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Sculptors on Sculpture: Part One

Stephen Shaheen
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Installation view of "Beautiful Beast" at the New York Academy of Art.
(Photo by Peter Drake)

On the occasion of the group exhibition "Beautiful Beast," on view at the New York Academy of Art through March 8, artist Stephen Shaheen delved into the studio practices of each of the 16 featured sculptors: Barry X Ball, Monica Cook, Gerhard Demetz, Lesley Dill, Richard Dupont, Eric Fischl, Judy Fox, Folkert de Jong, Elizabeth King, Mark Mennin, Evan Penny, Patricia Piccinini, Rona Pondick, Jeanne Silverthorne, Kiki Smith, and Robert Taplin. Part One, a series of eight interviews conducted via email, telephone, and in-person exchanges, appears below. Part Two will be published on Friday. The interviews have been condensed and edited for clarity.

BARRY X BALL

Stephen Shaheen: Working with space and form comprises specializations such as sculpture, architecture, and design, which have porous borders. Repeating pre-determined forms in variable materials is normally a hallmark of design, though it also is seen in fine art, for instance Rodin's commissions for both marbles and bronzes made from the same plaster prototype, the huge output of duplicate ceramics from the della Robbia workshop, and Warhol's identical image being silkscreened in multiple hues. The serial production of some of your works — in particular the busts "Envy" and "Purity" — prompts me to ask how you position your practice, and what, if any, the limits to reproducibility are, when the potential is ad infinitum?

Barry X Ball: The history of art is more practical than we think. For example Brancusi, how many “Birds in Space” did he make? Someone told me 22. Of course, they vary in form and material. But he had a winning formula... and he had to make money. He also wanted to explore the effect of those material and formal decisions.

The same thing with me. A solid, opaque Belgian black marble “Purity” is a lot different than a translucent white Iranian onyx version, or one that is highly figured, so partly I’m doing it just because it is a pleasure to make a variety of them and have them be so different. I also have to say they have been very successful sculptures for me, and I figured for the first time to do more than one. Why not? There’s the ability to show in different contexts, which has been great, to support my studio, and try things. There have been many positive repercussions. In fact, my whole life, up until the point where I did variations, was an endless series of prototypes. There’s no question of why I lost money. The research and development that goes into the making of one figure is huge. From the digital scanning to the digital modeling, it’s just a plain old practical decision that you need to make — to create more than one — and I’ve tried to make them as maximally interesting as possible by doing variations that were as different from each other as I could make them.

With the CNC equipment it’s maybe the first time in the history of stone carving that we can do multiples in stone like you did in bronze in the 19th century. Today you can make an edition of more or less identical sculptures via CNC milling. The only caveat is that there is actually no efficiency of scale in the making of my work. There’s a rhythm and level of intensity that we have to bring to the carving, and it doesn’t get much faster. It can be as efficient as possible, and it’s still going to take us 1,500 to 2,000 hours after the machine to do the hand work — to get it to my level. I just have not produced a sculpture that I could take off the mill and say, “This is finished,” or have a minimal or cursory amount of hand chasing or detailing. So in a way, each one is unique in how we attack it.

The other thing is that this idea of Picasso doing whatever he wants to do, and the world beating a path to his door, is really a 20th-century model. Almost every artwork that was ever made was for commission or to order. Especially sculpture, because they cost money to make. Part of the reason that I see work of the past not always finished to a jewel-like level is because artists had contracts. They got the important part done, such as the face, but it was going to be in a niche, or up high, where the whole back remains barely modeled. That’s how art was done. The idea that I’m going to do my great inventions, and people are going to *ex post facto* come buy it is not so realistic. Especially with large sculptures that are very pricey to make. I need to have someone supporting me a priori in that.

There have been a few times in the history of art where apparently the support system was in place to do things at a maximal level. I look at exquisite little sculptures from Egyptian Amarna, where the carving of the details is great, in the round, all the way. They were small-scale works, where it was technically and practically possible to carve at that intensity level. But you rarely see that. And so I have to be very careful

with my Masterpiece works when I say I'm "perfecting" these things, because art historians bristle. They think the works that I'm using as my historical antecedents are pretty perfect, given the circumstances of their time. And it was an original conception... I'm doing this whole "take" on it. However I always view myself as using that artist's finish point as my starting point, in bringing it to another level, to another place. And if for whatever reason they didn't have the ability or desire, or couldn't have enough light to see the details — I do. And I want to go to this other place with it and see what it means.

MONICA COOK

Stephen Shaheen: As an artist who works predominantly in three dimensions, I must confess to occasionally having painter envy. The ability to capture a universe in a limited piece of real estate — and draw the viewer into it — often finds a better venue in painting than in sculpture (at least on a smaller scale).

You seem to have done the opposite, leaving the limitless canvas for the cold realities of objectified presence, and whatever constraints and possibilities that brings. Curiously, your 3D works do not seem derivative or supportive of your 2D oeuvre, but rather express very different aesthetic and conceptual concerns. They appear looser, more abstracted and experimental. Though bizarre, the sculptures feel more whimsical than macabre. Moments of realism and taxidermy punctuate otherwise uncanny entities.

Could you talk about your relationship to both media, and whether you consider yourself developing two sides of the same creative coin, or if the different genres allow you to express radically different ideas?

Monica Cook: Over the years my paintings became tightly tied to the photograph. Even though I found enjoyment in the challenge of capturing the image, I grew disenchanted by the lack of discovery/surprise in the process. I wanted to work more loosely and intuitively. I tried to paint solely from my imagination, but found it frustrating, somewhat limited by not borrowing from life (textures, surfaces, light, etc.). In search of a tangible world of my own, I began making sculptures to paint from. I started by building posable, life-size humans with wire frames, malleable clay faces, and hands. A friend of mine, Amber Boardman, came to my studio, saw the figures, and urged me to do stop-motion animation with them. Following her lead, I became so captivated with animation (and sculpture) that I have yet to get back to painting.

Since I didn't have a background in sculpture, it was all fresh and experimental. Creating without a skill set or knowledge of materials made it much easier to play and, somewhat awkwardly, reveal a world that I was searching for. I do plan to get back to painting... very curious to see how this new language that's developing will translate into 2D. I have no doubt that they will feed one another and ultimately be two sides of the same creative coin.

GEHARD DEMETZ

Stephen Shaheen: One of the first things striking a viewer of your work is virtuosic carving and the ability to render a credible human form. Yet what you *don't* do seems to be equally important: loosely roughed-in areas, lacunae in the assemblage, and wood blanks left untouched. I think that a great challenge for artists with enormous technical skill is the discipline to hold back, to not show all the cards or take something to the linear conclusion that is normally inculcated in craft training.

With a contemporary art world that often looks with suspicion upon craft, expertise with your hands may more likely earn you a living making artisanal objects, serving commissioning agents, or fabricating works for an ideator who has sufficiently “deskilled” himself. However, your sculpture has penetrated the market and found an engaged audience of collectors and curators.

Could you talk about the role of skill in your practice, and where you think it is an asset, and — if ever — a liability?

Gehard Demetz: The process creating a sculpture is, every single time, a fight for me. But I need it... and in my opinion, it should be like that. I have done a lot to reach my level, and I give my best to every artwork using all my knowledge and skills. My opinion is that the technique shouldn't dominate the work, but it should be a means to an end.

LESLEY DILL

Stephen Shaheen: All artists, and especially sculptors, must involve collaborators (assistants, fabricators, etc.) when scale and technological exigencies exceed their individual capacities. You have made many works, including “Rush,” on a sweeping scale that required many hands to create and install. Perhaps more interestingly, you give curators freedom in determining the shape and layout of these installations; the work changes in each venue, and by the decisions of those who arrange it.

In work, such as yours, whose evocative powers hinge on transmitting an idiosyncratic and interior vision, the involvement of others creates potential contradictions. How do you feel about working with others at any point during the creative process, and do you see their semi-autonomy as a dilution or enrichment of your intent?

Lesley Dill: I don't see how any artist can work alone. I am so happy working with people; I like working with a team, whether they're assistants or interns. We are making something together, and I am proud of them, because they contribute so much. However, I am definitely the captain of the ship, the singer of the song, the leader of the pack, and it is my job to have a steady vision and open mind. I keep a hawk's eye out on the work, because, though explorative, it has to be exactly right. We often work together to solve a problem, especially technically in terms of materials, and go with the best idea. This ease of small group-ness comes from my

early, fortunate experience of being invited by printmakers (Landfall Press, Tamarind Press, Graphic Studio) to work with them. One relinquishes the technical aspect, but I still make sure that my “hand” is in the work. They trained me how to work with them, and I think that has really carried over.

In terms of installation, I am only an artwork’s birth mother — not it’s ultimate varying location. I trust curators! They know what they want and we discuss, send jpegs back and forth, etc. And, for my work, somebody else needs to take care of it in the world. I am such a klutz as soon as the work is out of my hands; I get nervous and risk stepping on it, ripping it, and making impulsive, bad judgments. Therefore I make calm, extremely detailed installation instructions for varying spaces. At this point there are additional collaborations: between the artist and the curator, and between the curator and the architecture. Curation is its own art.

When I have a full-throated idea, I feel as if I am teaching, bit by bit, my team to sing the same song that I am singing, so that we have this group hum, and we are making the work from that kind of atmosphere.

RICHARD DUPONT

Stephen Shaheen: I’ve followed your body of work utilizing the digital data of a full body scan and its various iterations in material via 3D printing and CNC milling. Having experimented with these technologies to a much lesser degree, I am sensitive to (and perhaps wary of) the impositions of mechanical reproduction on the autonomy of the hand. I feel as though, in the worst case, we are left as slaves to the machine’s output, reduced to diddling on the surface as we assemble, patch, and refine the now-fixed dictates of our concepts. Of course, there is immense human labor in virtual space, and in the interventions following machining. Yet the generative principle guiding incarnation is largely predefined, and distanced from the innovative participation of the hand.

As an artist who has worked in various media that involve both manual and mechanical processes, how do you reconcile the inherent tensions between both modes of creation?

Richard Dupont: It is precisely within the inherent tensions that you speak of that I find myself interested. I may make something by hand and then scan it in. I might also scan in a readymade object or make use of the scan of my own body. Once scanned in, then the form can be further “assisted” in the computer prior to any engagement with material. Every step involves decisions which impact the next decision allowing for an exponential number of outcomes: material, scale, process, finish, etc. Often, a work that is CNC milled will undergo subsequent manipulations by hand which will subvert the whole CNC process.

Certain works in sculpture which give the impression of completely erasing any trace of the human hand are the exact opposite; requiring countless hours of tedious labor to achieve the look of a machine made thing. Ultimately, any artwork, regardless of its mode of creation, is the product of artistic intentionality — a question of individual

intentions, aesthetics, and conceptual concerns. It's not the how, but the why?

ERIC FISCHL

Stephen Shaheen: In looking at your sculpture, I get a strong sense of your roots as a painter. Leonardo relates the plasticity of clay modeling to the fluidity of oil painting, and your comfort moving between both realms is apparent. The figures do not lack in sculptural substance or credibility, yet many common preoccupations of trained figurative sculptors dissolve here. There are qualities in the work that could be described as *painterly*, such as inchoate extremities and the loose handling of surfaces and transitions. Even the unusual choice of translucent materials for some of your sculptures is one that, for me, considers the effects of value and chroma over form. But this perception extends deeper, to a feeling of liberation from certain structural exigencies, like the burdens of gravity, or bodily parameters. In "Tumbling Woman," the lower legs swoop in a wonderfully gestural arc that disobeys anatomy, but adds greatly to the piece's gestalt.

Could you talk about how your painting informs your sculpting, and what advantages or challenges may come with that?

Eric Fischl: When I first came on the scene with my figurative/narrative paintings, the critics were very accepting of them in the context of their deeper history. They would mention Degas and Manet for instance, but not hold them against what I was trying to do. When I began to make sculpture, the critics said Rodin, end of discussion, period. It was as if Rodin was the last sculptor of flesh and bone and emotional force through body language. Not to mention bronze. That single-minded dismissal, not just of my sculpture, but of so much figurative sculpture of the last 100 years, was revealing.

Even more than painting, the sculpted body reveals our deepest anxieties about flesh and the complexity of its relationship to sex and death. Rodin was perhaps the last great sculptor who unshakenly believed in the body's ability to express emotions outwardly. No matter how many pieces he cut the body up into, you could always feel its passions, its urgency.

After him, and for the last 100 or so years, emotional expressiveness has become inward-directed. And in the case of Giacometti, anorectic. So it was against this backdrop that I began to explore both the questions of sculpture and the question of differences between sculpture and painting. You are right to observe that my sculpture stems from painterly concerns in much the same way that my paintings have had to take in the influence of photography. And in truth, I think I have failed to understand or even define for myself what that relationship is between sculpture and painting. I have tried with each work to answer that fundamental question and, to be honest, it absolutely eludes me.

Sculpture has to answer for its existence in ways fundamentally different than painting. Unlike painting, which controls its context to a greater degree, sculpture competes with everything that surrounds it as if those other things have equal weight.

I'm not talking about other works of art. I'm talking about tables and trees. So viewers have to work much harder to enter the experiential realm of a sculpture, and to step out of their moment into the "meaningfulness" of a sculpture's form. Paintings, the moment you look at them, you are in them. Not so with sculpture.

I don't care about the rules of anatomy. I don't care about exact replication. I don't care if someone says about a sculpture of mine, "If she stood up, she'd be 8-feet tall with an impossibly long torso and couldn't walk." She was not created to walk. She was created to express the feeling of collapse, of torment, of wrenching, twisting struggle to find psychic/emotional/physical balance. So for me, the sculpture must feel urgent and more importantly, it must feel like this "person" needs me and needs me now.

As for the question of surface, once a painter always a painter. I work in wax. I model the form loosely and then with brush and heat gun, I brush the figure into being. Much the same way I would paint a figure. It is really a stupid approach and I don't recommend it to anyone. But for a painter, the brush is the hand and I want my work to convey the feeling of being touched.

For me, the greatest sculptures are the ones that embody human experience revealed through the language of the body empowered to speak for the soul.

JUDY FOX

Stephen Shaheen: When I look at your sculptures, I see the result of an aggregate of innumerable innovative moments: from the spark of inspiration, to the planning of its pose and gesture, through hundreds of thousands of additions and subtractions of clay, adjustments, refinements, and finally brushstrokes of paint. Your work is completely saturated with deliberateness, intentionality, and idiosyncrasy. In a day and age when you could have assistants blocking things out, or 3D prints of at least the volumes upon which you model, why do you persist in approaching your work as a single combat warrior?

Judy Fox: Assistant sculptors can be actually uncredited collaborators, especially if the artist doesn't understand form. But I think some artists do make a point by not doing the work themselves. Farmed out or scanned sculpting tends to have recognizable shapes, but a blank style. That does convey attitude: casual, not overly involved, perhaps hip. It's not about looking deep.

I'm going for a kind of magic quality that I have never been able to torture an assistant into achieving. There is decision-making through my entire process, from general to specific. It has to do with the development of a rhythmic surface. My work is very, very realist in a way: observed and specific, with idiosyncratic body proportions. But on another level, the surface is very resolved, just like a Renaissance piece. There are regular curves that stretch up and down the sculpture. And those larger curves are criss-crossed by smaller curves that echo them, or spin off. There's an overlay of a certain kind of musical harmony on top of the dissonance of physical

idiosyncrasy. That particular mix is my style. And that style is important to me, because it's symbolic: it has to do with the aspirations that people have toward perfection, toward transcendence, toward those hard to grasp spiritual things, at the same time as they themselves are mortal, irregular, susceptible to disease and death. That's a philosophical position that permeates all of my work, and it is expressed as an underlying tone through form.

To achieve that, I believe that I have to follow my style, curving around reality in a more and more scaled-down way. The process of my finishing something is a zeroing in on smaller and smaller areas of getting that rhythm. And when it all locks together, and the surface has a kind of glow, then it's done.

FOLKERT DE JONG

Stephen Shaheen: I would like to ask you about your use of color, which is often a tricky thing in sculpture. It can compete with or even obliterate form, lock a work into a particular time and place, or even ruin its effect and take it inadvertently into the realm of kitsch. Yet color is fundamental to your sculpture, both what is added, as well as the innate tints of the industrial foams you carve and pour. Color very effectively creates an atmosphere of contrasting values: the appeal of almost childlike pinks and blues against the implied toxicity of artificial colors that will last an eternity in the landfill; a calming green reminiscent of moss takes on an eerie pall. These base colors, as well as punctuated bursts of bright or dismal hues, are an optical provocation (just as the contrary is true of monochromatic sculptures, even those with dramatic gestures, such as the even and earthy tones of Niccolò dell'Arca's terracottas that impose an almost restive effect on otherwise animated figures). In fact, what might be a benign or goofy expression on a uniformly-colored sculpture, such as a grin, is perverted into a sinister and macabre display on your multi-hued foam.

I would be interested to hear a little about your decisions in the use of color, because achieving a balance between revealing and obfuscating, accenting and distracting is not only a challenging task, but a very personal investment.

Folkert de Jong: The colors of the insulation foam that I use in my artwork are the "natural" colors of the materials as they are produced by the factory. Each individual company copyrights their product by adding a color pigment to the production process. These are often soft baby-colored tones, such as pink and light blue. In my studio laboratory in Amsterdam, I produce my own foam materials. Having mastered the chemistry, I am able to produce my own rigid foam in any required shape and color. This allows me to experiment and manipulate the boundaries of my ideas through these materials in my art practice.

An important inspiration for me is colored theater spotlights shining on the actors on a theater stage. For the Middelheim Museum exhibition, I have been using fantastic pictures that show the refraction of light through a stained glass window of Saint Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. The colors that I sprayed on like graffiti are in fact

classical bronze patinas, based on acids that you burn into the skin of the bronze at the foundry. The effects of natural corrosion on bronze, and the artificial coloring with acids, called patina, caught my interest. I learned to apply patinas on the surface of the bronze with a paint brush and spray can, and slowly developed a coloring that suited my ideas.

What I would like to look at is how fascinatingly smart and efficient marketing strategies work on our psyches. If you know how to manipulate consumers' behavior, or even an individual's moral position towards life, that means you can manipulate life itself. This is a fascinating but also potentially dangerous power which is often used with the carefully hidden motive of making a profit. I consider this not necessarily a bad thing, more a factor in the reality of life and nature that we have to deal with according to our human condition. My interest goes out to the fact that, as human beings, we have a choice to do things with respect to others. The only way to be able to form opinions upon which to base our choices is to have knowledge about the true nature of things; that is, to unravel misleading rhetoric techniques and processes which serve the targeted purpose of exploiting human life. In order to unmask some of these processes, one has to be aware of the rhetoric, and be able to apply the same techniques in order to turn the process inside out and upside down. In my work, I decided to use similar means. I make use of the strong visual qualities of the specific materials that I work with. For me, this and the recognition of iconic figurative aspects works best in getting the viewer involved. The artificial and protected art environment is an ideal platform to reflect upon those processes that we are exposed to in real life. The art space thus becomes a metaphor for real life; like an illustration, it creates a perfect, safe distance and playground to study and reflect upon complex questions, such as the mystification and manipulation of reality through powerful business strategies.