

LEDISFLAM

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Deborah Masters (Gracie Mansion, LedisFlam, January 4-27), despite certain art-journalistic claims to her feminism and ancient spirituality, cannot escape the interesting fact that she has situated her work in the nth-generational descent of a morbid tradition of sculpture which peaked in France from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Masters is the same kind of morning-after feminist that one finds in current attempts to restore the reputation of Camille Claudel. She takes a conflicted dismissal of patriarchy and tries to edge this great deadweight an inch nearer to a more humane revival by repaving its premise in female terms. Best of luck.

Francine is very clearly a great-granddaughter of the funerary monuments of Antoine Etex (*Tomb of Raspail—Pleureuse drapée*, Père-Lachaise), Albert Bartholomé, and Léopold Morice, among others. Only, where in stone in Paris a draped female figure personifies an aesthete's devaluation of death—a male-poet-originated smothering of the death principle in a wash of eternal eros—in hydrocal in New York this figure is self-contained, no one's personification, no longer in mourning. *Francine* is installed with an idea of enhancing the tragic aspect: behind a pillar, facing a wall, sitting on a mahogany box. Masters's casting marks are odd and nervous, clay-like scourings and imprint marks. They provide a static that reminds one of the contemporaneity of the piece. For all Masters' formal weight, her manner gives the work a makeshift uncertainty that casts this character as one of the homeless of art history. The *Circle Figures* stand about in a Stonehenge arrangement but vary so little from body to body that in this case the inherent demand of the involvement of the tradition backfires by finding nothing in the composition to incite a tactile feeling that may not have even been on the agenda.



Deborah Masters, *Three Backs*, 1989, Hydrocal, graphite, and mahogany, 80" x 49" x 110". Courtesy LedisFlam.

Out in Brooklyn, at LedisFlam, Masters poised two tableaux on the two platforms of this former meat-locker space. The compositional elements—interacting figures, and narrative—more clearly link the work to 19th-century Paris. *Pieta*, based on a drawing, is a kind of picture sculpture—earnest, real, not ironic. For some bizarre reason, the spirit of Wenceslas Square perhaps, I would love to see this work work, but it does not quite come off. The drag of Dalou demands a uniform materiality to sustain the surge of the real sculptural space into the ideal realm of emotion. A metal knife, a real chair, break the circuit, depthcharge emotion, and the gorgon of material inspection turns it all back to—hydrocal. This crash to raw material is what caused sculpture to devolve from human to organic presence in this century: it makes the human leftovers look like that. *Three Backs* horizontally reinforces rhythms beautifully built up from foot to drape to head in each of the three figures. The backs fall out the other side of Matisse's simplification into abstraction to suggest a new birth of figuration. But the drapery over the strange completeness of stone cleavage begins the ball-rolling all the way back down Masters' Sisyphean slope to Père-Lachaise.

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ARTS
MAGAZINE

APRIL 1990