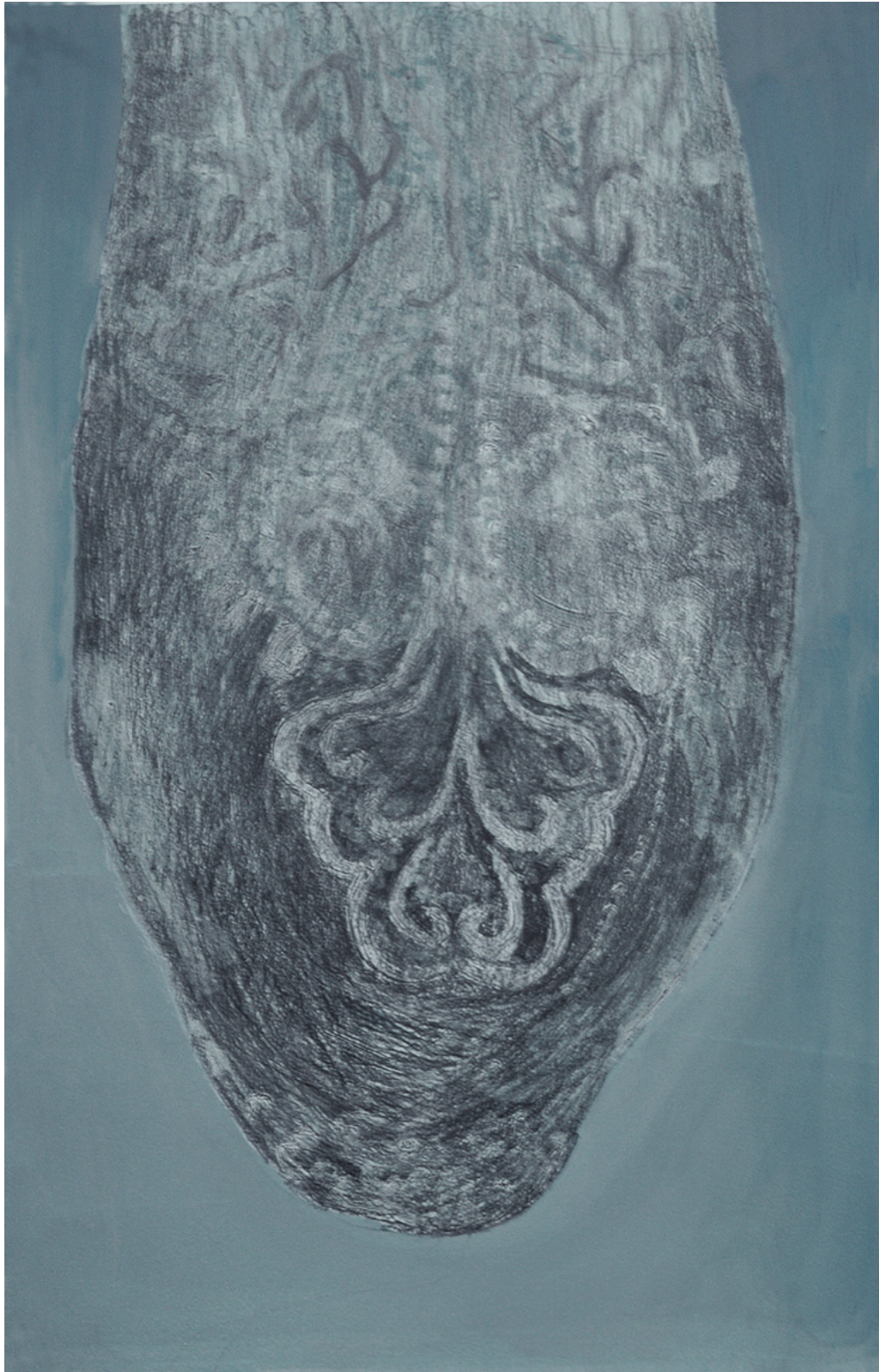


In the third, the face of Darwin (author of the phrase that provides the title to the series) emerges from under a heavy hat, as solid as a helmet, a civilized artefact, which suggests the final barrier of thought against the advance of the wild jungle – but then we remember that it was from beneath this ‘thinking cap’ that we get the idea that our origin is not something that descended from the angels, but rather from this mat of hair. This Darwin has two pairs of eyes, and the lower pair, located where we normally tend to find them, is smudged with a rubber, suggesting a gaze that has expired, or perhaps the punishment that awaits those, like Oedipus, who reveal forbidden or undesirable truths. But just as blindness gives rise to new vision for Oedipus, Darwin is given new, but smaller eyes above the ones that have been rubbed out: suggesting, perhaps, a new way of looking at the world. The title refers to a moment in Darwin’s autobiography, when he explains that it is as difficult for a man to abandon his faith as it is for an ape to overcome his instinctive aversion to snakes. In another picture inspired by this phrase, *Ape Trying to Throw off its Instinctive Fear*, the artist seems to confirm this observation with subtle irony: the ape-man (a woman or a man in an ape mask) reads a book attentively, as if trying to cure himself of the phobia through reading.

There is an anthropological exploration in these works by Elly Strik – the relation between hair and civilisation, savagery and hair, humanity and animality, the masculine and the feminine – as well as an essentially artistic exploration: that of similarities – in the medieval sense of profound analogy between the thing and the sign – between the hair and the line. I draw a line on a sheet of paper: is it simply a formal entity, or is it a sign that represents something else: a hair? When does the line cease to be merely a line and becomes a line that represents a hair? What is the threshold between the abstract and the concrete?

The picture often begins with this line that does not know where it is headed. As the artist herself puts it beautifully: “*All drawing begins with a line. You never go back to look at this line; drawing is a permanent saying goodbye to this first line. You know where you want to get to, but something happens along the way and digressions start to take place. That is how the drawing grows. It is a question of the things that you encounter along the way, and which change the drawing. And suddenly, all the lines come together and an explosion takes place, or an implosion, which makes all these lines conjugate in one world, and figuration takes place: and then an image appears.*”(Oracle, page 82).





Time and time again the artist refers to this process by which the drawing emerges from a line in search of an image: “the drawing was not based on a real snake, the motive emerged out of the act of drawing”, she says of the first picture in the series



*Snake and Bride in Blue* and *Jour de Venus* (Day of Venus): “the necklace emerges out of the act of drawing. It is a chain of little balls”. (Oracle, page 79). It is the same in the drawings that function through frames and repetitions: “Making a drawing with a pattern that repeats is like a ritual; you can disconnect your thoughts. You draw a first line and you repeat it, you carry it with you like an echo. Little by little you forget this line, which means you have discovered a new one to serve you a model. And that is how the pattern develops, which for me, is a form of transmitting energy.” (Oracle, page 75).

“What is a ghost?” wonders Stephen Dedalus, in Episode 9 of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and he answers: “One who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence, through change of manners”. A ghost is also that which is not yet born, which is yet to appear. In *Ghost of Chance*, William Burroughs imagines another possible version of humanity, that which would have evolved from the peaceful and collaborative lemurs of Madagascar, rather than the irascible apes of the African continent (the lemurs, we recall, are the ghosts or spirits of Roman mythology). Multiple ghosts lurk in every image.

An iconic moment from the film *King Kong* (1933) shows us the penetrating gaze of the gigantic gorilla on the tiny, but infinitely mysterious blonde beauty Fay Wray: three white marks (the body of the blonde, and the eyes of the ape) against a vast black expanse.

Strik’s *Fay Wray* inverts the colours. The bride’s dress has been opened and pulled down to the hips (Duchamp’s grooms have laid hands on the work), but she is wearing a gorilla mask, beneath which her jet black hair falls down upon her white chest, which seems to evoke, in the contrast of tones, the classic look of vampire women (black on white) and in its form, more specifically, that of Munch’s vampiresses. The work functions as a trap to capture the masculine gaze: the eyes feel powerfully attracted to her perfect white breasts, and when the gaze manages to drag itself away, it finds itself being watched by an invisible pair of eyes behind the gorilla mask. It is as if, as we approach the keyhole of Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*, we find ourselves on the other side, with an eye that has been watching ourselves the whole time. The mask suggests that it’s a male gorilla (perhaps it is because of the influence of that same *King Kong* that the iconography of the gorilla is firmly fixed in the pictorial tradition, like that of the peacock and the deer, in the masculine), but we know that the eyes that are watching us through it are feminine. Moreover, this mask is white, and the iconography of the film, the blonde woman and the dark beast, is here inverted and subverted: the pale gorilla and the dark lady. This game of successive layers does not suggest, as in the drawings of hairs and skulls, the layers of pencil and paint, but rather the consecutive layers of paper that wrap a present,

those deceitful wrappers inside which there is another layer of wrapping, and then another, and another. In *The Same*, from 2005, the woman seems to be taking off a gorilla mask, behind which there is another gorilla mask, and behind that a tuft of hair – that might be real – but might also be nothing more than yet another gorilla mask.

These pictures, like many more from the series of women and gorillas, evoke less directly, but no less suggestively, another iconic moment from cinema: that in which Marlene Dietrich, in Joseph von Sternberg's *Blond Venus* (1932) emerges from a gorilla suit in slow striptease and puts on a blond wig. A year before King Kong upset the masses with the bizarre fantasy about a giant black beast in love with a tiny blonde beauty and forced them to confront his monumental phallic fall, Von Sternberg's film created the bizarre erotic chimera of the blonde woman emerging from inside the black beast. Even if it is a spectacle mounted for the masculine gaze – represented in the film by Cary Grant – the striptease does not follow the expected order: Marlene Dietrich dons the blonde wig *before* she has finished removing the gorilla suit. As in the pictures by Elly Strik, the order of the uncovering has been disrupted (this is one effect of her powerful art: it leads us to see 'Ellystrikiian' moments in her predecessors). For a moment, we see a 'naked' gorilla with the head of a woman, a moment that inverts the Guerrilla Girls in their famous poster about the 1989 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which showed a naked woman, the concubine from *La Grande Odalisque* by Ingres, wearing a gorilla mask.

This kaleidoscopic game of mirrors between the human and the animal, the masculine and the feminine, between watching and being watched, also animates the picture entitled *Tell me woman, what do you want from me* – the famous last words of Herodes to Salomé – the answer to which, as everyone knows, is the head of Saint John the Baptist served up on a plate. According to Jean-Christoph Ammann, the work "shows a man standing, in a wedding dress that he is lifting up with one hand to reveal his muscles. The man asking the question is wearing a primitive gorilla mask topped with a veil." And he goes on to say, "it is impossible to know if the gorilla mask is masculine or feminine". In 2009, Hans Theys<sup>1</sup> propounds with equal certainty, "in the centre of this work we find a female figure wearing a bridal veil and an ape mask. She is holding the veil with one arm as if she were a bride about to be carried over the threshold. The dark head of the animal contrasts with the white veil that is scarcely able to cover the woman's pudenda; perhaps these parts too are bestial".

The interesting thing here is not to question which of the two is right (is it the body of a woman or the body of a man), but to realize that both are right: the correct reading is in the divergence. What is a woman's body, anyway? And what is a man's? What

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<sup>1</sup> Book 'Oracle'

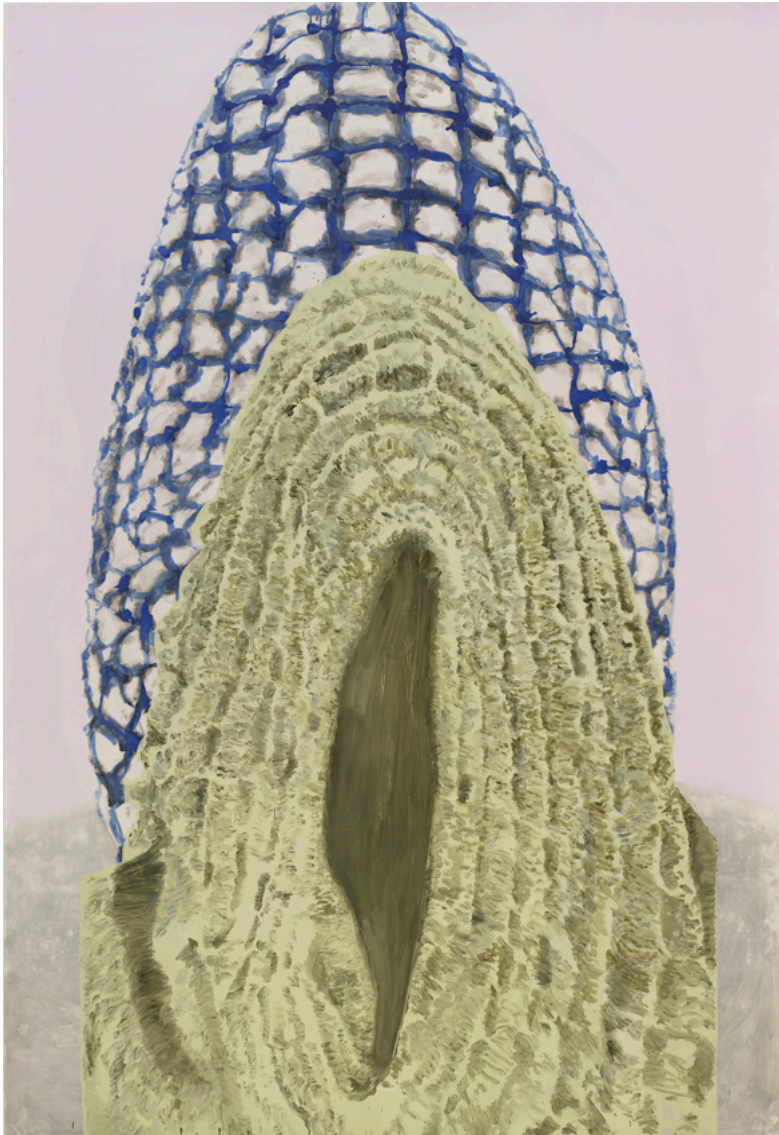
is about to be revealed by the veil being lifted, but not lifted high enough, is the ambiguous nature of gender identity, and our anxious need to resort to anatomy as it were the source of all the hidden answers. The legs look suspiciously like those of another picture from the same year, which shows a woman (at least it has the breasts of a woman) wearing the mask of a roaring ape, dressed in black and pink, and whose title *E.S.* unmistakably appears to allude to the artist. Does the evidence of this painting permit us to diagnose that the figure in *Tell me, woman* was a woman? Or will it be that in *E.S.* the artist presents herself as a composite of man, woman, and ape?

The pictures of Elly Strik are not only pictures that we look at: they are also pictures that look at us. In some, such as *Zelfportret* [Self-portrait] and *E.S.* (both from 1999), the face of the artist is partially covered by a seashell (always vaginal), but from behind the shell, a penetrative eye observes us;



or in *E.S.* a braid of hair descends over the face, blotting out the nose and mouth, but leaving the eyes uncovered. As in *Fay Wray*, there is a trap: our eyes go towards the element that demands attention, or seems strange (breasts, seashell, braid of hair), and absorbed as we are in our observing, we don't realise that we are being

observed... This process takes place in many of the pictures of brides, such as *Braut* (Bride) from 1998; *Little Bride* and *Zwei neue Bräute* (Two new brides) from 2004;



the second, third and fifth pictures from *Snake and Bride in Blue* from 2006; as well as in *Devotion* and in the central picture from the *Orakel* (Oracle) triptych, from 2008. In all of these, the bride is wearing a veil.





The fifth drawing in the polyptych *The Bride Fertilized by Herself*, from 2007-2008 no longer needs Duchampian males to address her, perhaps because, as Joyce suggests in Episode 9 of his *Ulysses* "in the economy of heaven, foretold by Hamlet, there are no more marriages, glorified man, an androgynous angel, being a wife unto himself."



Every artist is both masculine and feminine, bride and groom, is what Elly Strik also seems to be proposing when, in the collage entitled *Goya* from 2004, she has Goya getting married to Goya. Impenetrable to the masculine gaze, her brides protect themselves behind these veils that suggest the Islamic burqa, the locus wherein the West has decided to locate women's oppression of another culture, and thereby exempt itself from examining its own.



The brides of Elly Strik, with their phallic form of extended 'Sugarloaf', resist the grooms' attempts to see them or unveil them, perhaps because they don't need it: they are themselves their own groom.

The works of Elly Strik always create a spectator in motion (moving internally, searching for the place that the gaze of the work demands, and searching as well for the work's own meanings and signifiers). On the one hand, in so many spectators, her works submerge us in the landscape of their figuration. On the other hand, the same works require us to constantly enter them and leave them as we search for our place as spectators, trying to elucidate answers to questions about the place of the protagonist in the work, their status (are they art, reality, or artifice?), their constitution, their construction (what material is this creature made of, that is neither man nor hair, neither woman nor gorilla, or all of them at the same time?) Strik's pictures encounter a viewer who is concentrating, curious, both serious and playful at the same time, fundamentally inquisitive. And this encounter is a true reflection of the artist's own search. *"For me the drawing also has something to do with the continually opening and closing of an image. The woman with the burqa is an image that inheres this opening and closing"* (Oracle, page 76).

Her images always remain open to new echoes and new resonances; and they will continue to construct in our imagination that which is not there – or that which has been disrupted, changed, camouflaged – and which will always remain mysterious, or out of reach: *"An echo always comes from different directions. [...] The ear has been removed. You need an ear if you want to hear that echo. I often remove the most important part of a drawing. Sometimes something has a much greater presence when you can't see it."* (Oracle, page 21).

In front of the face is the skull, beneath it the mask.