

MATTHEW MONAHAN

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IMAGES COURTESY OF: ANTON KERN GALLERY

As in the imaginary world of animation, where inorganic objects vividly come to life at the hands of their author, Matthew Monahan's figurative sculptures pulsate with a spirit and history from the very moment they emerge into being. Working in his Los Angeles studio, Monahan constructs a host of tragic characters that have seemingly entered into this world only to be subjected to uncertain and dramatic predicaments. A range of materials—from treated paper and wax to floral foam, wood, and drywall—form a cacophony of dismembered torsos, heads, and limbless bodies. They are crammed onto deficient pedestals, trapped in between sheets of glass, and sprung from decrepit cardboard boxes only to face the limitations of their own circumstances.

In the course of his career, Monahan has resisted being pigeonholed into a particular school of thought or creative movement. In an artist statement from 2005, he firmly explained: "The work is not a postmodern selection of references to be decoded, but a bodily expulsion of influence and impulse performed in the act of making. Art history and private history are simultaneous, in the movement of my hands... a cycle of making, breaking and fixing." As such, viewers are left to rely on their own devices to develop the narrative and context for his sculptures. This approach, as well as his choice of faux materials and active use of pedestals, drives one to engage with the works, rather than merely observe them as isolated aesthetic entities.

Born in 1972, in Eureka, CA, Monahan completed a BFA at New York's Cooper Union in 1994, and the equivalent of an MFA at de Ateliers in Amsterdam in 1996. He ultimately entered into public consciousness following his 2005 exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery in New York. Heralded as an excavation of his studio, the show's works constituted a thoughtful collection of ideas and materials from the preceding ten years.

The exhibition was dominated by charcoal drawings that Monahan created in the mid 90's, later adopted as the foundation for his sculptural figures. Works such as "Whispered Agreement" (1994/2005) and "Said the Joker to the Thief" (1994/2005) were constructed merely of a charcoal portrait coerced into dimensionality and mounted atop a disproportionate column. The drawings cover the page from edge to edge, with the portraits' "skin" functioning as both the basis for the human facial features and an abstract background for the drawing itself. Monahan poetically described this act of recycling past works as a method that allows these components to ripen and individuate prior to entering the sculptural community he has meticulously nurtured. Thus, by the time the characters materialize and "mature," they are old souls in refurbished bodies

Although Monahan's figures directly reference the human body, their form is conjured solely from his imagination. He adamantly contends that he does not permit himself the use of source materials such as photographs, mannequins, or models, a fact that lends to the characters' mystique. He begins constructing a figure from the tip of its nose and works his way through the rest of its face and body, carving and manipulating his material of choice. The further he relinquishes control to the rhythm of his process, the more one senses the figure literally emerging from a solid block to claim its liveliness.

This self-reliant process epitomizes Monahan's creative approach, which maintains that a purely original and subjective image, rather than that of a recycled icon, should dictate the structure of the work.¹ While many of Monahan's figures frequently reference traditional sources such as ancient and Far Eastern cultures, the new context he constructs requires their reinterpretation. Rather than revitalizing a canonical representation, he wishes to generate a wholly unique character devoid of a fixed association and narrative. Borne of a visceral and uninhibited process, the figures thus resist classification.

Also essential to Monahan's works are the bases upon which the sculptures stand. Since his 2005 exhibition, he has consistently placed the figures upon or within a museological structure of display such as a pedestal, shelf, or vitrine. Within these confines, they have been subjected to an array of precarious arrangements and consequently appear perpetually unstable. These encasements define the limits of the figures' fictitious universe—controlling and containing, as well as alienating them from both one another and the viewers. As critic Peter Eleey eloquently observed: "This is sculpture tortured by its own support."²

While Monahan's 2007 solo exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles included works similar to those on view in the 2005 show, his fall 2008 exhibition at Anton Kern Gallery clearly demonstrated a maturation of his practice. In these works, the iconic charcoal portraits no longer serve as the defining element of the figures, but rather almost as an afterthought. This transformation is apparent in "Scale of Orange" (2008), in which the drawing rests along the edge of a glass shelf, while a cryptic narrative transpires between a horizontal golden bust, a truncated figure, and a seemingly heroic, yet headless small character.

Monahan's new works present several significant developments in their composition, materiality, and form. His foremost achievement lies in the sculptures' ability to elicit a sense of looming tragedy through their complex narratives, most notably in "Gone to See the River, Man" (2008), where a figure hangs perilously from the edge of a rock formation in the upper corner of a glass case. Now mostly constructed of tenuous floral foam, the surface of the figures also reflects much of the "trauma" to which they were subjected in the course of production. The restricting foundation of each work has taken on an even more pivotal role in the overall composition, and as a result, dictates and contextualizes the figures' predicaments. In two recent works on display at the 55th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, "Youth Fenced In" (2008) and "Phantom Limb" (2008), Monahan has further developed methods by which to define the characters' boundaries. Here, he has trapped oversized statuette figures in a tangle of tight-knit straps, making them appear evermore constricted.

Despite their dramatic assemblages, there is an expression of stoicism intrinsic to many of the new sculptures, similar to that observed in ancient Greek statues and Buddha figurines. In fact, many of the forms appear to directly reference elements of classicist and Buddhist cultures: the aforementioned headless faux-marble figure in "Scale of Orange" stands tall above a toppled

Buddha torso, a classicist male portrait with a wreath in his hair is traced onto a rock formation in "Rescue of the Rock" (2008), and a truncated figurative column in "Dear Mineral" (2008) elegantly floats between two sheets of glass. Each of these figures offers the impression of fallen heroes who have been deemed irrelevant. Yet, however anguished, tortured, or severely compromised they appear, they have managed to preserve some of their ancient majesty, as evident in their composed expression.

With the foam sculptures conspicuously missing their heads and several limbs, the charcoal drawings crumpled and smeared, and the pedestals marred, Monahan proposes an alternative to traditional notions of sculpture. He has often been placed within the context of artists who utilize ephemeral materials to create monumental sculptures. The most obvious correlation was made in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, the inaugural exhibition at the New Museum's Bowery building. Although the other works in the show appeared similar to Monahan's sculptures in method, his works stood out amongst the plethora of abstract objects due to their figurative and narrative nature.

They did, however, fit within the context of subverted monuments; like many of the participating artists in *Unmonumental*, Monahan utilizes scale to evoke grandeur, yet undermines his own attempt with the use of unsound materials and compromised compositions. This is best embodied in "Blindness is Believing" (2005), an eight-foot hybrid character of a wandering shepherd and injured soldier. What appears as a substantial metal shield garment is, in fact, only treated paper, which therefore counters the heroic perception one may have initially procured from its large size and alleged materiality.

A common thread throughout Monahan's practice is a dual reference to spirituality that is applied to both his work method and his ultimate product. In a recent interview, he encapsulated these two spiritual manifestations that emerge

during his process: "There are moments when the face really comes alive and the body seems to twist of its own volition... but I seem to go out of my way to ruin it, to push the gaze back inward and paralyze the body as if caught in the rigidity of a trance."³ The act of creation appears to be a subliminal experience for Monahan, one that is virtually detached from reality itself as it evolves and morphs into an independent form with physical attributes and unique story. The resulting characters appear as if borne of an intensely private experience that, like an inside joke, is evident only to them and their maker. Furthermore, Monahan often refers to his figures as totemic objects, which are believed to house spirits and special powers.

Monahan's sculptures serve as a testimony to both his personal history and that of culture at large. Numerous references come to light in a single work—one can detect where he has traveled, what he has been taught, and which general spiritual beliefs and influences he has adopted along the way. With their complex identities, as well as far-from-pristine surfaces and unstable grounds, his sculptures pertinently capture a form and spirit more akin to humanity and its inherent flaws.

¹From a video interview with Monahan on the Carnegie International 2008 website: <http://blog.cmoa.org/CIO8/2008/02/matthew-monahan.php>

²Peter Eleey, "Matthew Monahan," *Friend Magazine*, Issue 94 (October 2005) 414.

³From an interview with Monahan conducted by Maurizio Cattelan: "I was a God Adorned with Gold," *Flash Art International*, Issue 259 (March-April 2008) 103

OPPOSITE

"Rescue of the Rock," 2008
Glass, foam, ratchet, metal, strap, wax, wire, drywall
41" x 26.5" x 16.5"

RIGHT

"Deep Uids (Mask)," 2008
Pigment on paper
23.5" x 16.25" x 7"

