

A MENAGERIE IN CLAY

The animalist terracotta sculptures of Ulla Zettergren are witty and whimsical comments on the human condition with more than a soupcon of irony. Profile by Dorothy Erickson. Photography by Victor France.



'Taking Shelter', 2003, terracotta smoked in sawdust, horsehair, on rammed earth base, 60 x 60 x 24 cm

THE work of Ulla Zettergren reflects relationships between people and their interaction in a world populated with the distinctive animals she has met, including shaggy Israeli sheep, sturdy Norwegian fiord ponies and her beloved cat.

Born in Upsala, Sweden in 1950, she was a determined youngster who had her first horse ride at 10 and by 15 had earned enough to buy her own pony. A few years later, before studying for a career, she set off around the world on a working holiday. This saw her being a shepherdess on the hills above Gaza, milking the awazzi sheep with their floppy ears and shaggy coats.

Zettergren moved on accompanied by her travelling companion boyfriend and, after spending some months in Asia, arrived in Western Australia. They decided to stay awhile as their funds were depleted. Hard work

soon fixed the money problem and they bought a small farm in the hills behind Perth where they built a house, acquired horses, a donkey, goats, geese, poultry, a pet pigeon, 30 head of cattle and a camel called Ali Baba Hump Free. Also a flock of black sheep, which she bred, provided wool for spinning. Biblical metaphors spring to mind, perhaps a rural Eden or a Noah's ark?

These animals, although no longer part of Zettergren's surroundings, still populate her world. In 1980, as a young mother who had separated from her partner, she decided she was in need of some tertiary training and enrolled to study ceramics at Perth Technical College. Clay had been the obvious choice as it had always fascinated her. Even when she was very small her parents, if they needed to go out without her, had been in the habit of buying a kilo of clay for her to amuse herself.



'Seated Man', 2000, terracotta smoked in sawdust, paint, on rammed earth base, 12 x 16 x 12 cm. Private collection

The goats were turned out and the goat-house became her studio. However, the images of animals she loved intruded. The Israeli sheep were produced in flocks. Curiously, as they "bred" their features became more refined and their bodies fatter. Her horses also invaded the workplace. Herds of terracotta ponies in various poses and stages of construction inhabited the place as she prepared for exhibitions and graduation.

Zettergren graduated in 1983 and has since established her own studio, making sculptural works for exhibition. The terracotta sculptures are smoked in smouldering sawdust to create subtle earthy colours which are then contrasted with gold leaf or acrylic colour. She also produced functional ware and a range of terracotta garden objects, such as bird baths, wall plaques, bells, chimes and feeders. These were a "bread and butter" line sold under the name Kurrajong Pottery.

Her witty and ironic exhibition pieces usually feature press-moulded animals, ambiguous human forms and, in recent years, ecclesiastical gentlemen. She says of her work: 'I have a special love for animals, in particular horses. Through my work I like to recreate their strength and agility. Other ideas for my work may come from something I have read, a piece of music or a colour that interests or moves me. From this initial stimulus I begin to formulate a visual image which may be incorporated with an idea or issue that is on my mind. This image determines the shape, the movement and the feeling I wish to achieve in the finished piece.'

Early works consisted of flocks of Israeli sheep made in 1983 to which a shepherd was added in 1985. Although the bodies were press-moulded, each head was fabricated individually allowing for considerable expression and variation in the groupings. A white clay smoked with sawdust provided random markings and even black sheep.

'Man in Boat with Fish', 2003, terracotta smoked in sawdust, on rammed earth base, 18 x 26 x 13 cm



'Horse and Rider', 1998, terracotta, jute, on rammed earth base, 60 x 60 x 17 cm





'Heaven Above and Earth Below', 2003, terracotta smoked in sawdust, galvanized iron, on rammed earth base, 30 x 42 x 10 cm

'Waiting for the Tide' (detail), 1998, terracotta smoked in sawdust, 25 x 54 x 28 cm



Personal experiences run through all her artworks. For instance, her father fished as a hobby and she, after reading Tim Winton's *Cloud Street*, created a body of work that combined the two experiences. The storyline of a young, mentally-deficient man who, having been saved from drowning walked back into the water, made a deep impression that married with the artist's childhood memories. The finished work thus comments on the exchange and interaction between man and the sea, whereby fishermen bringing home the catch were depicted as becoming more fish like. This led to a body of work with people drifting in boats.

In her 1993 exhibition "Reflections" at New Collectables in Fremantle, WA horses and figures featured prominently. The figures wore expressions varying from amazement to sadness and drew the viewers not only to contemplate but stirred their imagination. *Requiem for a Fat Cat* consisted of six "maskers", cats wearing gold masks, bearing a boat-shaped bier not unlike the ark illustrated in children's Bible storybooks. From the ark flew doves. Taken by some to be a comment on the demise of the well-paid civil servant, it was in fact in memory of her beloved 14-year old pet cat that had recently departed this world. The sculpture was not just a memorial it was a vehicle to comment on the mask people often present to the world, hiding themselves by putting on a different personality or a brave face.

In the same exhibition was *Dreams Revisited*, based on personal experiences with a pet. Her horse had died unexpectedly while being gelded. This was a distressing experience as the person who disposed of the carcass just cut it up in front of her. Making this piece was cathartic and helped to ease the loss. It depicted three bearded sages sledding away the horse's proud head. Happier memories were incorporated into *Horse*. Here

the plinth-bound pony, carefully prepared for a dressage event, was adorned with a precise, squared pattern of currycomb marks delineated in gold-leaf. The rider, who had groomed the horse, was obviously simpatico and similarly "dressed" with a gold-leaf marque. The smooth forms possessed an irresistible tactile quality.

Zettergren's 1995 solo exhibition at Gomboc Sculpture Gallery in the Swan Valley, revisited horses and added more boats to her repertoire. *Women Crossing*, featured in this exhibition, exploited the typical metaphor for a journey, a crossing over, either physical or mental. It was one she was taking herself. Yet her past continued to be carried with her; the forms of the boats resembled Viking ships excavated from ancient burial mounds.

Pastoral scenes of Biblical contentment pervaded 1998. The shepherd lay down in the field with his flocks. In another tableau a patriarch blessed a horse, while in others monks pondered the meaning of redemption. Zettergren by this time was engrossed in discussions on religion and philosophy with a new partner, a former theology student. Visual clues in the sculptures signal the perambulations of their debate. A thin monk stands for misery, a fat one for happiness, while womanhood contained in her own world, has a sun above 'which is all she needs'. Churches began to be depicted in some of the 1999 sculptures. They were the white Scandinavian Lutheran churches with pointed-roof bell towers. A person's past inevitably follows them into their future. Zettergren generously shares hers with her audience.

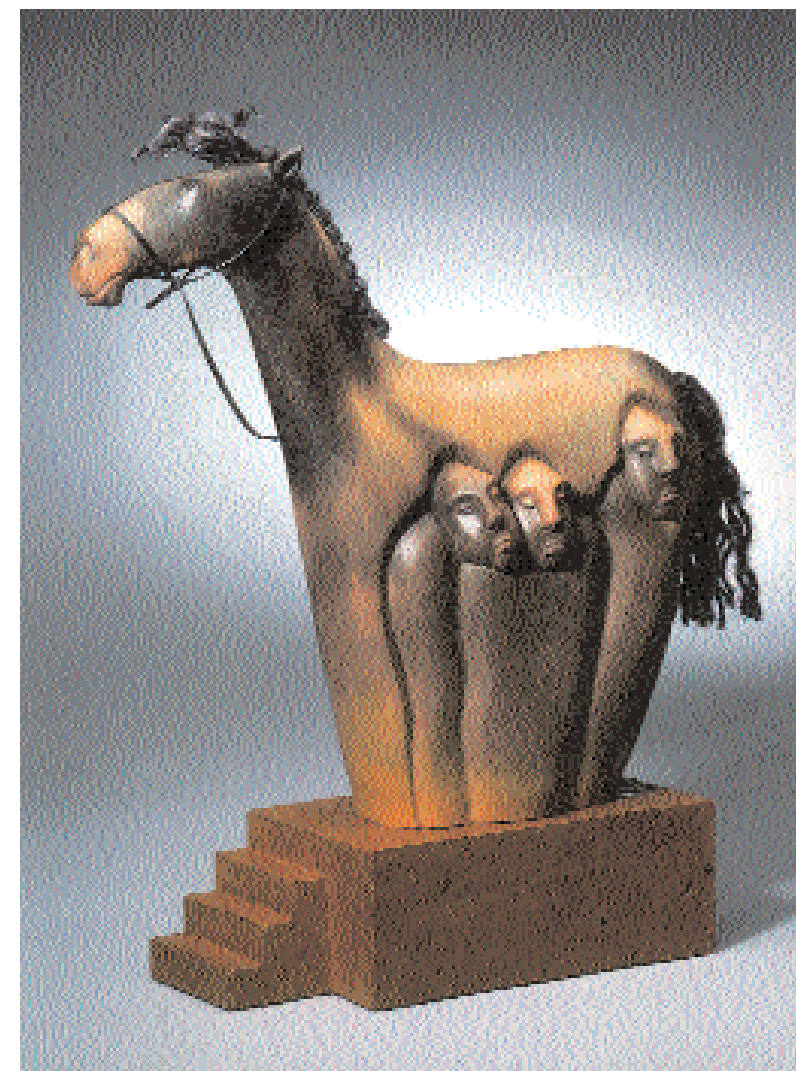
In 2001, she and her partner moved to the tall timber country near Denmark in the south of WA. A new home and studio/gallery have recently been completed in a "green" development in the forest that bans the keeping of animals. It remains to be seen what effect this will have on her work.

Working in a neighbour's shed, Zettergren completed a body of work before she left to spend the northern summer in Sweden in 2003. These recent pieces deal with themes of birth, death and life in between, of dreams and longings and exchanges above and below water. Her animal relationships were destined for invitational exhibitions such as the "Soroptimist International" invitational exhibition in Fremantle. Other work was sent to Gallows Gallery in Perth, Gomboc Gallery in Midland and the Margaret River Galleries – permanent stockists of her work. The remainder is shown in her own gallery which opened in October, 2003.

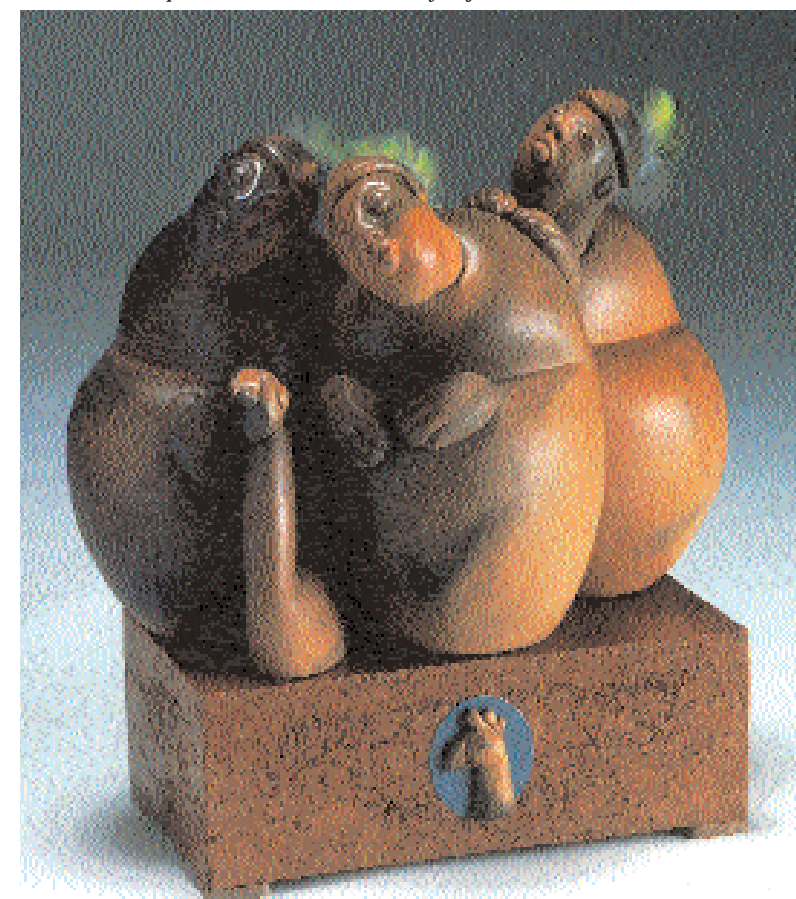
The theme for the Soroptimists exhibition was "women working with women". *Alcoves and Stairs*, which she made for this show, features a woman, with her accumulated baggage, sitting at the top of a set of stairs contemplating her life. She says of it '... but in the end, life is an individual journey and ultimately, as a woman and human being, you stand alone.' The alcoves illustrate incidents from that journey.

Heaven Above and Earth Below is one of Zettergren's favourites. It portrays three angels surmounting a male figure in a rammed-earth alcove, symbolising a simple version of life and its coming to an end – part of this artist's ongoing fascination with existential questions. 'Generation after generation, each treading the same path between birth and death. Although very important and meaningful for the individual, on a larger scale, it represents very brief and probably rather an insignificant time on earth! Meanwhile, the sun kept shining.' Ulla Zettergren's intriguing sculptures, which seduce the eye and tease the mind, are to be found in the homes of entranced collectors throughout Australia, Sweden, Singapore and the US.

Dr Dorothy Erickson



'Horse and People', 1995, terracotta and dyed jute, 45 x 22 x 14 cm



'The Crested Ones', 2003, terracotta, jute, on rammed earth base, 28 x 26x 21 cm