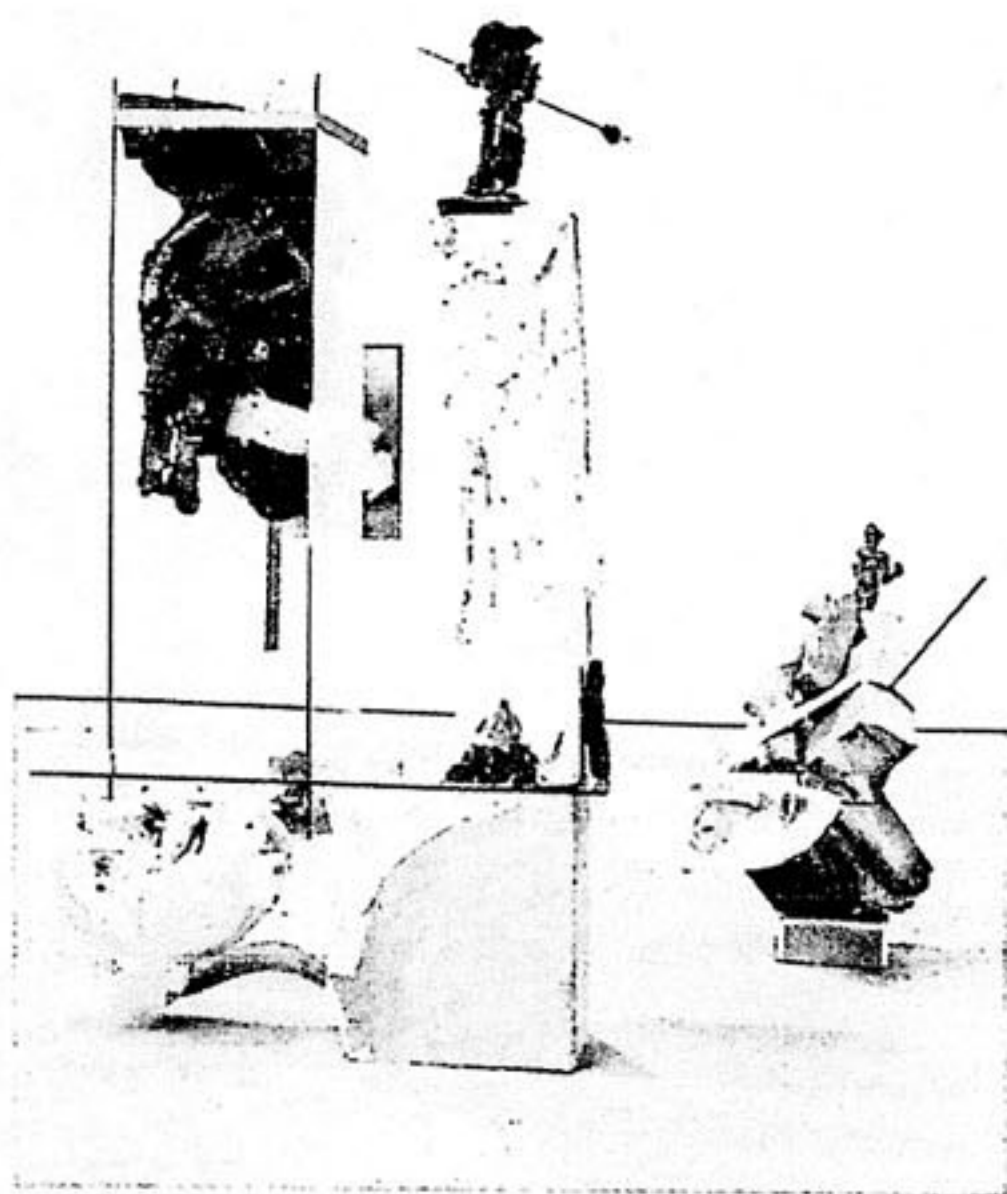


Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Matthew Monahan's exhibition, showing (foreground) *Scale of Orange*, 1994/2008; at Anton Kern.

MATTHEW MONAHAN ANTON KERN

Considering the stereotypes that link big paintings, vast spaces and muscular workers with Americans, it's surprising that most of the artists attracting attention for large-scale (and grotesque) sculptural bodies—they include Folkert de Jong, Thomas Houseago and Berlinde de Bruyckere—are European. Another star in this firmament is Los Angeles-based Matthew Monahan—indeed an American, but one who has studied in Europe and lived in Japan. Monahan's works at Kern seemed to reflect the ages and depths of those other cultures, not his own.

The dozen large, fragmented figures that were shown, most made of hand-constructed paper or carved Styrofoam, draw equally on icons of painting and sculpture, and are presented on pedestals or within partial vitrines. The major reference points are art history and museum environments. Monahan creates an impression of artifacts trashed, but not as in Arman's use of a vitrine as a transparent garbage bin; here the sheets of glass sometimes seem to protect, sometimes to oppress, objects and ephemeral renderings that appear to have been abused by time and sheer neglect.

This abrasive, jangly fragmentation might represent the overload of clashing imagery that is an ordinary part of life today. Surprisingly, though, many of these jumbles hint at tenderness. And every semi-vitrine is emphatically bound with one or more ratcheted canvas straps, as if Monahan were seeking to hold together remains he had found, or trying to reconstitute something all

but lost. The effect is tentative and, because of the flimsy materials, literally light. *Chamber Command* (2008, 106½ by 25½ by 20¾ inches) is a quintessential example. Under a large sheet of glass is a rectangle of mesh on which draperylike folds are drawn, as if for an art lesson; there is also a charcoal-on-paper rendering of a female figure with tilted head. Behind an inch-thick layer of honeycomb paper is a large carved and silver-leafed bust, which can only be seen from the work's side. The bust is blocky, its schematic eye sockets sunk down into its cheeks. Perched above it is a small pieced-paper sculpture of a nude, rendered with Cubist angularity. The whole is brutal yet poignant. Other works evoke odalisques, Buddha heads, Etruscan funerary figures.

Five spray-painted works on paper were also shown, depicting ghosts of objects in black and white, sepia or multi-color. They have the abstracted, nostalgic quality of photograms. In all his works, Monahan combines coarse, cheap materials reflective of our time with flickering recollections of great works of the past, a rueful combination that nonetheless speaks of the endurance of beauty.

—Janet Koplos