

Art Review:

Reviews

Debut Discovering emerging artists

Matthew Monahan

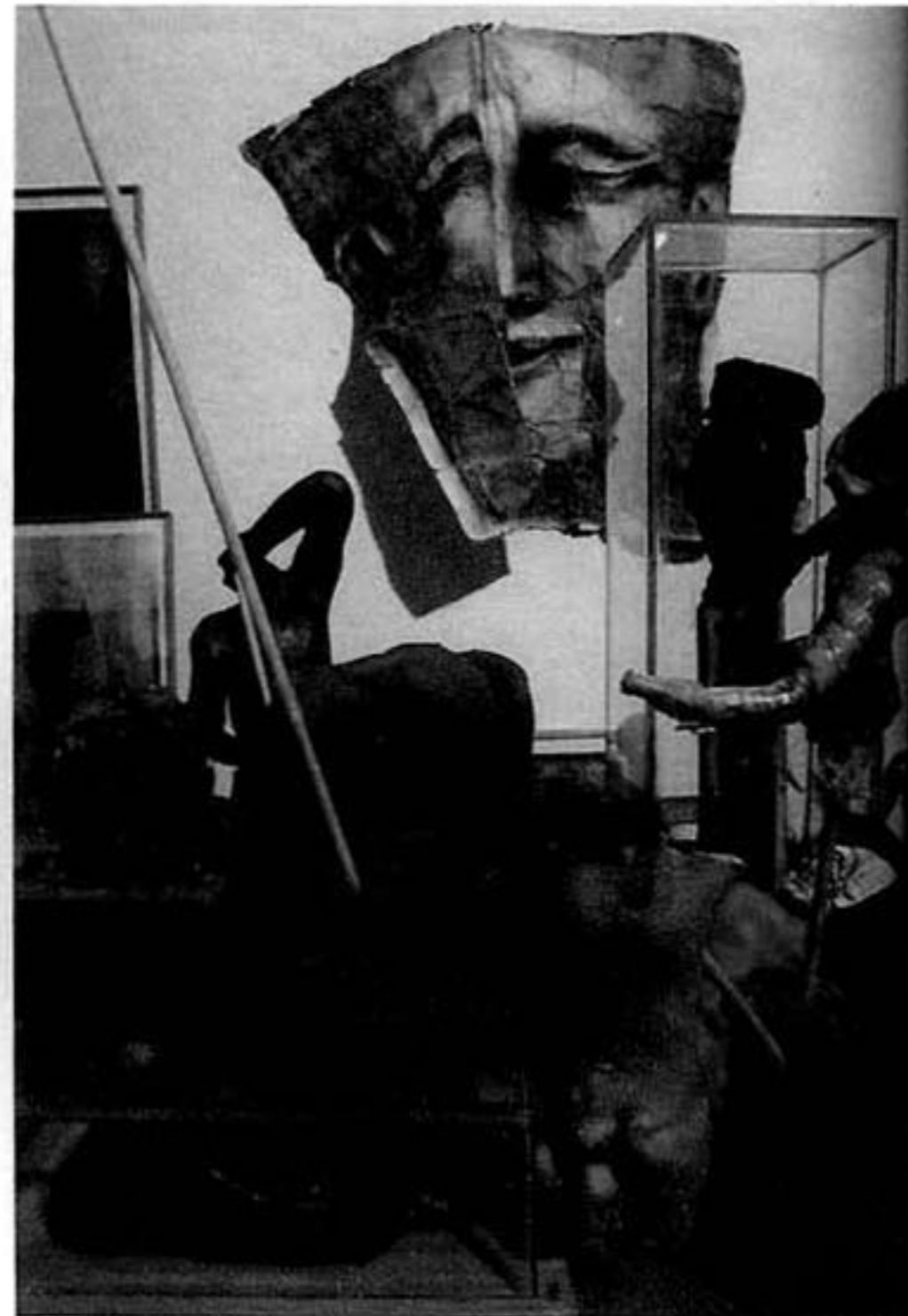
24 June-29 July
Anton Kern Gallery, New York
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Review by Bridget L Goodbody

Matthew Monahan weds the profane to the sacred with a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde touch in his solo show at New York's Anton Kern Gallery. Comprised of hundreds of sculpted heads (all 1994-2005) displayed cabinet-of-curiosities-style, the exhibition presents a cosmology of character in which art's illustrious past resurfaces in a post-apocalyptic world. Linking the Creator to the Destroyer, Monahan's house of ghosts demonstrates the price society pays for art to survive war.

Walking into the show is like entering Dante's *Inferno*. Twenty-five display stands are arranged in a labyrinthine path. Each one bears a small sculpture made from a conglomeration of floral foam and beeswax. Tortured bodies stabbed with sticks and shrunken heads with *Laocoön*-like expressions of suffering abound. An occasional beatific grin, like that on the Buddha-like face of *Nameless One From Not Even Anywhere*, suggests that spirituality is the way out of hell.

While seeking the divine may be the key to ending suffering, Monahan's museum is no refuge from violence and destruction. Each stand is made from sawed-up pieces of unfinished drywall, while many of the vitrines are constructed out of broken glass. The one in *Former Republic* looks as though someone has punched a hole in it and stolen a precious object off the now empty pedestal. To keep the shattered cases from falling apart, Monahan sprays them with silicone, the same material police use to hold together storefront



windows smashed during riots.

Inside his museum/mausoleum, Monahan battles with the centuries-old science of physiognomy. *Twilight of the Idiots*, the largest installation, is laden with sculptures of specific character types: a mummy, a dying slave, a babushka and a Buddha. In each, the classic metamorphoses into the contemporary. The Buddha, made from molten wax plunged in cold water, looks like Bernini's Louis XIV, but his carnation-pink lips recall the transvestite Lypsinka.

Monahan is clearly ambivalent about using the old to create the new, however, as if in so doing the blood of empire-building stains his hands. *Writer's Block* and *Said the Joker to the Thief*, tall pedestals balancing giant heads, are reminiscent of

Renaissance sculptures made from looted ancient Roman busts. The faces – Monahan's own folded, crumpled or twisted charcoal drawings attached to canvas – are like the features of the women in *Demaiselles d'Avignon* (1907), which were inspired by African masks Picasso saw in the Trocadero's ethnographic collections.

That museum collections and, subsequently, art history are built on the colonialist spoils of war is also suggested in *Sir Young Husbands or Museum of the Anti-British*. Structured like a three-part totem pole, the top head looks like a proud doughboy returning home. The middle head comprises a charcoal drawing encased in Plexiglas that recalls Rome's Column of Trajan, and a green bust whose gullet is

pierced with a stick on which a tiny paper head is skewered like a headhunter's trophy.

While destruction breeds destruction, however, it also generates creation. In *Dictator Equator*, the main element is an amputated red arm with pointing index finger, the standard iconography of the dictator/orator. The arm is wedged between two red drawings encased in pyramids, one depicting figures running from an explosion, the other an endless circle of burning flames. Out of these ruins another empire may arise; but also, perhaps, another work of art.

Clockwise from top left: Matthew Monahan, *Writer's Block*, 1994-2005, charcoal on paper on muslin, wood, drywall, 236.2 x 33 x 33cm, detail; studio view; installation at Anton Kern Gallery, New York.