

# frieze

Anton Kern Gallery, New York, USA

My first impression of Matthew Monahan's sprawling show was of a *wunderkammer* of odd assemblages of devotional-size figurative sculpture strewn across cobbled pedestals, reliquaries and vitrines. Part art object, part artefact, Monahan's hybrid figures are refashioned fragments of works made over the past decade, created from a seductively patinated mess of materials including beeswax, paper, carved floral foam, tape, glass and glitter. Described as an excavation of the artist's studio, the exhibition dug similarly through art history and various genres of museological display, all without any apparent hierarchy or critique.

I had seen photographs of many of these sculptures beforehand, and their composite installation surprised me. Initially the meandering structure of the show suggested the inspired fumbling of Monahan's mind as much as it did the jumble of art history, allowing viewers the sensation that they were discovering things with the same intuition and at the same pace as the artist had done. But the conventions of the works' display eventually distracted, encouraging extraneous readings.

It is Monahan's wide-ranging facility with sculptural portraiture that is most captivating. His unqualified toying with the styles and methods of institutional display (but not its politics) puts him in the strange position of seeming to reference institutional critique while harkening back to a pre-Postmodern era. Monahan appears to find formal inspiration in these modes of display, which is only troubling if you're looking for greater meaning in such choices. The artist, of course, is aware that viewers *are* looking, enough so to feel it necessary to state pre-emptively in the press release that 'the work is not a Postmodern selection of references to be decoded'. This assertion of anti-criticality leaves viewers to wonder what significance the likes of Hans Bellmer, medieval grotesquerie and Roman or Minoan portraiture might have for him (if any), and what his allusions to chinoiserie, voodoo and Baroque figuration mean in a context in which the artist is simultaneously distancing himself from any specific value those references may have.

But let us take Monahan's pastiche without prejudice. On the stricter formal terms on which I suspect Monahan works, the individual pieces can be stunning. As it was for Alberto Giacometti, sculpture for Monahan is often an attenuating exercise in drawing, and vice versa. Some of his

Matthew Monahan  
Right:  
*Icono-Spasm*  
1994-2005  
Mixed media  
150x46x48 cm

Below:  
*Said the Joker to the Thief*  
1994-2005  
Mixed media  
343x122x122 cm



most impressive pieces are oversized heads made of torqued, scrunched paper. Starting as charcoal drawings, they are crumpled again and again as Monahan forces them, Frankenstein-like, to take on a monstrous presence. These pieces, including *Said the Joker to the Thief* and *Whispered Agreement* (all works 1994-2005), have the feeling of an artist working slowly and deliberately through self-doubt towards a hardened and truthful likeness, albeit of no one in particular.

Monahan's first show at Anton Kern placed totemic, armour-like figure drawings alongside a group of Central African masks. The portrait assemblages that constituted the bulk of this recent exhibition feel imbued with the modest, stoic grandeur of such masks but often tend toward the rapturous and ecstatic. *Icono-Spasm*, for example, features a grimacing visage, bound tightly in pink string and sparkling with glitter. *Sir Young Husbands Expeditions or Museum of Anti-British* involves a small crumpled paper head on a pole that is skewering another figure through the eyes. Elsewhere torsos writhe, heads are chopped in half, arms are lopped off, fragmentary bodies are entombed, embalmed or mummified with tape. Violence and intimations of pain abound. Like voodoo dolls, figures in *The Hammer Speaks* and *At Home He Feels Like a Tourist* are impaled by stakes that also play a role in holding them together. This is sculpture tortured by its own support, a disturbing paradox that hints at a melancholic, darker side to Monahan's project.

When we recognize a certain self-reflexivity in this contorted and rapturous pain – the existential trials of the creative process, anxieties that appear to have laid the groundwork for the entire show – Monahan's assemblages begin to move beyond their *revanchiste*, academic veneer. But it isn't clear where any of this can lead, except to some kind of purgatorial exquisite corp of making, unmaking and refiguring.

For the moment, however, Monahan's conflation of personal travail with historically familiar embodiments of struggle is perfectly effortless – we recognize the body battling against its own limitations, frozen in a perpetual effort to transcend mere materials. All of this retrospective reworking is haunted by a lonely sincerity that knows it has few peers among contemporary sensibilities. How many figurative sculptors working today, for example, would characterize their work as a 'brutal materiality edging towards spirituality', as Monahan boldly does, in language that Minimalism claimed from the Baroque?

Peter Eleey

## Matthew Monahan