

EAST CITY ART



Cameron Stalheim's Sculpture Swims into Academy 2014

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BY ERIC HOPE



and then I saw Colby on the Street and my fantasy died (2014) Colby Keller, www.kickstarter.com, Donors, Plastic, Foam, Steel, Acrylic Photo courtesy of the artist.

Literally a fish out of water, the cast form undulates twenty feet across the gallery floor. The sculpted torso of a man seemingly asleep morphs into the form of a sinewy sea serpent whose muscular tail rises to propel its fins forward. A “merman” isn’t something you expect to see washed up on a gallery floor, but at CONNERSMITH’s *Academy 2014*, Cameron Stalheim’s fantastical creature takes center stage. Yet for all its beauty, something feels amiss; there’s magic in the air, but also a feeling of trepidation. The work’s title, *and then I saw Colby on the Street and my fantasy died*, gives weight to the sense of loss hanging in the air. Intrigued by this interplay between sensual fantasy and palpable angst, I recently spoke with the 2014 MICA graduate to further define the point where reality upends into fiction.

And then I saw Colby.... is not Stalheim’s first foray into the world of magic. A quick overview of his website finds a cast of fantastical characters ranging from literal, solid forms (unicorns, biomorphic botanicals) to edgy, skeletal hybrids that weld man to machine in a nod to science fiction. The materials are as disparate as those forms,

ranging from traditional mediums such as bronze all the way through to the latest in high-tech plastics and resins. For Stalheim, figuring out how to manipulate the properties of his chosen tools is part of the excitement and bridges both his adolescent passions and maturing artistic ideologies. The artist grew up in a creative household in South Dakota (his mother was an art teacher) and dreamed of a Hollywood career designing special effects makeup. As with many childhood dreams, life took a turn and he found himself immersed in the University of South Dakota's theater department designing make-up for stage productions. An art class introduced him to sculpture and the stage was set; "the physicality of using my hands," ignited a sense of wonderment and shifted his focus from the stage to the studio.



Currents (2013) Aqua Resin, Urethane Resin, Steel, Wood, Acrylic Photo courtesy of the artist.

Transformation is a reoccurring theme for Stalheim that manifests itself in a variety of contexts. On a physical level, the artist is inspired by the notion that manipulating mediums between their solid and liquid states is in fact a way to manipulate the very reality of nature. This can be as simple as creating a wax cast he fills with liquefied bronze (itself a centuries-old technique) or as complex as changing plastic from a solid state to liquid slurry and back to a sculptural form. *Currents* (2013) for example, with its blending of different resins, displays the ways in which modern materials can be morphed into sculptural forms their inventors wouldn't have dreamed possible. Stalheim relishes pushing the seeming boundaries of materials and likens this act to, "giv[ing] them a greater life force." Scientific research into the physical properties

consumes a large part of his pre-sculpture planning.

This notion of scientific study feels at odds with the fantastical creatures that are the end result; there's a sense of left-brain/right-brain entanglement taking place. The intense give and take between the rational and the fantastical gives rise to a second, more emotional sense of thematic transformation. For Stalheim, the concept of the piece supersedes the materials used to create it, and those concepts blur the line between fantasy and reality. He sums it up concisely in his artist statement, short enough for me to quote verbatim: "I am interested in fantasy, reality and the objectification that happens in between."



Severed (2010) Bronze, Aluminum Photo courtesy of the artist.

Stalheim is forthright in describing how his emotional world is in a constant state of flux: "I live in a world of both the now and [a] fantasy world of what I think in. In some ways it is more real to me than reality sometimes." Far from unbalanced, this actually describes an emotional state many of us at times can relate to if we're honest, calling into question our relationship to one another and the wider universe in which we navigate. I get the sense he views the world in the form of a venn diagram, and where those two spheres overlap is perhaps a point of potential clarity.

Examined in this context, his works begin to take on an emotional poignancy that belies their fantastical appearance. Undertones of potential angst rise to the fore in pieces like *Severed* (2010), where the unicorn's serene facial expression belies the grotesque physical details of its decapitation. *Split* (2009) creates the same unease metaphorically, with two humanoid forms intimately connected yet forever at odds. And I wonder, is the woman in *Currents* experiencing a state of rapture or panic?

Stalheim acknowledges there is an element of pain involved, but that sense of discomfort is a critical element of introspection. “Without experiencing rejection, pain and vulnerability, you can never experience love and joy,” he tells me, concluding, “a lot of my artwork wants to try and cross a line between the two.”

Confronting these swirling emotions head-on sometimes requires complex coping mechanisms. One method that resonates with the artist is the way in which we objectify the appearance or actions of others, as if quantifying their presence makes our own vulnerabilities less palpable. While a common emotional tool, it doesn't necessarily solve the issues it seeks to address. This realization forms the basis for *and then I saw Colby.....*, a piece which marks, if not a full-fledged turning point, a supremely profound moment of clarity in how the process of objectification impacts the way we interact with others.



Split (2009) Steel, Chain, Gypsum, Bones, Latex Photo courtesy of the artist.

Like many of his peers in the so-called Millennial Generation, Stalheim's social networks expand deeply into the digital realm. It is here, on a social networking site geared towards gay and bisexual men that the artist had a chance conversation with an attractive stranger. Their flirtatious conversation steered towards their common affinities in the visual arts and Stalheim casually suggested the man should pose as a

sculptural model sometime. Imagine the artist's surprise a few weeks later, when he glimpsed this same stranger on a pornographic website; yes, his chat mate is indeed a pornstar. In a freak coincidence, that very same afternoon, he passed said actor on a street in Baltimore, at which time he tells me, "our eyes met and my head exploded." In a moment of clarity, his preconceived notions of this man fell apart; "this isn't a fantasy anymore," he tells me, "this is a real human being who has feelings." Stalheim recognized how his objectification of this man as "nothing but a sex object" pigeonholed him, watering-down his humanity, further obfuscating that line between reality and fantasy.

The concept of the merman had been in the back of Stalheim's head for several years. All of a sudden he knew he had his muse. In an act of artistic bravado, Stalheim contacted the stranger via the website and pitched his idea. The man agreed to have his body cast for a sculpture and today we see the end result — a life-sized replica of Colby Keller in fantastical, monumental merman form that continues to walk Stalheim's line between fantasy and reality. His size is impressive; "I made it that big because my head exploded that big," the artist tells me. In a subtle nod to his muse, Stalheim does not shy away from the merman's sexuality. While choosing to "fully-equip" his creature does add a sheen of sensuality, it feels more a comment on the creature's masculinity than being specifically gratuitous. We don't have to shy away from the creature's physicality, he seems to be telling us, but we must take care to not solely define him by it.



and then I saw Colby on the Street and my fantasy died (detail) Photo courtesy of the artist.

True to his earlier work, Stalheim's piece also elicits a tangled emotional response. Like the fantasy that came crashing down on that Baltimore sidewalk, the merman, outside his watery realm may be quietly dying on the gallery floor as his fingers grasp for life. Yet there is also intense serenity on his face – as one emotional door closes, perhaps another one is standing wide open. The scene is left intentionally vague,

allowing us to use our own imaginations to run wild as we ponder these questions.

Academy 2014 marks the artist's first exhibition inside the walls of an established gallery, though we're likely to see much more of him in the near future. MICA has awarded Stalheim a grant to stay in Baltimore and complete his next sculptural series (of which *and then I saw Colby...* is the first). If you are in Baltimore this year, be prepared for more mythological creatures that toy with your sense of reality!