

RECYCLING CULTURE AND MEDIA

PROBLEM IN LIEU THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	iv
Chapter	
I. PROPOSAL	1
Introduction	
Statement of Problem	
Methodology	
II. PROCEDURES	4
Construction of the Venus	
Perseus and the Medusa	
Column Fragment	
Kouros and Kore	
Relief installation	
III. CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION	13
Relating Media and Content	
Cultural Aesthetics in Conflict	
Contemporary Emphasis	
Stylistic Synthesis: Media and Message	
ILLUSTRATIONS	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	20

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Nike, cloth mache on wood and hardware cloth armature, h.3' w.2' d.5", 1991.
2. Parthenon facade, cloth mache on wire armature, h.12' w.7' d.1', 1992.
3. Discobolus, fiberglass and mixed media on wire armature, h.5' w.5' d.9", 1992.
4. Venus, mixed plastics, h.8' w.2.5' d.2.5', 1994.
5. Perseus and the Medusa, mixed media, h.10' w.3' d.3', 1995.
6. Perseus (in progress), 1995.
7. Column Fragment, mixed media, h.5' w.4' d.5', 1995.
8. Kouros and Kore (in progress), 1995.
9. Kouros, fiberglass, h.9' w.2.5' d.2.5', 1995.
10. Kore, mixed media, h.6'7" w.2' d.1.5', 1995.
11. Lintel and Column, cloth mache on hardware cloth, h.11' w.4' d.6", 1995.
12. First night scene relief, mixed synthetic fibers, h.6' w.5' d.2", 1995.
13. Second night scene relief, mixed media, h.5' w.5' d.6", 1995.
14. Drapery relief exercise (in progress), silk batik on styrofoam, h.18" w.18" d.4", 1995.
15. Drapery relief (in progress), interfacing cloth and wire, h.12' w.2.5' d.8", 1995.

CHAPTER I

PROPOSAL

Introduction

Over the past few years I had grown increasingly interested in exploring the possibilities of many types of discarded or degraded materials for sculpture. The extreme variety of premanufactured plastics (a rather sudden phenomenon of the last twenty-five years) challenged me to respond in sculptural terms to the culture that produces them. Their gestural quality and the variety of ways of working these maleable materials led to a personal procedural approach.

The cast-off materials of modern manufacture reflect not only the fast-paced, highly technological late twentieth-century culture, anxious about social dysfunction and environmental pollution. They also reflect historical precedence, their development from classical origins. All man-made objects bear intrinsically the mark or stamp of personality. Assuming that human personality does not change significantly through the ages and considering that we draw the very terms of personality from Greek mythology, a haunting resonance exists between ancient and modern cultures. Therefore fascinating to me was the idea of

reinterpreting cultural myth in modern media, that is, creating contemporary derivatives of classical themes.

Statement of Problem

A comparison of classical and contemporary cultures was made by recreating classical sculptural imagery in contemporary recyclable materials. I proposed to use the detritus of modern culture to render sculpture that was ancient in subject, stance, and scale. The intention of this work was to create a visual discourse between cultures by bringing together elements of each, showing points of congruence and disparity.

Questions arising from this undertaking involved the relationship of media and message.

1. What cultural ideas and questions did the work generate?
2. How did the use of discarded materials affect the aesthetic perception of classical imagery?
3. To what degree were reflective embellishment and dramatic lighting necessary to the appreciation of the work?

Methodology

In the execution of the work, primitive procedures were applied to modern materials. The methods of sewing, fiber mache, brazing, heat forming, sanding, decoupage, and

painting were used with various materials such as nylon line, polyester resin, synthetic fiber mesh and other premanufactured plastics, felt, lacquers, fines, and glitters.

The resulting figures and reliefs were large and relatively lightweight. The figures, four in number, were over-lifesize constructions. The wall pieces were in low relief, averaging six feet in height and width, and also four in number. Derived from classical landscape and architecture, they served to support the figures with the suggestion of environment and atmosphere. I kept a journal and photographic documentation of the work in progress to describe the relationship of mechanical procedural steps with visual ideation.

CHAPTER II

PROCEDURES

The extreme variation and flexibility of the media called for unique procedures: methods of joining, shaping, and layering not customary in modelling more traditional media. Challenged by the abundance of possibilities, I developed a process of using both subtractive and additive methods simultaneously.

Construction of the Venus

The first piece started and completed was an interpretation of the Venus de Milo close to actual size. I constructed an armature of pvc pipe wired into an inverted dishwasher rack and covered it with shards of plastic buckets and bottles (sodapop, bleach, soap, etc.). A couple of hula hoops and some vinyl sheeting and meshes were also incorporated. Each piece of plastic to be attached was cut to fit, heated with a heat gun, flexed (crumpled or bent) and tied around the armature with wire or rubber bands. The pieces were then covered with fiberglass and resined with a brush. Before the resin set, sands, fines, and glitters were sprinkled on the surfaces.

After each application the piece was allowed to cure enough (at least two hours) to turn and reposition. Stress

on the form was reapplied using weights and wires, and the fiberglassing process was repeated. Due to the rapid set time (as little as 15 minutes) small areas were handled at a time. Before reapplying fiberglass or resin over an area, spurs and bubbles from the last application had to be ground down.

Many applications were made, between 50 and 100, resulting in a shell about 1/4 inch thick overall. I soon discovered that a small amount of any colorant, be it oil, lacquer, or acrylic-based, could be mixed into the resin without harming the cure. Additional applications of resin and fines were also used to unify the values and balance the color of the piece. The vinyl and mesh wrapped in folds on pvc armature provided drapery effects.

The resulting figure was less refined than the original fifth century B.C. classic, with a rough and reflective surface. The detritus construction and an intent to exaggerate led to much more interior shaping, deeper crevices, more abstracted and bisected shapes, and a more active surface. The predominance of white plastic in the construction mimicked the marble of the original Venus, the fines roughened and antiqued the surface, the reflective glitters indicated a contemporary dimension, and the translucence of the layers of resin suggested polish.

Perseus and the Medusa

For the model of the second figure I chose the Perseus of Cellini, executed in bronze in the sixteenth century. The addition of Renaissance flourishes on the classical theme and the introduction of bronze as the model's media provided challenges in regards to both content and procedure. To the sense of classical culture was now added the dimension of Renaissance styling, indicative of a transition between classical Greek and late 20th century culture. The work was also complicated by an elaborate base and the additional figure of the recumbant figure of the Gorgon Medusa, minus her head which is held in Perseus's upwardly extended left hand.

The same kind of armature and procedures as used on the Venus were employed again, with the addition of a fill of spray urethane foam. I had discovered that empty areas abounding between shell and armature disturbed the cure of the fiberglass by trapping moisture. Injecting foam greatly reduced the number and size of air pockets, maximized the strength of the armature, and allowed for a thinner shell and more refined surface. There was more attenuation of shape in the piece; some of the accidental shapes made by the foam expanding through fissures in the shell were used.

Whereas the Venus was partially clothed, the total nudity of the Perseus and Medusa suggested a shell made of

smoother, more transparent materials cut and sewn together so that their curvilinear planes could describe the shapes of the musculature. The piece became very full of surface shape very fast. With each of the fiberglass applications I faced the recurring challenge of refining and integrating the small areas into the larger whole. Smoothness was maintained by lessening the use of fines and by sanding thoroughly between applications.

The relationship between the procedures of applying and removing tensions on the material to get a desired shape and tension as content, that is, tension between classical theme and pop material, increasingly informed the work. I began to see each twist and bend in the media as representative of twists and bends in cultural activity. This was how the procedure shaped the work, not just its form but also its content. The clash of pop media and sensibility and classic media and sensibility became ever more evident as the piece developed.

Column Fragment

After beginning work on the Perseus I started a large column fragment to test the limits of the spray foam and to exploit the corrugated plastic sheeting that is used in architectural detailing and so mimics the fluting of marble columns. On a hog wire cylinder of about 40 inches diameter and length I wrapped found sections of frayed

corrugated plastic and reinforced the structure with coils of four inch vinyl slot pipe (used in irrigation) wound in the cavity. Some sections of pvc pipe were wedged in for stability and the whole interior was sprayed with the foam to make a solid, lightweight form.

The two faces of the cylinder were gradually covered with applications of fiberglass and fines, as well as dirt and bits of glass, to represent the two broken ends of the column fragment. The surface of the column was antiqued with holes bashed in and more resin and fines applications. Color was mixed into small batches of resin to streak on and create veination and color variations for the faux marble look. I also used ink washes, caulk, and gesso with dirt or fines in this effort. Finally I decoupage a few black and white newspaper photos of football players to mimic areas of discoloration on an ancient marble surface and to reinforce the content of the work. It was intended not to be just a piece of faux marble but to coordinate with the figures in provoking awareness of cultural recycling. The piece was also intended to help relate the architectural elements of the proposed relief work to the free-standing figures.

Kouros and Kore

For the third and fourth figures I referred back to the archaic Greek period, choosing for models examples of ideal

male and female beauty. Works of the archaic period reflect a transition from the stiffness of preceding Egyptian sculpture to the more supple forms of the classical Greek period. In their columnar stance they uniquely reflect the architectural origins of all Western sculpture.

For the Kouros I tried a different procedure to exploit the transparency and moldability of fiberglass. I dug a shallow mold in an area of flat sandy dirt outside my studio to represent the back half of the standing figure. The earthen mold was lined with cellophane to act as release agent and then with fiberglass cloth, onto which resin was brushed. After this set up into a thin shell, about eight feet in length, it was removed and the mold redesigned and reshaped to describe the front half of the figure.

The process was repeated and the two half shells reinforced cross-sectionally with wire lampshade hoops and tied together with rubber bands. Beginning with the flaps of fiberglass cloth left around the edges of each cast half, I sealed the halves together and developed the figure with successive fiberglass applications, sometimes working with the figure suspended from a rafter. A base of folded hardware cloth was attached and the piece reinforced with some wire coiled in cellophane. Once again scores

of layering applications ensued, involving turning and repositioning the piece after each. I used minimal glitter and fines, but in the original shell there was some colorant added, plus spots of dirt at gaps in the cellophane mold lining. The piece assumed a visceral translucence and looked as if made of alabaster.

I wanted to leave the last of the four figures, the Kore, as a simple sewn and shaped plastic mesh construction with no fiberglass or stiffened drapery, but since this would be too much of a radical departure from the treatment of the other figures, I decided to use relatively minimal amounts of fiberglass and resistol-stiffened fabric. The piece was hollow like the Kouros, with lampshade hoops giving cross-sectional, horizontal support.

Unique to the work was the blending of areas of fabric mache and fiberglass in the same piece, making it partially transparent. The technique of fabric mache was carried over into the relief work.

Relief Installation

After the figures were underway I began to consider possibilities for the relief part of the work. I had previously created a few relief works in paper and cloth mache, modelled after the architectural detail of the Parthenon, which served as a foundation for the current three-dimensional work. I intended the new reliefs to be

more like tapestries or video screens: lighter in weight, flatter, of more diaphanous construction, more spontaneously contrived, and indicative of a temporary installation. The first I began just previously to the Kouros and in the same manner, to explore the use of an in-ground mold. I dug and inversely modelled a lintel fragment and its supporting column, the two pieces together about 10 feet in height, four feet wide and eight inches deep. Cloth soaked in a mixture of resistol and wheat paste was laid in to form the cast. The cast was reinforced with a lining of lathe material, a flexible aluminum hardware cloth. Cellophane was used sporadically for mold release. The surfaces of the casts were then embellished in the usual way with sprinkles and inks and caulks, using the glue mixture instead of resin.

In this work I began to use the synthetic fibers known as interfacings, porous stiff fabric that is sewn between finer materials in dressmaking. The second and third reliefs I began continued to explore the use of interfacings with other synthetics, such as the plastic indoor-outdoor carpetting known as astroturf. I found that some types of interfacing could be affixed to the astroturf without glue of any sort, the texture of the astroturf acting like velcro.

In concert with this find I developed a technique of painting in glue and glitter on the gossamer mesh called tulle. When black tulle was overlaid on the black astroturf, the tulle almost disappeared and the lines and blobs of glitter created a luminescent effect, like lights burning at night. Fragments of plastic detritus and styrofoam were then arranged and sewn on to distinguish the picture plane of each wall hanging into a simple night landscape with some architectural ruins.

For the fourth relief I wanted to continue the use of fabric unstiffened, floated on and draped. I created an armature (from a folding aluminum chair, a section of wire display rack, and a vinyl trash can) for a wall relief of a Corinthian column and capital. Onto the armature was sewn four yards of off white sateen, the column part trailing onto the floor in folds. The piece was designed to hang like a valance and curtain and continued the thematic device uniting the reliefs: architectural elements floating in space.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

Relating Media and Content

The materials and procedures discussed above led me continually to find their relationships to the content of the work. Pieces of crumpled plastic found on a walk have a history. They were made, used, and thrown away by someone. With a little imagination, one can see faces and forms in their twisted shapes, forms that could be brought out with a little more twisting. The abundance and variety of plastic detritus speak of the culture that made them, and when incorporated into a work of art tend to interpret that culture. They are full of associations to be made; like a particular make and model of automobile that you once knew, they evoke memories.

The procedures resonate cultural processes. Tearing, bending, heating, crumpling, scattering, applying pressure, they all seemed to describe culture in transition. In culture there are tearings and weldings; discarded elements resurface later. Wind and war erode and etch stone monuments; I replicated the process in rendering fractures and weathered looking surfaces to describe cultural decay and the effects of time.

The assimilation of the detritus of contemporary culture into works of art about ancient cultures serves as a metaphor for cultural assimilation. Succeeding cultures absorb characteristics of the preceding ones. The grandeur that was Rome was born of the glory that was Greece. Just as Roman culture derived its language, customs, architecture, and mythology from the Greek, current western democracies and imperialisms find their philosophical, psychological, and linguistic origins in the ancient.

Cultural Aesthetics in Conflict

I had observed that the words tension, pressure, and weight apply to both the procedures used in this project and to the subject matter. As I struggled with mechanical tensions in the pieces, I could see how they related to the tensions in the content of the work. Tortured-looking forms, at once both organic and mechanical, indicated tensions in the culture and between cultures, tensions that are as much in evidence now as in any age.

Furthermore it became clear that the detritus with its shine, plasticity, and kitschy, devalued look established cultural tension as the content of the work. The work seemed to address the tension in terms of classical versus popular sensibilities. While the subjects of the work were eternal, ancient, heroic, and mythic, the media was

lightweight, disposable, glittery, and contemporary. The tension created in the pieces seems to me nothing less than the conflict between pop and classical aesthetics. Pop art parodies, humanizes, makes things gaudier, and is somewhat iconoclastic, so when applied to classical imagery, there is a clash.

Nevertheless the vivacity of the classical archetypes seemed enhanced rather than degraded by the choice of media. Though the media and procedural approach tended to forefront contemporary sensibilities, the classical aesthetic still came through in the stance and scale of the work. So loaded was the imagery with the code and context of ancient Greek culture that I could be very liberal in my translation without destroying a sense of the classical ideal.

Contemporary Emphasis

The media and procedure tended to create an existential or tentative quality in the work. Plastic detritus has the moniker of disposability. It is often transparent and soft enough to change radically and quickly with a little pressure or heat. It can sag or shrink or pop off unexpectedly. It can be worked both additively and subtractively simultaneously. Variations are infinite. There is a spontaneity to its compressions and extrusions. All this can be read as a weakness of the media; it is

unstable and perishable. However this very perishability can be regarded as a strength too, for it describes the cultural context of living in the high-tech 20th century as well as the general transitory nature of all life.

In the relief work especially I sought to suggest an affinity with computer and video generated art. Virtual reality, holography, and electronic video proliferation are the image-making facilities of today; they distinguish our culture from any previous one. The idea of screens, pixelation, light coming through the surface from behind, the image existing only as a thin film of light, or as a computer-generated matrix of vertices, without substance, like a memory of the distant past, appealed to my sense of the content of the work. A variety of premanufactured cloths and meshes and bits of injection-molded plastic of every conceivable shape seemed perfectly suited to contrast ancient and modern cultures.

Since I had used transparent and reflective materials to forefront the technological aspects of modern culture, with its audiovisual electronics of all sorts, I wanted to use dramatic lighting to enhance the work, to make it look somewhat electronically generated. The work could be lit from behind, below, or even from inside to achieve extraordinary effects.

Stylistic Synthesis: Media and Message

In the treatment of the figures, there is some abstraction, some appropriation, and generally a synthesis of styles. Plastic is such a good imitator it has been used extensively to imitate almost everything. But since that is all done with molds and casts ad infinitum, I preferred to use a constructivist approach. In trying to achieve a unique treatment of the figure, one that I thought of as culturally psychoanalytic, I combined stylistic elements of figuration with abstraction. The figures were exaggerated to the point of caricature, the intended effect being to deheroicize but not to demyth, to parody slightly, to humanize the Greek pantheon.

I found that the media and procedure allowed for a synthesis of stylization I had heretofore never known. I could make reference not only classical and neoclassical artists from Phidias to Canova, but also to expressionism, modernism, and pop, especially pop. The work had elements of Christo, Warhol, Gabo, Duchamp, Picasso, the surrealists, Mies van der Rohe, Kienholz, Oldenburg, Snelson, Dine, Clyde Connell, in fact almost everyone. This perhaps should come as no surprise since the premise of the work was that everything is related.

If all cultures are related, then the history of their integrations reveals a collective subconscious informing

every civilization. I have been exploring a psychic link between contemporary and ancient cultures rather than making a strictly a cross-cultural analysis. The work provokes a discourse about culture largely by challenging aesthetic sensibilities.

By addressing in the same work both the affinities and disparities between cultures I have raised more questions than can be answered. Many of the questions provoked pertain to nature and technology: are they compatible? Does one outstrip the other? The work is not designed to answer but to pose; it is always subject to variable interpretation.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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