



S T I L L

Recent Ceramic Sculptures by Susan Low-Beer

D A N C E S

PLURAL VISION

W
within

the stillness of this space, there are so many presences.

So many images shifting,

rotating around the body. They recur like habitual traits, recycled and familiar.

Yet they are fixed, immutable.

What is behind these appearances, this multiple vision?

Is it possible that there is no unity?

This exhibition of Susan Low-Beer comprises nine sculptures, representing her most recent work. It distinguishes an eclectic vision, an idiosyncratic synthesis formed by more than 20 years of exploration with painted imagery and clay. Together these works extol the act of *image-making*.

The choreography of this figurative sculpture is arresting. We are drawn into a space where we cannot rest, where there is no clear boundary between the visual and the physical, between substance and illusion. Surrounded by many images we enter an open centre, filling it with our comprehension of what is here. It is as if we are onstage, the subject of this drama. We cannot exit from the dramatic stasis and anonymity of these figures, their silent presence. Images press in on us. Our eyes and bodies become aware of what exists at the

periphery. It is difficult to summarize this event: there is no clear, identifiable centre of interest. As if in a hall of mirrors, we experience simultaneous shifts of identity. It is a restless place. Boundaries of verisimilitude are always shifting. There is no harmonious image, but a visible world that is multiple and changing. What we encounter are the glances and gestures of others. We witness and are, in turn, surveyed by looks of suspicion, embarrassment, anguish, seduction, menace, aloofness. We have been initiated into a spectacle of manners and mannerisms, into a lexicon of postures adopted for others, into the aesthetic construction of the social self. It is this social self which is mirrored back.¹

This art reflects a “totemistic interpretation”² of the world: one that demonstrates relationships, forges connecting links between

images, but does not denote meaning. Fragments, glimpses of human expression are assembled. Each body becomes a site where many postures and perspectives gather. Tiers of images become the body's image. Each figure construction has its own emotional vantage point, yet without a hierarchy or

unified subject. There is no trajectory toward an absolute individual image; rather each body is a plural instance. Layer by layer, gesture by gesture, we are invited to construct an understanding, to find the correspondences, to join the different stories.

These glimpses of human life are drawn from contemporary and historical sources. There is an accumulation of different fragments piled one on top of another where an archaeology of the present is displayed with the past that produced it. Excerpts from a quotidian language are bonded together with selected moments of historical figuration – Cycladic nude, medieval nun, madonna and child. Together they evoke an experience of memory, of being woman. Simultaneously,



STILL DANCES IX (detail)

1991

clay, encaustic, metal base

168 x 28 x 46 cm

they address the particular and the universal, the generic and the symbolic, the intimate and the detached.

Low-Beer functions as a novelist, an image collector, or an observer of life. She takes stock of what she sees and then assembles these moments of expressive human life

into visible fictions. She plays with these moments. Her images, which are originally two-dimensional (gathered from newspapers, photographs, and postcards), are cut out and collaged together. Then, as each composition comes to occupy three dimensions she opens it up, expands it, and gives it expressive (perhaps even theatrical) presence in clay.

While her formal training is as a painter, Low-Beer was, in the early stage of her artistic development, drawn to clay. She exploits the tension between these two modes of expression, allowing them to play off each other. With its tremendous plasticity and tactile quality, clay is an ideal medium for figurative modelling. Well-suited for direct, rapid handling of gesture and expression, clay records it all. Sim-

ilarly, encaustic (an ancient technique of suspending pigment in beeswax) fulfilled her search for a means to render a surface without the unpredictability associated with fired glaze.

Ultimately, what is most compelling about Low-Beer's works is that they have captured

the directness of perception. That they do so convincingly reflects a keen instinct for the telling gesture and a receptivity to significant moments. There is an inescapable realness to these moments. They seize us.

*And sometimes she was exalted,
And sometimes she was supplicant, pious,
And sometimes she was a portal to death, immortality,
And sometimes with abandon, she cast her body to the world,
Yet often, in her encounters with others, she protected herself
from becoming
Other.*

Anne West

1 JOHN O'NEILL. *Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 23.

2 J. E. CIRLOT. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Trans. By Jack Sage. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962, p. XIV.

The Craft Gallery

Ontario Crafts Council

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