

FIGURATIVE FOAM SCULPTURE:

A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Janice Flood Turner

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis presents twenty sculptures which document two years of this artist's explorations into a contemporary industrial material - foam rubber. Though previously used in non-figurative contemporary sculpture, foam rubber is in this case adapted into a unique new medium. In combination with panty-hose stockings, the foam, without compromising its soft flexible nature, has been used figuratively. The sculptures, distortions of human forms, grow naturally out of the pliable fleshlike materials. The foam is made to conform to appendage and torso-like forms as it yields to the elastic forces of the woven leg-shaped stocking. Through the adaptation of this principle a variety of forms is achieved. The compressible nature of the foam is further exploited through the use of tourniquet-like objects and restrictive containers which are incorporated into many of the works. The sculptures are represented for future reference in a document which includes a twenty-minute video-tape of the exhibition of the twenty works, slides, a three-dimensional example of the work and written explanatory notes.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis presents twenty sculptures. They are documented through slides and a video-tape produced by the artist with some technical assistance. These two visual records were employed in order to communicate more aspects of the work. A work executed in a style similar to the exhibited sculptures is included as documentation. It permits the reader to come into closer contact with the subject of the thesis. It is constructed so as to form a package for the other documentary materials.

The following written discussion provides further information about the evolution of the sculpture - its methods, its materials and its meaning. The artist's experience of making these works was predominantly visceral, visual, intuitive, and decidedly non-literal and non-verbal. Although the 'Gestalt' is intellectually inaccessible, other people's observations and experience of the works has helped me to bring to conscious awareness other dimensions of the work.

The knowledge presented in these works is the non-verbal knowledge of the maker who through an understanding of his tools and materials brings forth a creation in harmony with his soul.

I. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The works presented for this thesis and represented in this document by slides and video-tape were, with one exception, executed in foam rubber and panty-hose. Human distortions result from the compressing, restricting and squeezing of the foam within the elastic boundaries of the stocking. Some pieces were further deformed through pressure from sheet glass, plexiglas tubes, or boxes and a variety of harnesses and trusses, including assorted pieces of underwear. The distorted, humanoid forms are reinforced in both a visual and tactile manner by the soft fleshiness of the materials, producing images which are at times sensuous, at other times humorous and grotesque.

The content of the sculptures developed logically from the characteristics of the material, as did the method. Both content and method of sculpturing are direct and simple, spontaneous and free and as uncontrived as possible. Many pieces were executed in rapid succession, as one might approach sketching. The better experiments were selected as finished works. This approach allowed many more experiments per unit time than is usually allowed in traditional sculptural explorations. Though ideas and drawings motivated some pieces, the resulting sculpture rarely bore any resemblance in actual form

to the original idea but was generated in a non-literal and non-intellectual way from a preoccupation with the materials, problems of realization and the aesthetics of these forms. However, a good image in foam and panty-hose was often consciously reinforced and strengthened through the use of an appropriate 'environment'.

The choice of these particular materials for use as a sculpturing medium, came as a result of actually combining them in the course of experimentation with various materials. Once the potential of the material was realized it became a matter of exploring and expanding the medium, controlling and refining it, while retaining its freshness and variety.

About halfway through the explorations, the introduction of color added variety and increased vitality. The initial pieces recalled the appearance of normal flesh tones but through a fuller range of color including reds, browns, greys, blues, etc., the body forms assumed new emotive, associative, visceral and visual value. Tonal qualities became important in modulating the form. The color intensity varied with the concentration of the weave of the stocking over the surface of the forms. Transparency of the stockings allowed color mixing which was further intensified by the application, in some cases, of liquid resins.

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II. MEANING

If the content of the work is allowed to emerge spontaneously from the materials described, that is, if the materials undergo a minimum of alteration, the figure is the most obvious image to explore. The figure can be distorted easily in these materials to achieve a grotesque image. This discovery became a means of extending the grotesque imagery which I had been developing previously in fiberglass and polyester resin. The grotesque, as expressed in these works, is vague and unspecific. The viewer is not really sure that the disturbing image he sees is that 'intended' by the artist, that which he is 'supposed' to see. Detail is absent. The forms are generalized and allow varied visual interpretations.

This presentation of the grotesque is quite unlike the work of realists like Mark Prent and Ed Keinholtz whose impact of horror, relies for its effect on the inclusion of every detail and on its perfect technical rendering. The threat to the viewer of the soft foam sculptures is contained in what is missing in each piece rather than in what is supplied. The grotesque, here, is distinct from the grotesque in the works of Prent and Keinholtz. These are bloodless. These are complete bodies. No piece has been cut off. They are deformities which relate to every kind of human aberration, every

sad thing that ever came klunking out and was allowed to grow. On that level, they most certainly must relate to my experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and child's early infancy, all of which transpired while these works were in the making.

In this comparison, the grotesque has two different functions in art. The work of Keinholtz and Prent evokes a similar response. Theirs is an expression of outrage at man's inhumanity to man. It is social art calling for man to move to action, to abandon blindness and insensitivity, to do something about a deplorable situation.

On the other hand, the foam effigies comment on the human condition - on nature gone awry. Though man has attempted to release himself from the hand of nature through the security of modern technology and the myth of the scientific method, nature continues to remain in control. Man is in his own ignorant hands. He is in a power struggle with nature. He continues to accept this technology which inhibits the workings of nature in ways which he does not understand. He blindly deforms himself at his own hands. He becomes a sculptor of flesh through his lack of respect for the laws of nature. Through his technology, he transforms everything - even his own image. Believing he controls nature, Man is vulnerable to the powers, knowledge, and experience which are ultimately hers.

These sculptures ask us to relate morally to the suffering of these deformities and to reconsider our relationship to nature. This is a choice we are still able to make. As we continue to force our bodies to accept drugs, food, and chemicals about which we have inadequate knowledge the future is not difficult to anticipate. Perhaps these works deal more with man's self-destructive impulses, that is man's inhumanity to himself. As he comes to depend more on the technology for his survival and less on his own resources, he relinquishes responsibility for himself and future generations of his species and becomes more vulnerable to the decisions of the Machine.

Aesthetically, the viewer must transcend the feeling of being disturbed before he can appreciate the beauty of the forms which combine to present an image of ugliness. The grotesque has always emerged in art in times of social upheaval. Violence in art becomes a way through the prevalent apathy, a way of affecting people who can no longer be affected, who can no longer respond and no longer act, who are confronted with their impotence on a continuing basis. These works are headless truncated torsos, a recurring theme throughout the history of sculpture. However, the missing parts point to the deformity of the parts that are present. Although the forms are often very classical or simply present a classical

image or form in a different way, they are obviously not just studies in the torso, not just a way of concentrating on a certain aspect of the figure.

CONCLUSION

This series of experiments produced honest and fundamental changes in my ideas and attitudes about my work and about sculpture generally. Although most of my aesthetic discoveries are not new to the art world, they were all 'first-hand' experiences for me. Believing that an artist must draw on his own very personal inspirations, I made no attempt to jump onto a contemporary bandwagon but found my hands full of the materials of our daily living which seemed naturally to produce works with significance for modern man.

Arriving at an appreciation of the aesthetics of these works' vulnerability and respecting 'the purity and spontaneity of the medium, I was able to transcend previous needs for permanance in the making of my sculptures. The objects, soft and no less vulnerable than people, seemed protected by their very vulnerability. Their durability became of little consequence. The aesthetic experience is no less intense for that which has a limited lifespan.

Having worked, prior to this series, with forms which drew much of their grotesque qualities from a rough and irregular surface it was revealing to be able to develop grotesqueness in smooth forms.

Although the technical execution of the work was generally consistent with the smooth forms, the value of attaining

the perfection of manufacturing standards gave way to an appreciation of the 'ends' of the stockings and other irregularities which retained spontaneity and humanity in the work.

At the same time, however, where I would previously have rejected the use of manufactured items in a work, I happily incorporated them in a meaningful way. Simultaneously, I accepted that the amount of time and work spent in making an object bears no relation to its aesthetic value. In the circumstance of the facility with which I was able to work the medium, part of the challenge was to keep the exploration from getting 'gimmicky' or boring.

The relationship of the base to the work gradually developed until the support became incorporated into the work creating only one object. In relating the supports to the quality of the material, its softness and lightness, the word 'base' became obsolete. 'Environments' will likely proceed naturally out of this fact, that is, the isolated art object becomes supported in a context which can be infinitely exploited and embellished. It is here that I expect to continue my research. Perhaps the word 'sculpture' will become obsolete for me as well.

MONTREAL STAR, March 2, 1974

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OBJECTS AND REFLECTIONS

Henry Lehmann

Exhibition: Janice Flood Turner at Gallery 1.
Sir George Williams University

ANTHROPOMORPHIC SHAPES, strange torso-like volumes, truncated corpses these are the images which confront the viewer upon entering the Gallery 1 at Sir George Williams University. On closer observation, each of these pieces of sculpture by Janice Flood-Turner manifests its own identity. Made from slices of foam rubber folded back upon themselves. Turner's pieces avoid the cruel hardness of Mark Prent's sculptures which these works otherwise recall.

She imprisons her objects, but her shackles are not the ugly tools of law and order. Some of the pieces consist of foam squeezed into glass cylinders and cases reminiscent of test tubes and museum display boxes. Others are hung from the ceiling and tightly bound at various junctures by things that one would expect to find in the bedroom of any young conventional mother: garter belts, diapers, bras and panty hose to name a few. Disguised as female ornament and accoutrement, these things become tourniquets which distort the natural, fleshy curved shapes of the foam effigies.

These sculptures evoke our modern technologies which force people into rigid moulds. Before we know it, metal handcuffs are replaced by Muzak, soft colour coordinated chairs, and a water cooler at every desk. We are compelled to question the meaning of our personal choices. Are they not often self imposed restrictions which bring us into yet greater conformity with the so called "norms" of society?

The soft material is constricted and bound. But no human cry of agony is heard, for the effigies are faceless. Only the dumb contours squirm. Like a mushroom, cruelly misshapen in its effort to push through a sidewalk, these forms blindly and instinctually surge against their artificial boundaries, which they themselves mindlessly embraced in the first place.

In terms of sculptural language, these works are not entirely original, but Janice Flood-Turner succeeds in expressing in a personal and powerful way the sadness of these conformist times.