

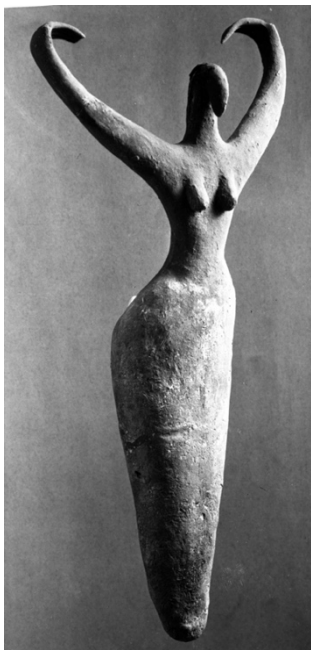
Effigies and Elginisms

Renee So

In August 1939, in the inner chamber of a cave in Hohlenstein-Stadel in Germany's Lone valley, a geologist, Otto Völzing, unearthed some fragments of a prehistoric figure carved from the tusk of a mammoth – the largest animal on Earth. It took until 2013 for the carving to be almost completely restored. At around 40,000 years old, it's the oldest figurative sculpture on the planet – and it appears to represent something that, as far as we know, has never existed: an amalgam of a person and a lion.¹ At only 31 centimetres tall, it's estimated that it would have taken more than 400 hours to carve with stone tools.

The creature stands upright; its front legs hang like human arms loosely beside its body – parts of which are smooth, as if it were passed from hand to hand. It gazes directly out at us across the millennia with a rough-hewn, genial expression: its ears pricked as if it's listening to us: it's thuggish, miraculous, strange. Despite being known in German as the ungendered *Löwenmensch* (Lion-human), in English the sculpture is commonly referred to as Lion-man. However, the paleontologist Elisabeth Schmid has a theory that Lion-man was the product of a matriarchal society. It's impossible to know who is right.

The cave where Lion-human was discovered is one of four, all of which have now been excavated. In 2008, another form was unearthed: a female figure, the Venus of Hohle Fels. Carved from mammoth ivory around 40,000 years ago and only six centimetres tall, it is the oldest extant figurative depiction of a human. While we can only speculate as to her meaning, symbolic or otherwise – she might have been a religious object, or a fertility charm, or even an expression of the artist's individuality – what is known is that patriarchal religion is a relatively new invention; artefacts relating to Goddess worship pre-date male deities by millennia.² It's hard not to see the Venus as a representation of feminine power: she has a pronounced vulva, her breasts are as sturdy as battering rams, her thighs like pylons. Her head is a tiny loop, which indicates she may have been worn as a pendant. It's also possible that she once had a head made of plant or animal fibres.³ But despite her distortions and immense age, she's not that dissimilar to so many women today. I look at a picture of this tiny figure, glowing in the light of my laptop, and I feel a connection to her. She feels familiar.



Female Figure, ca. 3500-3400 B.C.E. Clay, pigment, 11 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 2 1/4 in. (29.2 x 14 x 5.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 07.447.505. Creative Commons-BY (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 07.447.505_NegB_bw_SL4.jpg)



Two of a Kind, 2022

Prehistoric Venus figures made from clay, stone or ivory can be found not only in Europe, but across Eurasia and Africa and Meso-America. The ambiguous function and enigmatic power of these bodies is the fuel that sparks the fire of Renee So's imagination. In her sculptures, tiles, paintings and textiles, borders dissolve, animals and objects merge with humans: logic is upended in a dreamlike affinity. So – whose own story traverses the globe, from Hong Kong to Melbourne and London – is fascinated by history but less by its victories than its distortions and lies, its thefts, its vagaries and its strange wonders. Hers is an art of transformation – across time and space.



Valdivia. Female Figurine, 2600-1500 B.C.E. Ceramic, 4 5/16 x 1 1/8 x 5/8 in. (11 x 2.9 x 1.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Egizia Modiano, 76.166.41. Creative Commons-BY (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 76.166.41_PS2.jpg)



Longshan black ware tripod food vessel *li*, China, 2000-1700 BC © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

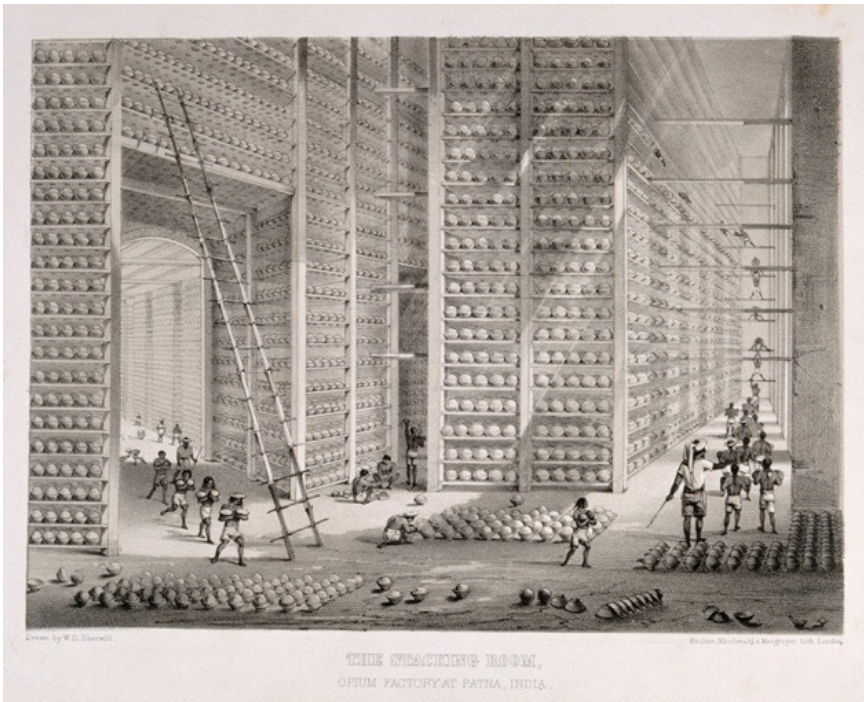
The title of So's new exhibition, 'Effigies and Elginisms' is a neat summary of her interest in the past, which is both playful and coolly angry. Her various creations are a lament for the dead, the forgotten and the overlooked, an acknowledgement of colonialism's viciousness and the near miraculous power of certain objects. Her title refers in part to Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, who, in the early 19th century, removed vast amounts of sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens to decorate his house in Scotland, which he later sold to the British Museum. The arguments about the ethics of what he did are still raging today. What is less well-known is that in 1860, as part of the Opium Wars between China and Britain, his son, the 8th Lord Elgin, ordered the destruction of the Qing Dynasty's Old Summer Palace – known in Chinese as Yuanmingyuan or Garden of Perfect Brightness – in what was then Peking. Three hundred eunuchs and maids who were hiding in the cellars were killed, and tens of thousands of objects – some scholars estimate even more than a million – were looted by British and French forces. Much of what was stolen can be found in public collections around the world. For example, the 19th-century Hope Grant Ewer, which was stolen from the Palace by troops and presented to their commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Hope Grant, is now in the collection of National Museums Scotland.

In 1861, the great French novelist Victor Hugo, lamented:

What was done to the Parthenon was done to the Summer Palace, more thoroughly and better, so that nothing of it should be left. All the treasures of all our cathedrals put together could not equal this formidable and splendid museum of the Orient.⁴

To memorialize this travesty, So has reimagined a bronze vessel, a snuff bottle and a scholar's rock that were taken. She has also filled the gallery's windows with a vessel of hand-coiled clay in the shape of opium balls, or cannon balls filled with dried opium poppies; a hand-made *pajogi* – a Korean cloth that is used to

communicate respect for any object it wraps and good will towards the recipient – and a Qing-era style display stand, which is empty.



A busy stacking room in the opium factory at Patna, India
Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, c.1850.
Wellcome Collection. CC0 1.0

Despite her focus on the horrors of the past, much of So's work is a celebration: she delights in the potential of female complexity by fusing ancient forms with references to modern science. For example, her recent sculptures were inspired, to varying degrees, by a photograph in the *Guardian* of a 3D clitoris that was first mapped in 2016 and based on research by urologist Helen O'Connell. So explains: 'She was the first person to discover that the clitoris was not a button, as previously thought. It instantly reminded me of the ancient Egyptian Venus figures, even though they are several millennia apart.'⁵ Her hybrid sculptures allude to history as a series of messy, unstable narratives. She describes a recent work as a 'mythical beast, part dog, part bird, part clitoris, part woman ... inspired by Roman winged phalluses, Assyrian winged lions, and Anubis, the Egyptian dog god.' Another sculpture – a fusion between a vessel and the lower half of a woman – refers to the 2013 rescinding of a 200-year-old French law that forbade women to wear trousers.



A few years ago, I interviewed So about the role of absurdity in her thinking, given the darkness of so many of the events she references. She replied: ‘That’s my two sides. I try to be serious in my work, but I slip up occasionally.’ She thought for a moment, laughed and said: ‘The world is insane right now – but then think how powerful Dada and surrealism were in response to the insanity of World War 1.’ *Plus ça change*.

1. Jill Cook, ‘The Lion Man, an Ice Age Masterpiece’, British Museum Blog, 10 October 2017, <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/the-lion-man-an-ice-age-masterpiece>
2. Charlene Spretnak, introduction to *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, Anchor Books, New York, 1982, p.xii
3. Stannard, M., & Langley, M. (2021). The 40,000-Year-Old Female Figurine of Hohle Fels: Previous Assumptions and New Perspectives. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 31(1), 21-33. doi:10.1017/S0959774320000207
4. Hugo, Victor. 1880. “L’expédition de Chine: Lettre au Capitaine Butler. Hauteville House, 25 novembre 1861.” In *Oeuvres complètes de Victor Hugo: Actes et paroles pendant l’exile*. Paris.
5. Notes sent from Renee So to Jennifer Higgie, March 2022

Jennifer Higgie is an Australian writer who lives in London. Her latest book, The Mirror & The Palette: Rebellion, Resilience and Resistance: 500 Years of Women’s Self Portraits is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson. She is currently working on a book about women, art and the spirit world. She also writes screenplays.