

October 2002

Kenny Hunter @ Conner Contemporary Art

The exhibition "Chase the Devil," the first in the United States for Scottish sculptor Kenny Hunter, included seven sculptures and two silk-screen prints. In contrast to the prints, both 2000, which contain manipulated photographic imagery and textual overlays, the sculptures look traditional, even conservative. Informed by the classical tradition of public monuments, they rely on figuration, tend toward the monochromatic, and make use of allegory. In this they are closer to the three bronze figures Frederick Hart added to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial than to Maya Lin's original formalist conception of the monument. However, unlike many artists working in a revivalist tradition, Hunter is not antimodernist. Nor does he reject avant-garde formal innovations out-of-hand, as his prints make clear. Rather than simply update traditional figural forms with contemporary clothes, he reconceives them, subtly manipulating surface, scale, color, and pose to impart a critical edge to his work.

*Bonne Année Monsieur Baudrillard*, 2002, is a lead-gray bronze featuring a striding cupid atop a skull that, in turn, rests on a clock face with numbers running counterclockwise. The title invokes Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulation, while the clock face contradicts the notion that history moves inexorably forward. Such heavy-handed polemics are undercut by the work's height (only eleven and a half inches) and the surface, sanded to generalize details, making the piece resemble a mass-produced toy spun-off from a Disney movie. The sculpture's allegorical content appears in the context of contemporary consumer society's relentless trivialization of everything in the name of profit. A related theme surfaces in *What is History?*, 1998, which consists of two busts intended as bookends. In the gallery they supported volumes like *Conspirator* and *The Worlds of the Early Greek Philosophers*. Since the busts were of Monica Lewinsky and Osama bin Laden, however, our sense of what counts for historical perspective was thrown into relief.

Made well before September 11, *What is History?* was not the only sculpture to seem eerily prescient. *Time and Space Died Yesterday*, 2000, is a small piece featuring an airplane crashing into a wall in a burst of Pop-art flames. Likewise *Citizen Firefighter*, 2001, at eighty-four inches high, the largest work in the exhibition. An earlier version was unveiled in June 2001 by Glasgow's Strathclyde Fire Brigade to honor Scottish firefighters; it later became an overnight tribute to rescuers who responded to the attacks at the Pentagon and World Trade towers when, in a show of sympathy, Glasgow citizens placed flowers on its base.

Patriotism aside, Hunter's work creates a sense of unease. In the gallery, the sculpture was set directly on the floor, sharing the viewer's space. But the statue, painted completely black and dressed in full fire-fighting equipment, including face shield and respirator, loomed over the viewer as an inscrutable presence, part hero and part action figure. If not exactly menacing, the piece was not warm and fuzzy either. It is this sense of ambivalence that makes Hunter's works so interesting. His instinctive resistance to platitudes of all kinds, from blind patriotism to the reassuringly simplistic view of the world that fundamentalism offers, flies in the face of certainties we so desperately seek.

-- Howard Risatti