

# ARTFORUM



## Matthew Monahan

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This page, top: **Matthew Monahan, *Most Isolated Human Being*, 1994–2005**, floral foam, beeswax, pigment, encaustic, paint on cardboard, glass, and drywall, 41 x 25 x 25". Bottom: **Matthew Monahan, *Waiting for Use* (detail), 1994–2005**, floral foam, beeswax, pigment, encaustic, silver leaf, wood, glass, paper, transfer drawing, carbon paper, Chinese brush, wire, drawing, and drywall, 64½ x 63½ x 14". Opposite page, top: **View of "Matthew Monahan," Anton Kern Gallery, New York, 2005**. Bottom: **Matthew Monahan, *Whispered Agreement*, 1994–2005**, charcoal on paper on muslin, wood, and drywall, 116 x 23 x 13".

Los Angeles–based artist Matthew Monahan has said that figurative drawing is the “core” of his practice—in graduate school in the mid-’90s, while his fellow students delved into video and installation, Monahan recalls, he wrestled with the question “How do you put a shadow under a cheekbone?”—and he is perhaps best known, especially to New York audiences, for his works on paper, which he exhibited at Anton Kern Gallery in 1997 and 2002. But Monahan is not an ironic neoclassicist blithely reanimating unfashionable forms; rather, his relationship to the depiction of the human figure is dead serious, even fraught. In an artist’s statement published in 1996,

he wrote, “Two years ago I believed I could not draw, least of all the human face. No artistic task seemed more impossible. . . . I continued to draw out of frustration. What seemed simple to many, I carried out in a long trial of self-negation, subtraction, false piety and erasure.”

One characteristic of self-denial is that it can suddenly turn into its opposite. Monahan’s tendency toward the ascetic pursuit of a goal that seems forever out of reach may help to account for the intense, polymorphously perverse materiality of his most recent solo exhibition, presented last summer at Anton Kern. Conceived as an “excavation” of the artist’s studio, the show gave the impression that, for Monahan, self-abnegation has periodically given way to an anything-goes spontaneity grounded less in the metaphysical search for the first principles of the human form than in the sheer physical energies of object making. The gallery was filled with thirty-two works comprising hundreds of elements produced by the artist over the last ten years, including numerous small figurative sculptures that variously recalled mummies, nineteenth-century memorial statues, Han warriors, Fritz Lang robots, or grotesque hybrids thereof. Made mostly out of beeswax and floral foam, they were modeled with a raw, slapdash immediacy that somehow exaggerated all that is both dire and compelling in dolls, puppets, and effigies—humans-by-proxy that mirror and subtly lampoon us while appearing to possess a creepy, passive-aggressive agency of their own. Like a child’s favorite toys, Monahan’s *poupées* had been subjected to attentions that seemed at once loving and sadistic. Pierced, punctured, trussed, and tarted up by a profusion of crafty embellishments, including colored paint, glitter, nails, tacks, silver leaf,



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# Openings

toothpicks, and twine, they were not so much decorated as mortified, in the old-fashioned sense of the term. The head of *General Molotov* (all works 1994–2005), for example—a bust of a man whose green plastic bib, studded with brass tacks, suggested a military uniform—had been rudely bisected by a piece of glass topped with a lump of foam, while the figure in *Most Isolated Human Being* was an armless, gold-painted androgyne whose coral-colored brains appeared to be spilling out of its head. Monahan's works on paper, meanwhile, had been conscripted into the general sculptural imperative of the show: Giant charcoal renderings of faces were crumpled into balls and stuck on top of wax torsos or raised on wooden poles like heads on pikes, while numerous transfer drawings—delicate, kaleidoscopic tracers of organic or mechanical forms on translucent carbon paper—were folded and draped here and there, used as bunting, babushkas, and shrouds.

All of these works, plus sundry other ones—fetish-like miniassemblages, abstract geometric forms made of intricately folded muslin—were arranged in groupings of vitrines, plinths, and pedestals as elaborately compartmentalized and multitiered as a Futurist fantasy of the postmillennial city. But as the term "excavation" suggests, there was nothing futuristic, at least not in the pristinely modernist sense, about

the installation: Rickety constructions of (sometimes cracked) glass, wood, and unpainted, hospital-green drywall, the displays were themselves decrepit, deeply compromised objects.

As the sole proprietor of this mad museum, Monahan had taken on multiple roles—the artist as collector, as curator, as archivist, and even as merchandiser—each seemingly antithetical to the persona of the resolute anti-conceptualist who doggedly sketched away while his classmates tackled *Of Grammatology*. The utility of such roles, of course, resides partly in the fact that they allow an artist to intervene beyond the studio, marshaling, containing, and recontextualizing the artifacts and texts of the world at large. But in Monahan's work that outside world seems hardly to



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exist, except as filtered through a highly intuitive, subjective sensibility in which recognizable iconography becomes as ambiguous and yet as mysteriously resonant as the imagery of dreams. In the artist's statement accompanying the show, Monahan wrote, "The work is not a postmodern selection of references to be decoded, but a bodily expulsion of influence and impulse performed in the act of making." What is being marshaled and contained, in other words, are the abject effusions and unreconstructed energies of the creative process itself.

This essential tension in Monahan's work—the artist qua artist, a sort of *sauvage* or visionary outsider, versus a cooler customer given to a more analytical turn of mind—is acted out in his "excavation," or evisceration, of his own workspace, which is a recurring feature of his practice: One of his earliest shows, at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in 1995, was also conceived as a kind of emptying out of the site of artistic production. (And that show, too, featured an eccentric installation, with works hung high above viewers' sightlines, tucked into corners, and even hidden in

heating vents.) As such, it is perhaps worth considering Monahan's oeuvre in the light of Daniel Buren's influential 1971 essay "The Function of the Studio," which proposes that any object produced in an artist's workspace and then displayed in a museum has engaged in an "unspeakable compromise," trading its own history and specificity for a kind of generic, free-floating institutional imprimatur. Once a private sanctum, a sort of lacuna in the everyday in which the repressed was free to return, the studio had now become, as Buren disdainfully put it, a "boutique"—just another node in the enmeshing matrix of consumer capitalism. Monahan's excavations give voice to all that is unspeakable in Buren's formulation, bringing an unnerving audibility to the profound ambivalence of object making in what might be called the post-poststudio era. His crazed museological displays simultaneously honor and profane the studio-produced object—the sculpture, the drawing—in all its uncanny, seductive presence, its contested history, and its limitations and failures. □

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