

MODERN PAINTERS

UNDER THE VOLCANO

History and what we make of it in the work of
MATTHEW MONAHAN

By MALIK GAINES
Photographs by JEFF MINTON

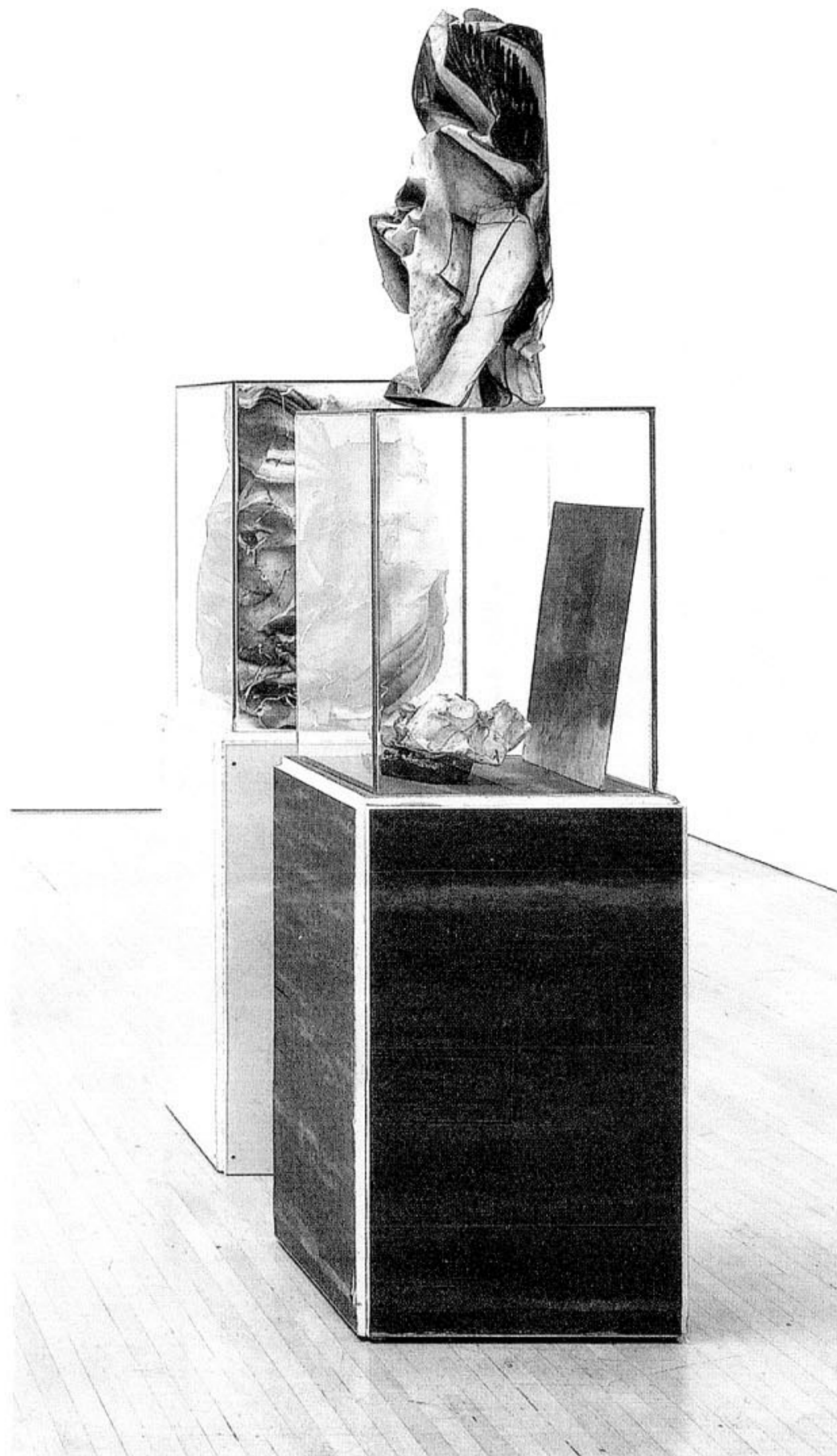
On a picturesque Malibu bluff, separated from the ocean by the raging Pacific Coast Highway, stands a grand and stately Roman palace, the Getty Villa. Recently reopened after years of remodeling, this oasis, nestled on the mountainside among modern multimillion-dollar residences, is a pastiche of anachronisms. Built in the 1970s under J. Paul Getty's remote supervision from his palace in Scotland, and never visited by the wealthy American industrialist, who died in 1976, the villa re-creates a great house of the cataclysmically truncated Mediterranean city of Herculaneum, which was preserved in volcanic ash and dug out 17 centuries later. This California replica is today a museum and educational center, holding many of the Getty's finest antiquities,



some of which are at the center of international court cases challenging the acquisition of patrimonial property. One such object is a large painted vase depicting ancient performers donning masks and *phalloi* for theater making. Displayed, for now, behind high-tech glass among other ancient trinkets, this vase is said to be destined for a return to the old country, its sojourn in Malibu soon to be a vacation memory. The remodeling of the villa sets the main building, where the valuables are shown, within a postmodern wood-and-concrete superstructure that wraps around it, like an observation platform above an archaeological site. This new section alters the experience of the space; it intervenes with the brilliant Hollywood fantasy of antiquity by creating a drab metazone that affords a more detached approach to the museum. The addition, which includes a gift

shop and a miniamphitheater, gives the place the quality of a University of California campus, though from the villa's balcony overlooking the authentically re-created classical garden, one can gaze west and entertain the illusion that the Pacific is the Mediterranean, and 2,000 years don't matter.

The Getty Villa bears the brunt of a historical thrust that also presses on the works of Matthew Monahan, which, at the time of this writing, reside in museums across Los Angeles, including a one-room solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Monahan's recent sculptures, which are dominated by partial figures and masklike faces, look something like long-lost treasures. The artist arranges them in museum-style displays that suggest the way antiquities are typically shown. But these objects are not marble or ceramic; they're made

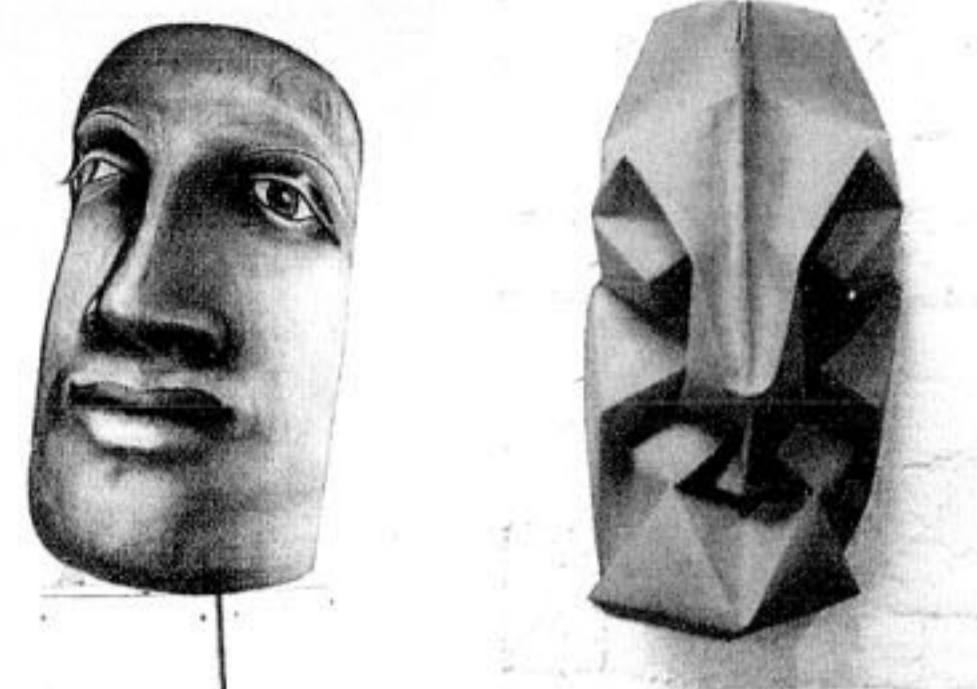


PREVIOUS SPREAD
MATTHEW MONAHAN IN HIS
STUDIO, LOS ANGELES, JULY 2007
PHOTO: JEFF MINTON

THIS SPREAD, LEFT
INSTALLATION VIEW
OF "MOCA FOCUS: MATTHEW
MONAHAN," MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART,
LOS ANGELES, 2007
PHOTO: JOSH WHITE
COURTESY ANTON KERN GALLERY, NEW YORK,
AND STUART SHAVE/MODERN ART, LONDON

RIGHT
LESSER KNOWN SON
(DETAIL), 1994/2005
CHARCOAL ON PAPER,
WOOD, AND DRYWALL,
10 FT 3 IN X 2 FT 2 IN X 1 FT 4 IN
COURTESY ANTON KERN GALLERY, NEW YORK,
AND STUART SHAVE/MODERN ART, LONDON

UNTITLED, 2003
FOLDED PAPER, 1 FT 7 IN X 9 IN X 6 IN
COURTESY ANTON KERN GALLERY, NEW YORK,
AND STUART SHAVE/MODERN ART, LONDON



interrogation or ironic supposition was the only position left for artists to inhabit and that art would forever be bereft of transcendent pleasure.

But following Walter Benjamin—whom Monahan cites in his *MOCA* catalogue's compendium of inspirational quotations—let us recall a kind of historically motivated transcendence that emerges from certain strains of 20th-century criticality. This transcendence lies not in an escape from the real world as we live it but in an improvement on it through socially engaged action. While many commentators, including the authors of wall texts at *MOCA*, have described Monahan's work in terms of timelessness, a historical view might reveal more of its timeliness.

What's fascinating is how this idea that Monahan's work is timeless confirms some conservative impulses. These can be parsed through four historical urges that the Getty Villa embodies and that Monahan's sculptures cleverly echo.

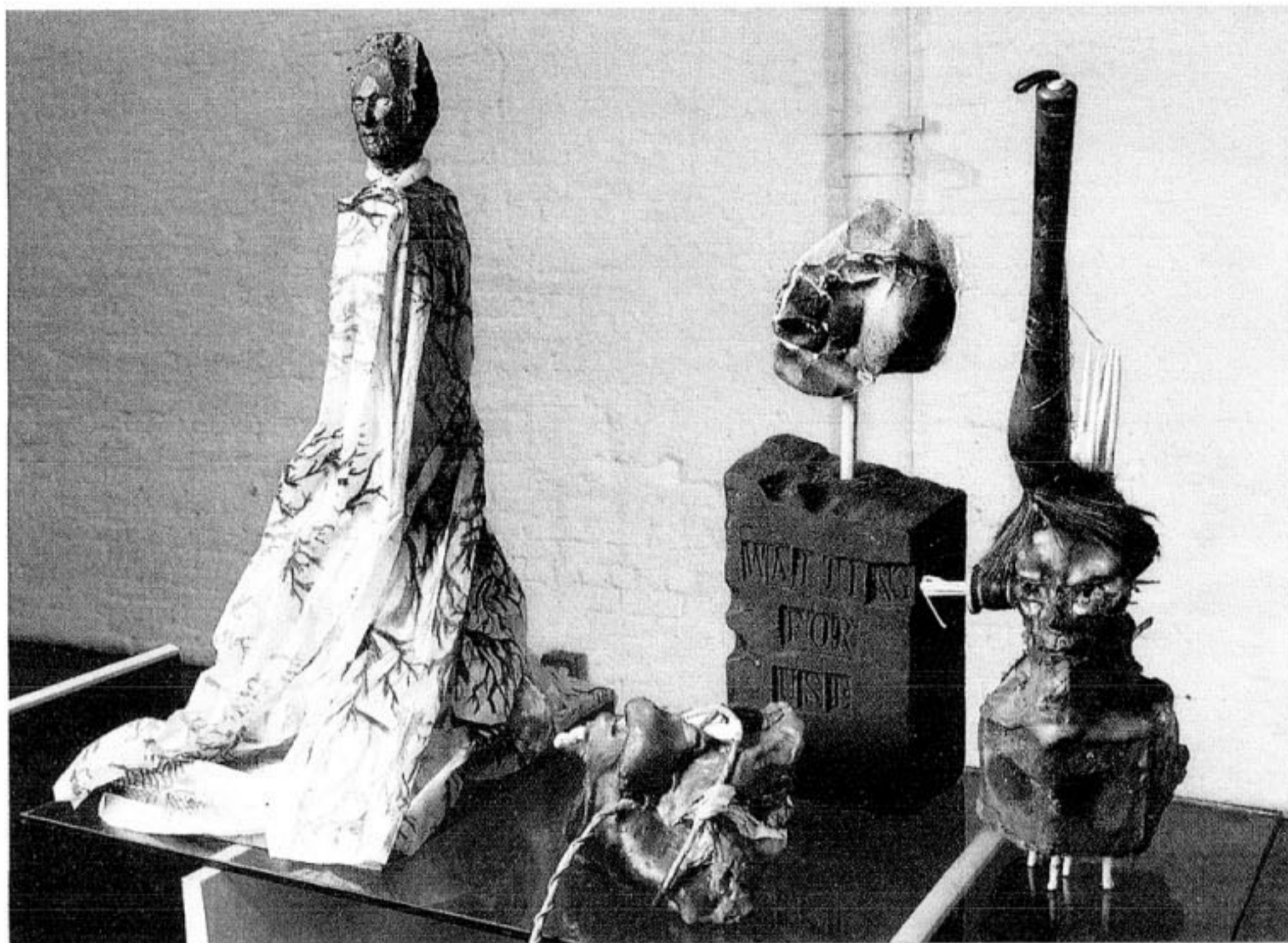
First are the demarcations of aesthetics and civilization to which antiquities themselves testify. A hunky marble sculpture of Hercules is both a master craft and a signification of a heroic narrative (Plato would warn us not to degrade the ideal with its representation, but Aristotle would give us permission to follow our instincts for mimicry). Here, each thing is two things at once: an object in space and a subject that confirms mythic meaning. The second layer of this sedimented mess is the modern European drive to create a Western trajectory for history, locating Athens as point one in an inevitable white progress,

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thereby validating colonial empires that pillaged the world while building museums of looted objects to aggrandize their own origin myths, their mastery of all subjugated materials, and the total commodification of objects. The third urge is kooky if no less troubling; this is where ahistorical Americans play catch up to the Europeans and build Roman villas alongside Malibu beaches, doing zigzags through history to complete the self-fulfilling prophecy of the West by manifesting its most advanced capitalism. While Berlin's Pergamonmuseum and London's National Gallery, with their more extensive legacy, seem to be comfortably retaining their prized objects, these latter-day American institutions are the ones being dragged through Italian and Greek courts in recompense for their dubiously acquired property (as if there were any other kind!). Finally, there's the postmodern viewing apparatus, embodied at the Getty Villa by its addition, that opens up an obsolete hegemony to the scrutiny of multiple points of view, decentering the whole enterprise for consumption in the mode of today's taste for less-dogmatic presentation.

What's evident to the astute viewer in the end, whether considering the Getty or Monahan's art, is that history itself is an accumulation of politicized imperatives, not an autonomous, unified force. To put it another way, history is not teleological it's dialectical. Monahan, who also quotes Hegel in his assortment

of everyday building materials. Monahan's back-room-at-the-Boden aesthetic and contemporary forms not only recall the kinds of historical confections the Getty Villa embodies but also, like that grand pastiche, invite quite a bit of discourse around history's enchanted spell. His work, which has become familiar through numerous exhibitions, including the 2006 Whitney and Berlin biennials and much-praised gallery shows in Europe and the United States, is beautiful, melancholic, and deserving of the artworld attention it's been getting. Monahan makes wonderful figurative things without fear of preciousness, introducing an unselfconscious artfulness that stands in contrast to the anti-art and radical breaks from convention privileged by the 20th-century avant-garde. The results feel good to art viewers who have feared that critical



of catalogue citations, seems to be illustrating this very understanding with his fractured and mismatched forms. Like the Getty Villa, his accumulations of objects possess layers of legibility. All at once they interrogate the relationship between the mythic and the real; they assert bold and dramatic narratives that may or may not be believed; and they materialize through an investment in bygone eras, while ultimately dissuading the viewer from wanting a single solution to the problems of origin and presence. Take a piece like *Mr. Flotsam* (2007), a rubbery replica of mummified human remains that lies at ankle height on a sheet of glass. Such works are too realistic to dismiss and too silly to believe in.

And yet, despite the playful criticality Monahan's work conjures, the romanticism of it all—the pleasure the artist takes in relating the human figure to poetic ruins and in an appealing and unified visual language—sparks nostalgia for a time before conceptual art, a time before modernism even, when material could be mastered into representations speaking truth on behalf of power. I cynically suspect that this accounts for some of Monahan's market appeal.

When the space people dig us out of our Home Depot ash, will we maintain expressions of torture and despair or gaze with ominous tranquility into the distance?

Although the 35-year-old has been described in writing as an antidote to the alienations of conceptualism, and has talked about himself in 19th-century terms (ruminating at a recent museum dinner on "the trident of madness, irrelevance, and poverty that all artists face"), his work doesn't require an escape capsule to the past to be appreciated. Monahan asserts aesthetics, to be sure, but from the here and now.

At MOCA, Monahan installed scores of works, stacked and arranged in his signature style. He's filled the most impressive of the building's chambers, a large room with high ceilings and topped with a pyramidal skylight that's typically covered but that was opened for the occasion, at the artist's insistence. Diffused daylight is the gallery's only illumination. A viewer moves through a maze of objects arranged much like antiquities at the Getty. Many are inside or perched on glass display cases and drywall pedestals. Most refer to human fig-

ures. These decayed-looking statuaries and pseudoruins are assemblages of foam, wax, wire, wood, brass, gold and silver leaf, and other odds and ends, often topped with charcoal drawings on paper crumpled into the uncanny faces, one of Monahan's strongest motifs. Eyes peer at you from every direction, with expressions ranging from Zen contemplation to Gothic anguish. Some faces are the size of a fist, others the size of torsos, and a couple of others, attached to great bodies lying on their sides, are a human's whole mass. Few of these bodies maintain their own unity; rather, they are composed of collaged segments that shift in material, color, and design as they move from head to foot.

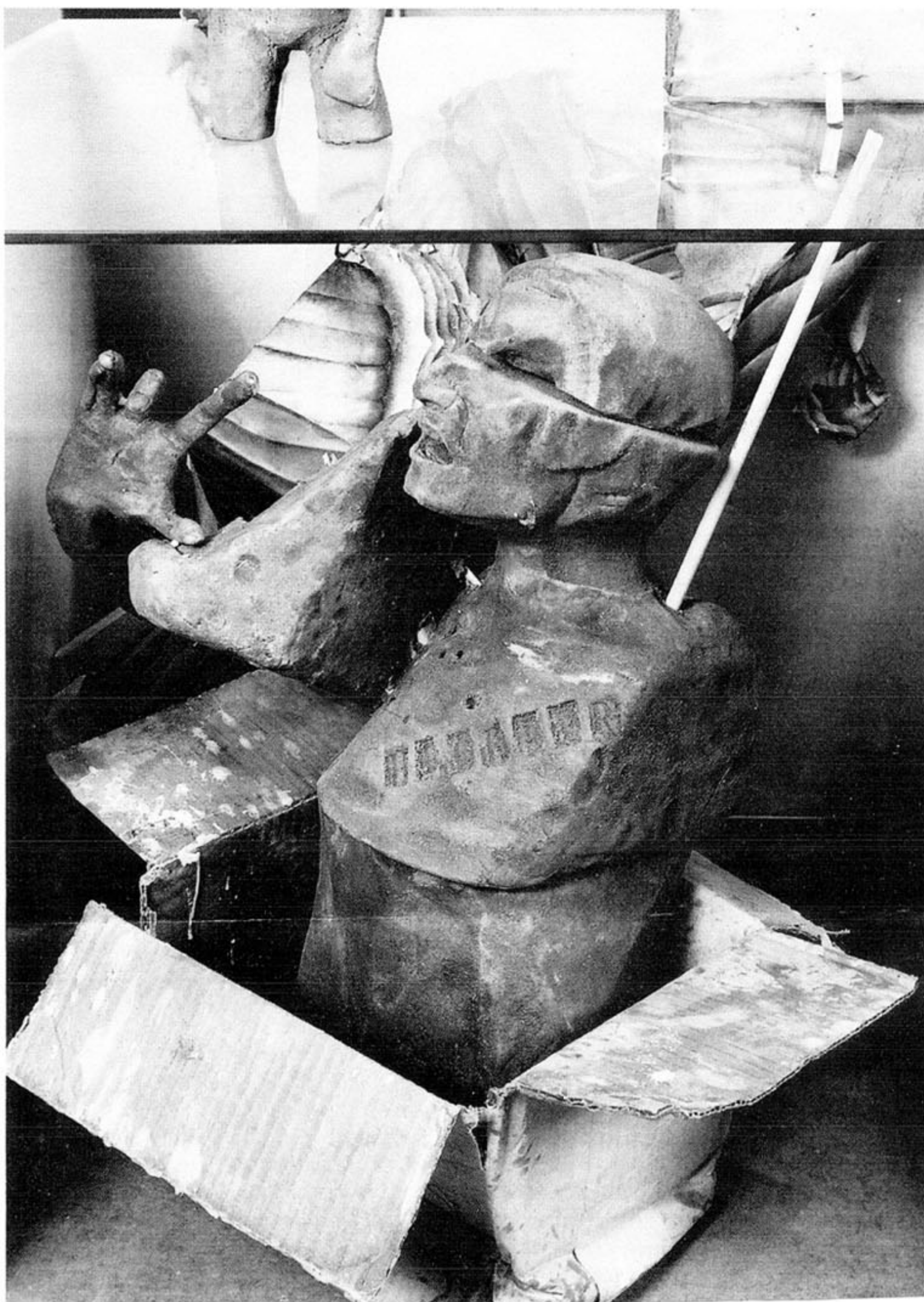
In *War Never Ends* (2005), for example, a rectangular pedestal made out of roughly cut drywall panels is topped with two glass cases, all together forming a squared-off column about the dimensions of a modest-size man (Monahan himself?). At about waist height, the first glass case holds a distressed pair of legs made of green sculpting foam. The case above that holds a golden figure emerging at the torso from waxy orange waves. Both elements recall long-ago-damaged marble statues but take shape in today's common materials. The

golden figure's precarious balance is accentuated by a brass bar extending out of its head like the leg of a modernist chair. Finally, atop this whole arrangement, a second, disproportionately large head, one of those made from a drawing that's been crumpled like a bad idea, frowns disapprovingly at nearby sculptures.

Monahan provides so much to look at and to be reminded of in each individual piece, and among this whole roomful of stuff resonating with associations, that visiting the exhibition is like studying a special collection, digging through the antique store, putting together the forensic clues to solve an age-old murder from the pages of *National Geographic*.

The MOCA show's subtitle, "Five Years, Ten Years, Maybe Never," a reference to Monahan's preoccupation with time, comes from a comment made by Swiss artist Georg Herold, a former instructor of Monahan's, when describing the time it would take for the younger artist to hit his creative stride. Herold himself, a contemporary of Martin Kippenberger's with whom Monahan once collaborated on a gallery show, represents a link between Monahan's neo-romanticism and the less sentimental interrogations of fine art conducted by artists of a preceding generation. Monahan attended New York's Cooper Union School of

**THE HECKLER AND THE
TROUBADOUR (DETAIL),
1994/2005**
FOAM, BEESWAX, ENCAUSTIC,
PIGMENT, \$5 BILL, WOOD,
CHARCOAL ON PAPER ON
CANVAS, CARDBOARD, AND
DRYWALL, 64 X 79 X 24 IN
COURTESY ANTON KERN GALLERY,
NEW YORK, AND STUART SHAVE/MODERN
ART, LONDON



Art as an undergraduate, where he encountered artists like Hans Haacke and Mary Kelly, whose works he carefully studied before departing for less conceptual territory. The systematic investigations of 1980s conceptualism look different from Monahan's work in all but desaturated color scheme, but Monahan too is deconstructing a system of representation that's embedded in our culture. While his work is certainly invested in individual artistic expression, it shouldn't be thought of as devoid of critical engagement for that reason alone. Part of what's satisfying about the work is the way these two seemingly opposing imperatives find some provisional common ground.

In some respects, Monahan's work can be thought of in relation to that of other sculptors of his generation working in Los Angeles, such as those in the artist's immediate circle of friends, including Scoli Acosta, Jeff Ono, and his own wife, Lara Schnitger. Like theirs, Monahan's work contains elusive internal narratives, uses materials with expediency, evidences a loving labor, and displays a certain contemporary stylishness. While his cohorts' works tend to index identifiably modern forms more distinctly than Monahan's premodern figures do, his pieces are often topped with glass coffee-table surfaces and are surrounded by angular constructions, resulting in a kind of modernist reinvention of their own. In particular, the "primitive" aesthetics appropriated by modern art in the early 20th century appear here as twice-ruined ruins. In Monahan's hands, everything derived from a time before now, modernity included, is part of an undifferentiated past subject to artistic manipulation. Though Monahan is more likely to cite Baudelaire, Baudrillard would suit just as well to describe the dustbins of history through which the artist sifts.

The nostalgic discussion of timelessness and the historical notion of transcendence, while perhaps at odds with each other, both point to a utopian space in Monahan's work: the future. Certainly, there's a sci-fi look to many of his figures. The movie monsters, fantasy beings, and frightening aliens of 1980s

childhoods make appearances alongside all the other images. And apocalypse is itself a utopian notion; it is the ultimate transcendence. Perhaps these androgynous figures in gray, blue, and green represent each of us, trapped in the structures that fell around us as the big one hit, preserved like California bog-people in the tar pits and oil spills of environmental disaster. When the space people dig us out of our Home Depot ash, will we maintain our expressions of torture and despair or gaze with ominous tranquillity into the distance? This vision is one of both destruction and immortality, of history's end and total confirmation. Either way, we're all ruined. This fantasy of history is the social context in which Monahan's treasure trove opens to view.

Matthew Monahan's solo exhibition "MOCA Focus: Matthew Monahan" is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, through October 29. For more information on Monahan, turn to Index, p. 110.