

# Sculpture

October 2002

Kenny Hunter @ Conner Contemporary Art

Like all good monuments and civic statuary, Kenny Hunter's memorial sculpture gets us thinking about time. We've become so jaded with the neoclassical conventions of the equestrian statue and the portrait bust that these effigies hold little relevance or meaning. Hunter's mix of gravitas and humor is the perfect antidote.

Hunter has an uncanny way of fusing a Pop sensibility with a formal reverence for previous periods in the history of sculpture. Verging on catchy eye-candy, his works wage a disarmingly subversive campaign against blindly accepting the veneration of individuals and empires in the guise of the traditional monument. He replaces easy notions of a clear definition and permanence with the certainty of doubt. His predilection for casting in glass-reinforced plastic (GRP) further complicates his approach. Like marble, plastic possesses longevity, but it is environmentally unfriendly and bears distinctly contemporary, commercial associations. At the same time, GRP can simulate marble's polish. The work's matte finish tempers any overly precious quality, and the material's versatility allows for variations in line, ranging from stiff to splashy.

*Chase the Devil* glorifies everyday leisure. The pale-blue cast depicts a young woman in sweats and headphones reclining on a plinth. A far cry from the sexiness or the spirituality of a Buddha, she nonetheless underscores the value of introspection in our fast-paced world. The somber gray *Bonne Année Monsieur Baudrillard* interprets the language of a *vanitas* still life. Drawing on Roman sarcophagi, medieval tombs, and Renaissance emblem books, Hunter stacks a skull and a cherub on top of a sundial, heralding the passage of time. A closer look reveals that the numbers are placed counter-clockwise in keeping with Baudrillard's concept of time and culture moving in reverse.

Time and history assume an eerie prescience in three works made prior to September 11, 2001. *Citizen Firefighter* is based on the statue commissioned by Strathclyde Fire Brigade in Glasgow and dedicated in June 2001. The imposing dark figure, entirely hidden by gear, helmet, and mask, recalls the unassuming yet attentive stance of Michelangelo's *David*. Paradoxically, it is here that the artist's love for plastic toys fully emerges. To balance the seamless, virtual appearance of a transformer warrior or a Bart Simpson doll, Hunter has carefully controlled the detail, meticulously carving, sanding, and painting the surface the color of soot, with traces of red paint and brushstrokes indicating his hand. Instead of being dedicated to a specific firefighter, the anonymous figure honors the ideals of service and citizenship, including the moral responsibility of the individual to protect the aggregate.

*What is History?* (1998) wittily upends our ideas of memorializing good deeds by featuring portrait busts of Osama Bin Laden and Monica Lewinsky as bookends. (Four years ago, these totally unrelated, notorious individuals appeared spontaneously in the media.) The publications in between, specifically chosen for this installation, addressed passion, history, and time, ranging from Freud's *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* and Manuel de Landa's *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* to a newspaper covering Chandra Levy whose fold boldly reads "Bombshell." The most Pop-looking of all the works, *Time and Space Died Yesterday* (2000) shows a toy-like jet crashing into the wall with a convincing three-dimensional rendition of gas fumes. Inspired by Futurism and the Paris Concorde crash, Hunter intended the piece to mark the breaking through of a time barrier at the millennium and to warn against the happiness promised by technology and material possessions. Since 9/11, however, the work carries a decidedly chilling message of violence and uncertainty.

Two works bear a direct connection to religion. *Head of Christ* is taken from Hunter's best-known work, *Man Walks Among Us*, a striding statue commissioned by the Glasgow City Council. To portray one of the most famous figures in Western art and a divine figure at that, Hunter traveled to the Holy Land and retraced the life of Christ. He eschewed blonde and fair-skinned attributes, opting instead for butterscotch flesh and brown hair. But the real magic lies in the expression, which gives the impression of an ordinary man possessed of great intelligence and feeling. By contrast, *Calf*, a gold-leaf figure on a green oval, appears void of any expression. The sculpture's objectified and kitschy quality borders on the endearing stupidity of Jeff Koon's work, but it is rescued by its metaphorical potential. Beyond the obvious allusion to idolatry and temptation, it speaks of our alienation from nature and addresses the idea of sacrifice.

Like Washington, DC, Hunter's hometown of Edinburgh is filled with monuments. Given his interest in civic memorials, it seems fitting that he made his American debut here. At their best, his offerings encourage questions rather than offer answers, fulfilling his suggestion that "in a world of different values, these might be the monuments."

-- Sarah Tanguy