

**Exhibition Review by Tessa Peters**

**Christie Brown: *DreamWork***

The Freud Museum, 20 Maresfield Gardens, London NW3

23 November 2012 – 10 February 2013

**Tessa Peters is an independent curator and part-time senior lecturer in the School of Media, Arts & Design, University of Westminster. In her review of *DreamWork*, a recent exhibition by figurative sculptor Christie Brown held at the Freud Museum in London, she considers the relationship of the artworks to Freud's collection of antiquities and in the light of his use of archaeology as a metaphor for psychoanalysis, as well as his investigation of 'The Uncanny'. *DreamWork* also needs to be regarded in the context of the larger, ongoing AHRC funded research project *Ceramics in the Expanded Field*. For further information please see the project website <http://www.ceramics-in-the-expanded-field.com/>**

The adjoining study and library on the ground floor of the Freud Museum in Hampstead contain Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic couch, part of his original library of books and his extensive collection of Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Chinese antiquities, which fills every available surface. The collection is comprised of nearly two thousand artefacts, including statuettes, amulets, scarabs, seals, jars and flasks, fragments of wall reliefs and paintings, all of which were once housed in his study and consulting-room at Berggasse 19, Vienna, before the *Anschluss* of 1938 forced the Freud family to leave for London. When the antiquities were packed, great care was taken to record the position of each piece, so that when they came to set up home in Maresfield Gardens the collection could be arranged to plan.<sup>1</sup> Following her father's death in September 1939, Anna Freud preserved the contents of his study and library intact, while continuing to live in the other rooms of the house until her death, more than four decades later, in 1982. These ground floor rooms are thus experienced as a time capsule and their contents held to be an authentic representation of the various scientific and cultural concerns - as well as the clear archaeological interests - of the 'father of psychoanalysis'.

It is the archaic artefacts contained in Freud's dimly lit study and library - in this museum-within-a-museum - that provide the conceptual starting point for Christie Brown's *DreamWork* exhibition. In the accompanying artist's statement she points to Freud's use of 'the archaeological metaphor as a way of understanding the psychoanalytic process and making it more accessible to the general public'. In speaking

about her response to his collection of antiquities she notes that: ‘Since human beings project a range of emotions onto objects, these objects have a life of their own.’ Most visitors to the house during *DreamWork* will have started their tour of the exhibition in these ground floor rooms, picking out the ten Egyptian faience figures of a toy bear whose jewel-like turquoise colour emerged from the gloom to punctuate the serried ranks of Freud’s collection. Brown’s *Peter Teddy Shabti* were originally made when she was artist in residence at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL in 2006, it being just one of the different kinds of votive objects she made in response to an Age Concern poll. In the poll three thousand people were asked what kinds of objects they would like to be buried with and the top ten answers had ranged from an Egyptian artefact to a mobile telephone, as well as a can of lager, food, money, mementos of a pet and a teddy bear.<sup>2</sup>

Lying on the Oriental carpet covering of the famous analytic couch was Brown’s *Eros* (2012), a work reminiscent of an unclothed Victorian doll with head and limbs in unglazed porcelain and a body of black satin. The title of the work and its location might call to mind the myth of Eros and Psyche that relates their difficult and eventful struggle for love. For Brown this ‘object’ (a key word in psychoanalysis) is also representative of the child’s search for the doll’s soul and subsequent disappointment at its lack of response. This figure, the hand-list emphasised, was ‘in need of coherent inner structure’. Due to its shrine-like focus within the room, the couch is frequently employed as part of the *mise-en-scène* of exhibited artworks. One memorable example was Sophie Calle’s *Wedding Dress* as analysed that accompanied one of the autobiographical stories that made up her installation, *Appointment*, at the Museum in 1999<sup>3</sup> and, last year, curator Philip Larratt-Smith suspended *Janus Fleuri*, the 1968 bronze sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, often interpreted as a fusion of male and female genitals, above Freud’s couch as if part of a patient’s free association.<sup>4</sup>

First in Vienna and subsequently in London, Freud kept his collection of antiquities in his consulting rooms and therefore quite separate from the family-orientated rooms of the Berggasse apartment and the house in Maresfield Gardens.<sup>5</sup> Selecting from the collection at large, his habit was to keep a changing group of pieces on his work desk, for consideration at close quarters. On the light and spacious mezzanine between the ground

and first floor of the house is *My Desk* (2000 – 2011), an intervention in which Christie Brown set out a collection of artefacts in ceramic and other media on a bureau belonging to the Freud family, each item being representative of her recent practice, its various conceptual and material concerns. Some of the concerns are long standing. For example she has always used clay as a metaphor of origin and many of her past works demonstrate an interest in myth and in archaeology and its objects. Over the past decade her practice has been increasingly informed by an interest in the relationship between archaeology and psychoanalysis, making the Freud Museum a highly pertinent site for the exhibition. *My Desk* clearly refers to Freud's desk and his practice of grouping selected artefacts as objects for analysis and as catalysts for thought. It therefore demands to be read in terms of Brown's current preoccupations, investigations, hypotheses and conundrums. The adjacent permanent museum texts added to the visitors understanding by placing emphasis on the more feminine aspects of the space. The books on the shelves, they inform, were Anna Freud's and the surrounding collection of house plants would also have been tended by her when she occupied the house. Another text informs the visitor that, 'This was a favourite place for Sigmund Freud's wife Martha and her sister Minna to sit with needlework and have tea.'

Anna Freud's room, off the first floor landing, has been curated to depict aspects of her life and work in both Vienna and London. The room contains furniture from her study, including her analytic couch, and a loom from her bedroom. Other items in the room help to articulate her pioneering work in the field of child psychology. Christie Brown's intervention in this space was *I Pray Again, Again* – an arrangement of child dolls in small groups of between two and six, whose unformed facial features were further masked by wax. Some were prominently positioned on tables, chests and stools, but appeared to multiply as the visitor explored the room, gradually finding more and more, standing in cupboards and corners, high on top of cabinets and underneath smaller items of furniture. These figures were cast from modern day ex-voto figures, as used in north east Brazil to acknowledge the intercession of a saint in response to prayer. Such sculptures usually correspond to the physical form of concern (frequently wounded or diseased limbs) and the fact of their insistent, emphatic repetition and their resemblance

to small boys and girls in this particular space renders them all the more poignant. The dazzling winter light of a cold January afternoon amplified the melancholic nature of these sullen and dumb agents. Devoid of colour they were felt as absent presences and provoked a sense of un-specifiable unease in the spectator, a sensation that Freud discussed in terms of uncanniness.

It was in 1919 that Freud published his famous essay on ‘The Uncanny’ (in German ‘Das Unheimlich’). The aim of his inquiry into the aesthetic was to consider why it is that things that are generally familiar might make us feel unexpectedly unsettled or frightened. He considers the philosopher Friedrich Schelling’s view that the uncanny is closely linked to that which ‘ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light’<sup>6</sup> and notes that Jentsch linked the creation of an uncanny feeling to uncertainty, in particular ‘doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’.<sup>7</sup> From Otto Rank he takes the idea of the ‘double’ linked to ‘reflections in mirrors, with shadows, with guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul’ and ‘the constant recurrence of the same thing’ as well as déjà-vu and the fear of death.<sup>8</sup> He also links the idea of the uncanny to superstitious beliefs and to the notion of ‘presentiments’ which often come true and thus to the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’.<sup>9</sup> An analysis of all such instances of the uncanny, Freud observes, leads us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe.’ This is because everyone, however civilized they may regard themselves to be, passes through a stage of development in early childhood where they experience the world in a way comparable to the animistic and superstitious state of more primitive people so that ‘everything which now strikes us as “uncanny” fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression.’<sup>10</sup> He concludes that:

... an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality.

John Forrester tells us that Freud began to collect antiquities shortly after the death of his father in 1896, and at the same time as starting to form a number of less material collections that also informed his work. The other collections included the documentation of his set of cases, of dream texts, Jewish anecdotes, and mistakes or ‘parapraxes’ such as

misreadings and slips of the tongue. This was an important, intensely reflective period in Freud's development of psychoanalysis that led up to the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. When his work on the text (which he playfully alluded to as 'my Egyptian dream-book')<sup>11</sup> was nearing completion, he is recorded as referring to his collection of antiquities in terms of the 'old and grubby gods' aiding him.<sup>12</sup>

A further insight into Freud's interest in archaeology is gained from his comparison between bringing the contents of the unconscious mind into the light of conscious awareness and the recovery of 'buried treasures'.<sup>13</sup> In 1909 he reports having said to a patient known as the 'Rat Man':

I then made some short observations upon *the psychological differences between the conscious and the unconscious*, and upon the fact that everything conscious was subject to a process of wearing-away, while what was unconscious was relatively unchangeable; and I illustrated my remarks by pointing to the antiques standing about in my room. They were, in fact, I said, only objects found in a tomb, and their burial had been their preservation: the destruction of Pompeii was only beginning now that it had been dug up.<sup>14</sup>

Christie Brown's research for the major work within her *DreamWork* exhibition, an installation titled *Sleepover* (2012), started with the study of 'a small and rather neglected selection of figures ... partly hidden in a case in Freud's study', among them an Egyptian figurine of an animal deity and statuettes of a Greek goddess, an Etruscan male and a Roman Mercury of between 5 and 8 cm high. The figures and a small selection of her annotated study drawings were to be found in a glazed case in the entrance hall, effectively bridging the gap between the rest of Freud's collection and the site of Brown's installation, which was encountered towards the end of the exhibition, in a first-floor room immediately above the library. The visitor entered this space through blackout curtains that also ran around the walls of the interior so that, like the rooms below, it was sealed off from the world beyond. On a low platform, bisecting the room along a horizontal plane, twenty-three white, child-sized figures stood looking out towards the spectator with unseeing eyes. In the exhibition hand-list Brown suggests that:

...the dream world that is activated when we fall asleep is echoed by the idea that objects come to life when we are not looking, hinting at an uncanny animated narrative that has been interrupted but which may resume at any time when we leave the room.

Her figures make reference to Freud's concepts of the 'dream-work', such as 'displacement', 'representation' and 'condensation'. The figures are quite literally representations of artefacts from the collection, whose significance is 'displaced' or separated from the original models and attached to a new child-sized physical form and a changed context. Whereas they were formerly obscured by other antiquities towards the back of an unlit cabinet, they are now spot-lit and foregrounded. At the same time each figure within the installation is created from a series of moulds, from a set of archetypal forms developed from her studies of Freud's 'old and grubby gods'. The notion of 'condensation' relates to how a dream object can simultaneously hold two or more associations or ideas and is analogous to such a method of construction, where each figure is built of parts taken from different moulds in order to create a unique entity. The visitor was also informed that this room was once Freud's bedroom and so encouraged to view Brown's *Sleepover* tableau as a dream work, and to speculate on its manifest and latent content.

In an incisive analysis of installation art, titled *The Somnambulist's Story: Installation and the Tableau*, art historian Briony Fer notes how such a tableau form of presentation, where it is impossible to enter into a three-dimensional environment, makes the spectator feel like a trespasser who should not be there. She quotes Brian O'Doherty's response to the work of George Segal noting how 'the figures appear like simulacra of the living and "ignore us with ... the irritating indifference of the dead."' <sup>15</sup> Indeed the visitor's experience of *Sleepover* was mediated by the inescapable fact that this is the house where Freud died. In his essay on 'The Uncanny' he had noted:

Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead and to spirits and ghosts ... the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us and always ready to come to the surface on any provocation ... <sup>16</sup>

*DreamWork* as a whole was conceived, created and curated by Christie Brown to be embedded within the Freud Museum. The works were not only inspired by Freud's collections, his psychological perspectives and practice, but also opened up a series of dialogues with the museum's more permanent displays. Whereas the intervention of *Peter Teddy Shabti* performed the role of eye-catching beacons to call attention to the extraordinary diversity of Freud's antiquities, *My Desk* was a reminder of the ways in

which objects and the relationships between them can function as catalysts of thought. *Eros* was perhaps overwhelmed by its highly charged site upon the analytic couch, but *I Pray Again, Again* and the installation *Sleepover* successfully partook of the history of the house, the richness of its associations and its profusion of narratives.

Brown's exhibition was both site-responsive and site-specific. In an important sense it provided a two-way conduit: on the one hand where the artworks found completion and enhancement through their specific placements within the museum and, on the other, where the artworks reanimated Sigmund and Anna Freud's interests and passions, presenting them to the public in new ways.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Forrester, 'Mille e tre: Freud and Collecting', in John Elsner & Roger Cardinal (eds), *The Cultures of Collecting*, London, Reaktion Books, 1994, p.227.

<sup>2</sup> James Putnam, 'Votive Objects for the Modern World', *Christie Brown: Collective Traces*, Ceramics Research Group, University of Westminster, 2006, unpaginated.

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Calle, *Appointment*, Freud Museum, London, 12 February to 28 March 1999. Curator: James Putnam.

<sup>4</sup> *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed*, Freud Museum, London, 8 March to 27 May 2012. Curator: Philip Larratt-Smith.

<sup>5</sup> Forrester, 'Mille e tre', pp.227-228.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', James Strachey (ed. & trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol XVII, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953, p.241.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pp.226-227.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp.234-235.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.240.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp.240-241.

<sup>11</sup> Forrester, 'Mille e tre', p.235.

<sup>12</sup> Freud writes of 'My old and dirty gods ... contributing to the work as paperweights' in a letter to Dr Wilhelm Fleiss, quoted in Lydia Marinelli, 'Dirty Gods: An Exhibition on Freud's Archaeological Collection', *American Imago*, 66:2 (2009), p.153.

<sup>13</sup> Richard D. Lane & Karen L. Weihs, 'Freud's Antiquities', *Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations*, 16:1 (2010), p.77.

<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis', 1909, cited in Forrester, 'Mille e tre', p.224.

<sup>15</sup> Briony Fer, 'The Somnabulist's Story: Installation and the Tableau', *Oxford Art Journal*, 24: 2 (2001), p.81. Also see Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of Gallery Space*, Berkeley, LA and London, University of California Press, 1999, p.49.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp.241-242