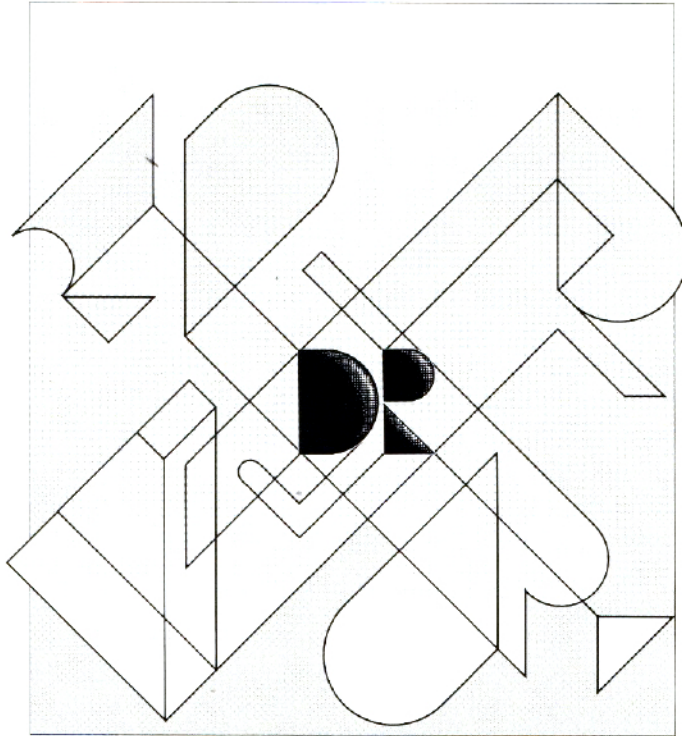


DIVERSE REPRESENTATIONS 1990



John Yau, Guest Curator

September 18 - November 18, 1990



THE MORRIS MUSEUM

John Yau, Guest Curator



In putting together a large exhibition, it is common for curators to isolate a particular feature or focus on similarities of subject, style, or medium. Exhibitions of this kind are categorical; they group works together under a single heading such as *Landscape*, *Minimalism*, or *Works on Paper*. At first, I thought I too would be categorical in my approach, and put together an exhibition of works by sculptors who had something in common, a shared sensibility, say, or a commitment to a particular subject or material. But having looked and written about art for more than a decade, I thought it might also be interesting (as well as frustrating) to try and do something else. Instead of relying on categories, I would attempt to put together a show of sculptures whose differences far outweigh their similarities. The reasons I have for trying this approach are simple enough. Firstly, during the past decade, no single style or ideal has dominated sculptural practices. In fact, one could say the opposite is true. Generations of sculptors are currently working in different mediums towards different ends. Secondly, in response to this diversity, I thought the exhibition should try to suggest the range of different means and attitudes going on within America's community of sculptors. Of course, to attempt to represent all the differences is to achieve the impossible. I have not put everything under one roof. I haven't even come close.

At the same time, I realize that grouping things according to categories can be useful in our attempt to make order out of the variousness of the world. Perhaps, the best response to this mode of thinking, this need to categorize, is to try and approach this exhibition from the inside, and develop categories based on the work that has been

selected. For all the obvious differences in mediums, subjects and approaches, I do see numerous connections and affinities the work shares, and believe it is possible to propose a number of categories which may be of use to the viewer.



(The Homemade)

The most inclusive category would be titled *The Homemade*. All of the work I have selected conveys the feeling of being homemade, which is to say the viewer senses the artist's direct engagement with his or her materials. It is what Ursula von Rydingsvard's *Zakopane*, 1987 (one of the two large scale works in the exhibition) and Mel Chin's *Rilke's Razor (Jung's Version)*, 1990, (the most intimate work included) have in common. By being homemade, rather than industrially fabricated, the sculptures in this exhibition are significantly different from much of the sculpture made during the 1960's and '70's, a period in which art making was dominated by two tendencies, industrial fabrication and the presentation of unaltered non-art materials. Exemplified by sculptors such as Donald Judd, the first tendency includes sculptors who eschewed expressive techniques in favor of geometry and industrial fabrication, while the second tendency is characterized by sculptors such as Dan Flavin, who blurred the boundary between art and non-art by presenting as art things (in Flavin's case, neon lights) that are virtually indistinguishable from their original identity.

I see "the homemade" as a particularly American trait; it suggests that anyone can make something particular if they want to. When visiting a museum, people who don't like art have often been heard to say "my kid could do that." What



these viewers don't understand is that the artist may be celebrating the very possibility that anyone can make art, that one need not have received the right fine arts education nor possess the financial resources to hire an industrial fabricator. There is something wonderfully democratic about these sculptors' use of materials (cedar wood, lemons, neon lights, steel barrels, ballerina slippers) and modes of working (welding, sawing, sewing, gluing, joining).



(The Figurative Impulse)

Although all the sculpture can be grouped under the category, *The Homemade*, it is immediately apparent to the viewer that very different means are being used to explore distinct subjects or areas of inquiry: Bill Barrette's use of photography; Ursula von Rydingsvard's knowledge of preindustrial architecture; Mel Edward's connections to Civil Rights and Afro-American history; Robert Therrien's playful regard towards modern sculpture; the provocative conjoining of different materials in the work of Jim Clark, Donald Lipski, and Judy Pfaff.

One of the ways to divide *The Homemade* into further categories is to isolate those sculptures which tend toward the figurative from those that seem more abstract or non-figurative. Among the works in which a sculptor investigates a figurative impulse are Bill Barrette's two box-like constructions, *Anonymous Couple No. 34*, 1989, and *Anonymous Couple with Doll No. 31*, 1989; Judy Fox's *Ancestor*, 1988, and *Mohammed*, 1988, Mel Chin's *Rilke's Razor (Jung's Version)*, 1990; Robert Therrien's nickel and bronze piece, *No Title*, 1990. Ranging from old photographs to a silhouette of

a figure cut out of a straight edge razor, from a "praying baby" (a conflation of both "innocence" and organized religion) to a "snowman" (one of our first attempts at sculpture), all of these works represent some aspect of how culture teaches us to know ourselves. By placing a "baby" in a position we associate with prayer, Fox is able to suggest the degree to which all behavior (both physical and spiritual) is learned.

Bill Barrette uses daguerreotypes, lens, and light to investigate the relationship of the self to history and anonymity. What, he seemed to be asking both himself and us, is the nature of identity? How does it prevent itself from being completely eroded by time? Robert Therrien's "snowman" echoes both the work of Constantin Brancusi — one of the Modernism's greatest sculptural innovators — and our own childhood attempt's at shaping the world around us. Finally, Mel Chin's "razor" both recalls and echoes Rainer Maria Rilke's admonition at the end of his poem, *Archaic Torso of Apollo*, "you must change your life." In one way or another, Rilke's challenge is taken up by all of these sculptors; they strive to discover evidence of the ways we can know something more about ourselves, which is very different than the way we are known. They are involved with process and discovery, rather than choosing to remain static and unquestioning.

IV

(The Functions of History)

What the "figurative" sculptures have in common with some of the other works in this exhibition is a speculative view of history, both as a personal continuum and a collective one. History is something we know and don't know. It is a constantly

changing confluence of enigmatic events, opposing views, and different interpretations. There are those, for example, who wish to overlook or forget what has happened, and those who would urge the rest of us to remember. Among other things, history could be said to be a struggle between the forces of remembering and the forces of forgetting.

Thomas Bang, Mel Edwards, Rona Pondick, and Ursula von Rydingsvard use imaginative acts (the making of sculpture) to speculate upon such areas of history as personal and collective memory. And in doing so, they make it as well as the larger cycles of time into vivid and substantial presences. Beyond evoking the atomic age, Afro-American history, childhood, and the absence of sustaining rituals, their work examines something basic to all of us; what is the relationship between human beings as shapers of their own destiny and human beings whose destinies are shaped by others. Their work is able to absorb our insistent need to read and comprehend the world we live in.

Thomas Bang is interested in the relationship between part and whole, that which contains and that which cannot be revealed. In *From Place to Place II*, 1988, Bang constructs a sculpture which embodies all the various states and vectors needed to complete an unnamed act; it is a non-functioning, self-contained "machine," a three dimensional diagram of all the "things" necessary to enact a specific ritual or function. And yet, however much the viewer examines *From Place to Place II*, it does not reveal the exact nature of the ritual or function it seems capable of performing, and thus questions our belief in empirical experience.

Mel Edwards' small wall sculptures are from his ongoing series, *Lynch Fragment*. Made out of African tools, sections of chain, hammers, tin cups (things that mark the passage from Africa to slavery), the *Lynch Fragment* series pays homage to Edwards' Afro-American ancestry as well as

serves as insistently physical metaphors of the ongoing struggle for civil rights for all people. It should also be pointed out that Edwards' sculptures are abstract and metaphorical, rather than literal and illustrative. Thus, within the terms his work proposes, history becomes a vivid ongoing presence, a struggle to elevate all our lives toward something more just.

Ursula von Rydingsvard works in cedar, a soft wood that comes in standardized sizes. Using such tools as a chisel and mallet, circular hand-held saw and circular grinder, she carves the wood into specific forms, which are then assembled and carved into again. In *Zakopane*, 1987, and *Confessor's Chair*, 1989, the viewer feels as if work has a function, that they were once used for something. In both sculptures, the repetition of forms echoes a nameless or absent ritual. Ritual is a form of order; it is one of the ways we structure our lives so as to give it meaning. Without ritual (or order), one endures the feeling of absence, of being anonymous and displaced.

In *Milkman*, 1989, and *Ballerina*, 1989, Rona Pondick conflates different "things" associated with stages in a woman's life (baby, girl, mother, lover) in ways that reveals how one's identity is constructed rather than natural. The sculptures suggest that society is something we must learn to accommodate in order to exist, and these accommodations are the basis of an individual's identity.

Thomas Bang, Mel Edwards, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Rona Pondick examine the relationship of the individual to society as well as history. They show us how we can become trapped in history without knowing it. And, in order not to repeat it all over again, we must learn the different effects history has on our daily life. Certainly, these four sculptors have something in common with the ones who investigate a figurative impulse, and resonant parallels can be drawn be-



tween Judy Fox's *Mohammed* and Pondick's *Ballerina*, say, Bill Barrette's *Anonymous Couples* and Mel Edward's *Lynch Fragments*, or Thomas Bang's *From Place to Place II* and Jim Clark's *Ankle Deep*. Although made out of different mediums, the works echo each other in some fundamental way. The viewer senses the artists striving toward meaning, trying to discover what remains hidden beneath the protective surfaces of our daily lives. And out of their striving, a distinct embodiment (or sculpture) emerges.

V

(The Nature of Making)

Among other things, the sculptures of Jim Clark, Donald Lipski, Judy Pfaff, and Al Taylor focus on a basic human impulse: The desire to make something out of the "things" one is surrounded by, to shape, influence, or understand the world one inhabits. This desire — it seems as old and mysterious as human history — is both examined and elaborated upon in ways that are witty, expressive, inventive, and playful.

In the sculptures of Jim Clark, Donald Lipski, and Judy Pfaff, the viewer encounters such unlikely combinations as red neon and twisted sheet metal, game pieces and metal carts, discs and brick motifs. Within each individual sculpture, the "things" echo each other, like dancers. The two red neon lights of Jim Clark's *Ankle Deep* are echoed by the twisted sheet metal ribbon supporting them, while, in Donald Lipski's *Schramm Cart*, 1988, the huge bag of game pieces nestles comfortably within the metal cart. The physical nature of one "thing" (the vivid red light's bodiless glowing) is echoed by the particularities of the other (the graceful rigidity of the twisted metal).

Although they come at it from very different points of view, both Judy Pfaff and Al Taylor make sculptures which enact a sense of movement through space. Pfaff's *Another Cinderella Project* seems to be a visual memory of the noise and sights of the city. There is a bright staccato rhythm to the work, the way our eyes jump from one element to another. Al Taylor, on the other hand, uses a more austere vocabulary of linear forms to construct pieces which seem to defy gravity while shaping the space around them. Describing a particular gesture or movement, his open forms are simultaneously containers of air and deflectors of light. In his work, shadows gain substance.

VI

There are many ways for the viewer to approach this exhibition. It is deliberately open-ended and makes no attempt to offer a final say on our comprehensive view of the kinds of sculpture being made today. History, as I mentioned earlier, is constantly changing. In different ways, these sculptors make important contributions to the changing nature of art making. Using their capacity to imagine, invent, discover, shape, and perceive (basic human activities), they make sculptures which provoke the viewer into further contemplating the world he or she inhabits, the things seen and not seen, remembered and forgotten. Their work returns us to a state of wonderment — a condition we often associate with childhood and that moment of when we are first surprised and delighted by the world around us. And out of that wondering (both the sculptors' and ours) comes the desire to know.



R O N A P O N D I C K

Born 1952, New York
Lives and works in New York

EDUCATION

MFA, Yale University, Connecticut
BFA, Queens College, New York

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1991 fiction/nonfiction, NYC (forthcoming/ April)
- 1990 Asher-Faure Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 1989 *Bed Milk Shoe*, fiction/nonfiction, NYC *
Hillman Holland Gallery, Atlanta, GA
- Currents*, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
- 1988 *Beds*, Sculpture Center, NYC *
fiction/nonfiction, NYC

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *Spellbound*, Marc Richards Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Fragments, Parts and Wholes: The Body and Culture,
White Columns, NYC
- 1989 *Lines of Vision: Drawings by Contemporary Women*,
Hillwood Art Gallery, CW Post Campus, Long Island
University, Brookville, NY and BlumHelman Gallery, NYC *
- 1989 *Summer Group Exhibition*, Asher-Faure Gallery, Los
Angeles, CA
Invitational with Gallery Artists, fiction/nonfiction, NYC
Invitational, Doug Milford Gallery, NYC
Erotophobia: A Forum in Contemporary Sexuality, Simon
Watson Gallery, NYC

AWARDS/GRANTS

- 1988 Art Matters Inc.
New York State Council on the Arts
Artists Space
- 1985 Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation
- 1977 Fannie B. Pardee Prize in Sculpture

* includes catalogue

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Milkman, 1989
Mixed Media
18½ × 34 × 22½
Courtesy, Ruth and Jacob Bloom

R O N A P O N D I C K



Ballerina, 1989
Mixed Media
9½ × 8 × 3½
Courtesy, fiction/nonfiction, NYC

Mine, 1987
Mixed Media
42 × 24 × 24
Courtesy, fiction/nonfiction and
Jose Freire, NYC

R O N A P O N D I C K



M.B.P.

