

Art in America

Deborah Masters at LedisFlam

By Nancy Princenthal

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Even from the furthest point of the hall leading to this gallery, the nine massive figures in Deborah Masters' *World View* had an uncanny impact. Square-shouldered, flat-footed and deadly serious, they advanced toward the doorway with the slow implacable progress of mortality itself. As in some unspecified ritual procession, they were ranged in two rows-five woman on the left, four men on the right. A coarse median carpet of lava stone tapered toward the rear, exaggerating the formation's depth. Each figure was about a head taller than life-size, cast from roughly modeled clay in hydrocal (a form of plaster) and rubbed with earthy pigments. All were portraits of the artist's friends and colleagues but were meant to register as types, variously bold, knowing, serene, strong. Arms held stiffly to sides, one barely flexed leg just slightly in front of the other, they formed a silent chorus less reminiscent of the early Greeks than of Cecil B. de Mile. There was, in other words, the shameless sweep of epic in *World View*-of an important story told in bold strokes.

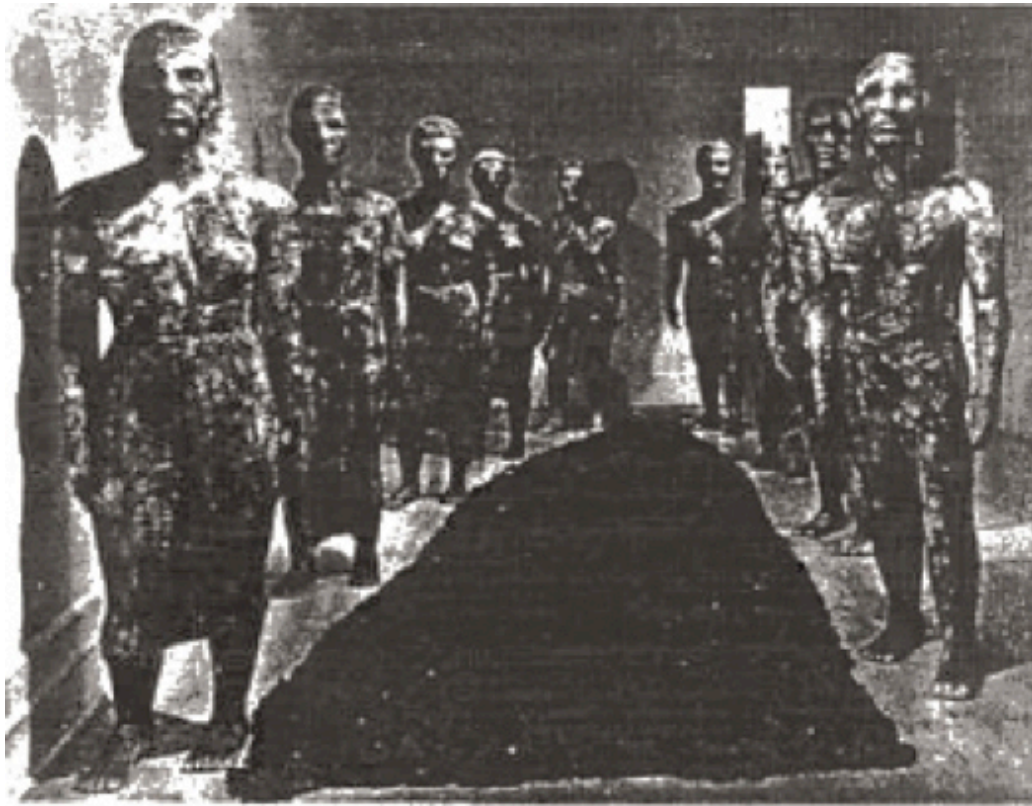
Masters has been working in this vein, based on early or pre-classical figurative models interpreted in large scale, for several years. Often, as here, the figures make up fixed groups. The legacy of ancient and mythological figuration, and of the kind of primitivizing shown in Masters' technique, has not often recently found expression in monumental terms-in our Freudianized century, ancient urges are equated with the most deeply intimate and darkly shrouded experience. Archaic myth has a comfortable place in, say, Abstract Expressionism; in sculpture, "primitivizing" now most often results in one or another form of provisional-looking, deprecating mordant funk. In *World View*, Masters returns these conventions to the service of public speech, to a diction that is used to express civic rather than inner truths. These sturdy, striving figures urge us to such virtuous accomplishments as may be torn from the teeth of diffidence, ironic historicism and other lately fashionable forms of protective coloration.

But this tone does not prevail throughout. In a smaller room (the relationship of architectural to sculptural dimensions was precisely calculated in this exhibition), the undertone of Masters' voice could be heard. *Thank You for My Adolescence* consists of a big female figure resting awkwardly in a coarse wooden tub a few sizes too small; she is a grown stuck in what might be an adolescent's open coffin, itself wedged slantwise into the gallery. Again, the figure's proportions and profile, even the stylized rim of bangs on her forehead, suggest a classical prototype. Dusted with coppery powder, she is decidedly heroic. In consequence, her ungainliness and the indignity of her position-her exposure-are dramatized. Using a metaphor no more recondite than that of a square peg in a round hole, *Thank You* tells us a great deal about individual vulnerability to institutionalized power and about the inadequacy of public language to domestic reality.

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Photograph Below:

Deborah Masters: *World View*, 1991, hydrocal, pigment, lava stone, 7 by 9 ½ by 23 feet: at LedisFlam.



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