

In the exhibition of sculptures of Bruce Gagnier, currently on view at the Lori Bookstein Gallery, the work asserts itself as a very moving contribution to the tradition of figure sculpture, and declares itself as contemporary in unexpected ways. The richness of the expression derives from the interplay between worlds, between ideas, and variety of ways the works can be seen. It is the strong form, and artist's knowledge of the language of sculpture, that makes this possible.

In the catalogue statement, (unattributed) it says that the work has "eluded the categorizations of ugly or pretty", and indeed it is the power of these works that we are in-between these categories. But this is only the beginning of a thread we can follow into more complex relations of form and meaning, and into a deeper significance of these works.

In the confrontation of these works, we are also in-between a known past and an unmistakable present. The past is immediately evoked by the stance of the figures, which recalls, of course, the Greeks and the Renaissance artists who followed. Gagnier has fully mastered the formal difficulties of convincingly weighting and un-weighting his forms to convey the figure in-between rest and motion. In his figures, as in much great sculpture, this major movement is played out in numerous minor relationships that animate the forms, and move us, in turn, around the figures. As this occurs, new relations are revealed, and new readings unfold. Forms are sometimes lumpen, sometimes taught, they emerge and merge into groups and larger masses, and ungroup and dive into the interior. Forms can sometimes be read as anatomy, or as representational, this knowledge is certainly there, but at other times it simply is pure form, sometimes abstracted into spheres. Forms are held in tension, and allowed to release, they are, it seems arrived at slowly from observation and memory, and invented, one guesses, spontaneously in the moment.

The history of figure sculpture that these works draw from is inextricably tied up in theology, in the relation of humans to the divine, and the relation of the body to the soul. For the Greeks, the gods took human form and were represented as such. In the Renaissance a primary humanist belief was that man is created in the image of God. The representation of human form became therefore a symbol of gods "finest" work. The cosmology of the renaissance was hierarchical, the material world at the bottom the divine the top and human in-between, above the animals yet below the angels. The contrapposto gave visual form to this idea, the weighted side reminding us that we are tethered to the earth, the un-weighted side indicating our ability to ascend and take part in the world of the spirit.

Idealization, scale, extraordinary beauty, and the attribution of awesome power, the terribilita, were all ways of making a connection to the divine,

Later in history, in the twentieth century, when consciousness or the mind, replaces the divinity, or the non-physical, the dematerialized world would dominate, and figures would nearly disappear in the atmosphere and transparency of cubism or in the matchstick figures of Giacometti.

The figures of Bruce Gagnier are a return to the physical, a return to the body. The weighted side seems to dominate. The clay as flesh, the material and the transformation of material all contribute to the startling presence of the work. Though cast in hydrocal, the original clay is felt throughout. The artist makes his own molds in order to ensure that the feel of the material and all the detail and touch in the clay comes through. Consistent with this physicality is the clear lack of idealization in the work. There is no aggrandizement, no attribution of any awesome nature to these figures, no classical sense of beauty. They are undeniably human. One might think that the theological link has been broken, but as we move around these figures, the un-weighted side speaks up.

As it speaks, one might turn to the titles for information. We see the pieces are named, Francis, Louis, Eddie, Rose – neighborly names, names of our friends and relatives. Until we realize that these are also all the names of Saints. (One exception is Sou(illac) which is a conflation of Sue and Souillac. Souillac is the location of a major Romanesque church in France famous for its sculptural program. This figure, interestingly, forsakes the contrappasto stance for the spring-like zigzag of the Romanesque, which shares the in-between, both up and down characteristic of the contrappasto). Further, in the back room of the exhibition, there are crucifixes. These small figures are perforated, giving them an appropriate light, dematerialized nature. Finally we turn to the title of the show, Incarnate, with its theological overtones and meaning the spirit embodied in human form.

So while we have the body, we also have the spirit. But what kind of spirit? I suggest that the spirit here lies in the in-between state that these works propose. In between beauty and ugliness, in between motion and rest, in between the material and the spiritual, in between the merely human and the saints, perhaps between knowing and unknowing, and in between the theological and what might be called the post theological. This position proposes that to be in-between, is exist to exist in possibility, the possibility of becoming something else. For Deleuze and Guattari, whose philosophy has been referred to as a positive ontology” “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” In the post theological the world of the spirit is very much alive, but the verticality of the hierarchy, and its implicit values, is turned on its side. There is movement, but it is no longer seen as up and down. Power, in the form of insight, can arise from humility. For Gagnier the body is not lower on the order of being, it is not a prison as it was for Michelangelo. In his case the cycle of motion and rest is no longer ascending and descending, the yearning implicit in the Renaissance cosmology is replaced with acceptance. Acceptance of our body, and all the implications in fact and in metaphor. Acceptance of the physical, in this case leads us the spiritual, and to the central message of this work, which is, I think, compassion.