



Dinner with Venus

How two bags of prehistoric loess became part of an artist's dialogue with the past

Lucy Duggan

The fifteen guests face each other in a circle at the centre of the room, their faces animated. Scheherazade tips her head to one side as she prepares to describe the moment in which Aladdin found the magic lamp, while Michelangelo's forehead wrinkles – he looks as if he might still be concentrating on a tricky bit of marble. Their hostess is ceramic artist Jitka Palmer, who has sculpted a clay portrait of each guest and brought them all together for a dinner party under the title *Good Company*. Each of the guests has influenced Jitka in some way, and together they form a complex web of inspiration and tradition across many art forms and many thousands of years.

One of the guests stands out from the others; her features have not been painted, and her red-brown skin is grainy rather than smooth. She is the Venus of Dolní Věstonice, and her story is particularly illustrative of the echoes and dialogues which form the basis for the installation.

Almost twenty years ago, Jitka received a gift which was both strange and meaningful. Visiting an archaeological site in her home country of the Czech Republic, she was given two bags of dusty earth to take back with her to England. Technically known as 'loess', the soil dated from 26,000 BC: this was the period in which the figurine known as the Venus of Dolní Věstonice was formed and fired. A small, naked figure shaped from the same prehis-

The exhibition draws us into a very tangible and lively portrayal of artistic influence: instead of being a vague, mythical presence, the palaeolithic Venus really is here, and she looks thoughtful, as if she might be about to speak.

right Slavonic Dances 2

opposite page Venus 2



Jitka Palmer's solo exhibition, Good Company, will take place at the ceramic gallery Galerie Le Don du Fel in France. Dates of exhibition: October 14th – November 30th 2012 Address of exhibition: Le Don du Fel, 12140 Le Fel, France www.ledondufel.com www.jitkapalmer.co.uk

toric loess, the “Venus” is one of the oldest known ceramics in the world. Jitka was fascinated by the question of who might have created the figurine, and why – and by the idea of a connection between artists across millennia. She kept the two bags of loess for years, and now she has found the right use for them: for the Good Company exhibition, she wanted to bring together people who had influenced her life and her art. She says, “I covered the bust of my Venus sculpture with a thick layer of the prehistoric loess – so my Venus and the oldest fired clay artefact in the world have the same material in common, apart from both being women.”

The exhibition draws us into a very tangible and lively portrayal of artistic influence: instead of being a vague, mythical presence, the palaeolithic Venus really is here, and she looks thoughtful, as if she might be about to speak. The interaction between the artist and her influences is framed not just as a dialogue but as a conversation between many voices, a hubbub of intertwining stories.

The dinner party is formed from three

concentric circles. The guests are arranged in an inner circle, and surrounded by a ring of large ceramic vessels, onto which are painted topics of conversation associated with each character. These in turn are encircled by pastel drawings exploring the background of each guest. Thus, on one of the vessels, we see images of the creation of the Venus of Dolní Vestonice – and the concentration which radiates from the careful hands and bent body of her creator brings that moment of creation close to us, making it palpable. The story of this early ceramic figure is brought together with other stories on other vessels: we see the hands of Jitka's carpenter father gripping a plane as he shapes a piece of wood, we see J. S. Bach's childhood, and we see one of Dvorák's Slavonic Dances, figures whirling around in colours which recall the Czech flag. In a sense, many more circles are present here than the three which are immediately visible: others are formed by themes of national identity and family identity, cultural kinship and musical echoes.

In her foreword to the exhibition cata-

logue, Jitka talks about the many things which shape and influence our lives. Good Company is about gathering together all these influences and letting them mingle – the fluidity of the shapes on the ceramic vessels and of the features of each clay portrait suggest that this is a continuous process, that nothing here has reached its final form. Thus the Venus of Dolní Vestonice has made her own journey through millennia to be here, but has lost nothing of that dynamism which infused her creation. Perhaps it is this that gives the installation what Martin Rieser calls “Bohemian joie de vivre” in his introduction to Good Company. Bohemia is present here in its geographical sense, a predecessor of the Czech Republic, and it is also present as an attitude to creativity: nothing is fixed, and as one line of conversation merges with another, there is a sense that each of these guests will be somewhere completely different tomorrow.

Lucy Duggan just begun a PhD at Oxford University, published articles in the Czech newspaper Literární noviny and edits the online magazine Europe & Me.