

Longing and belonging

Shonagh Manson

I first encountered *The Human Condition* in image form, on a computer screen. I turned individual pages, as you have done, to reveal each single object, separating one image from the next. I found myself looking for a story, for a sense of narrative and progression that works in series suggest. There were moments of surprise as I turned each page.

I next encountered *The Human Condition* in physical form, laid across the table of Jonathan's studio. That sense of narrative changed and its sculptural qualities became a focus. They were individual objects, but also a whole bigger than the sum of their parts.

My response to the work changed fairly dramatically from the first encounter to the second. I asked myself three things. What do these objects mean to Jonathan? What do these objects mean culturally? What do these objects mean to me?

In his work, Jonathan isn't interested in dictating or explaining – each piece is a proposition not an absolute. He certainly doesn't want me to tell you what you ought to think about this piece. Rather, our personal meaning is as important to him as his is.

Although Jonathan's work might seem on the surface quite contained and concise, I'd say it's actually deeply personal, and deeply revealing about Jonathan the person – if that's at all different from Jonathan the artist. He has collected each ring here. Several pieces of jewellery belong to the significant women in his life: his girlfriend, his mother. The cock rings have been bought for this piece. Jonathan talks about *The Human Condition* with a sense of yin and yang – as a journey along some kind of trajectory from female to male, light to dark – and in doing so he ascribes certain values to either side of these proposed oppositional pairings which are specific to his personal, and cultural, experiences; and these are therefore naturally quite different from mine. Jonathan's journey along this scale travels from a sketching of

innocence to what he describes as the 'dark side of our psyche'. He is exploring morality, perhaps, from a source in 'morally strong' to an end in 'morally wrong'. Both ends of the scale represent ideas of power, and of control. The circularity inherent in the objects themselves is broken by the beginning and ending-ness of their presentation. The impact of sequence upon narrative and the relationship of each object to the next is paramount for him; as is their objecthood; as is maintaining that space for wriggle-room for you and me, for our interpretation within the myriad cultural meanings that sit and shift over the work.

I don't feel the same way about quite a lot of this.

Responding to the work revealed several things about my position, and in writing about them I could reveal several things to you. I am female, I would consider myself a feminist and I am gay. Usually these things might not be any of your business but here they're important to how I read *The Human Condition*.

My literal journey through the series of rings began by considering different kinds of value. These objects begin with the ephemeral, with the fakery of some kind of glamour. They come from fairground arcade, they are children's toys. Make believe. Play. They are the opposite of eternity, their materials are not defined as precious to us. Some make a beautiful image, but the objects are not crafted. Further in, they progress to the fashionable and to friendship, and then the objects seem to grow up. They become 'real'. What does this mean? They become the thing the earlier versions ape; they signify and they have significance. Both their meaning and their material is ascribed value. They gain emotional value. They gain many associations. They bond.

And then I became confused, moving as I was from the delicate and jewel-encrusted to the coloured rounds of rubber or plastic which appeared next in sequence. What were these? It took me as much as seven or eight

Longing and belonging cont.

Shonagh Manson

images to realise. This potential period of not knowing what you're looking at doesn't necessarily exist when you see the work physically, when you view the objects at once and all together. Although the installation is the work proper, setting forth their collective objecthood, it's so right that it exists in book form too. I found here a small space of transition and revelation.

I am a bit nonplussed by my relationship to these objects; what do I know about cock rings, culturally or personally? Not a lot. What do they mean to me? Other. Sexual. Sexuality. They mean maleness but partnership too; perversion to some and pleasure to others. Something very different happens with scale between the object and its printed image; they are far more substantial in physical form than I'd expected; they are bigger, heavier. They also have more variation; their material also moves from pliable to rigid, rubber to metal to leather.

This collection of objects clearly moves along one scale, from public to private. Rings have been used publicly to adorn, to confer authority, to bind and to declare. They have been a symbol of religious or political position for men, and a signal of ownership for or of women. The trinkets we begin with here stem from an old power in the use of the ring in engagement and matrimony, or as a pledge. Rings announced ownership, literally contracting the passing of a woman from her father to her husband's possession, only later beginning to represent emotion or the promise of love and trust. Still now they make a particular announcement to the world regarding what you have or have not.

Cock rings are what I would consider quite honest objects in comparison. They exist to arouse, to maintain, to physically control, to enhance, to decorate, perhaps to dominate. Yes, if you interrogate it, they exist to maintain a form of power, the male erection. And they are an object of choice. Actually to me they're quite

exciting; erotically charged, again honest and also concerning a sense of play, full circle. If we find them illicit, that's as a result of cultural custom rather than of law. For the artist I think they represent a battle for and against the things you can't control – and in their very purpose they are about negotiating this control. But perhaps I don't take them here as the most morally problematic items – I'm inverting this particular scale. I find the struggle for control and a balance of power far more exposed in the roots of ring giving, and for me the disturbance of this series is located in the early pieces – where children might play at being grown up and we might hand on our flawed cultural expectations.

Of course on reflection this journey and my thoughts are full of contradictions. It was only later in my consideration of our human condition that I came back to rings more sentimentally: to the idea that I might wear a ring not only liberated for its decorative purpose but as a sign of celebratory pride in my connection with another human being. I guess I was being quite stubborn.

Shonagh Manson lives and works in London and is Director of the Jerwood Charitable Foundation.