

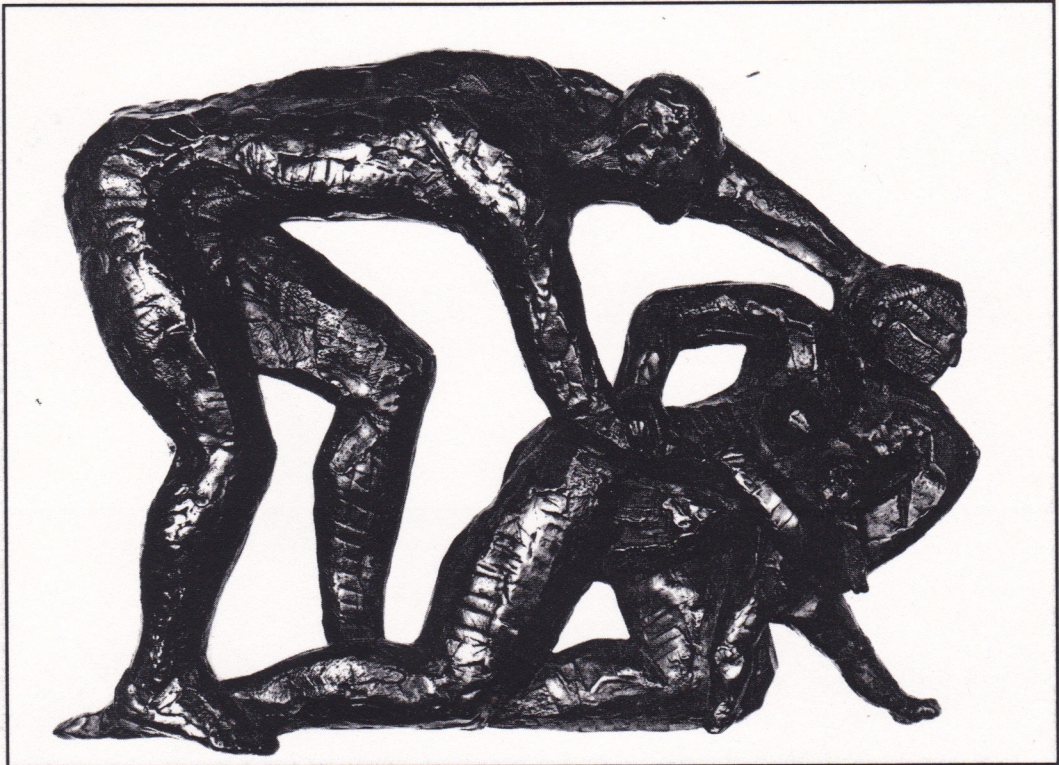
EXPOSED

To be alone is perhaps our greatest fear. We fear particularly the type of exposure that places us in space without the support and comfort of shelter, companionship or sympathetic objects. Yet until the last century, artists seldom depicted this fear. Throughout history the single figure, alone in space, was represented primarily as divine and/or heroic and excluded strength, confidence and transcendence. Fear, vulnerability and weakness were rarely expressed. These "power figures" served as physical reminders of "the answers" that structured our societies. However, beginning with the numerous scientific discoveries of the last century, world-wide communication and an overview of history, it became impossible to believe in the easy answers that these figures gave us and apparent that there are many more questions than answers.

The figure in contemporary art as exemplified by the work of Grace Graupe-Pillard, Betty Tompkins, Deborah Masters and Arnold Mesches departs from the historical precedent of figure as omniscient hero/divinity and becomes everyman, vulnerable, isolated, often fearful and perplexed. These figures do not answer our questions, they ask more and more and more. They are exposed as we the viewers are exposed to the uncertainties of life in contemporary society.

Grace Graupe-Pillard's series, "Boy With A Gun," makes reference to one of our last heroic figures, the America G.I., but by titling the series "Boy..." instead of "Man..." immediately topples any illusions that this man is a hero. Boys play games and to Graupe-Pillard, war is a game, deadly, senseless and tragic. Each of the silhouettes of the "Boy With A Gun" is crammed with an image suggesting the effects of war. "Corporate Man," cool, calculating and clean, keeps his distance from the mayhem of war while manipulating the situation for profit. "Homeless Person," "Bars," and "Starvation" pay homage to the unacknowledged victims of war games, those whose lives could have been helped by the billions of dollars spent on war toys rather than social services. "Herakles," the super hero, brings us to the realization that war according to Graupe-Pillard is not and never has been a heroic activity. The heroism of war is a myth promoted to serve the interests of greed and power and the "Boy With A Gun" is a tool and victim of those interests.

Fragments of figurative sculpture (primarily Greco-Roman) are placed in garden-like environments in the paintings of Betty Tompkins. Super nature, blindingly beautiful and aggressively fertile, overwhelms the figures who seem isolated, threatened and awkward in their new situation. These figures, even as they represent a period in the history of art of supreme artistic accomplishment, seem impotent (note the embrace of Cupid and Psyche) compared to the creative power of nature, a power that continually regenerates in contrast to the disintegration of man's creative



Divorce, bronze, 16" x 22" x 2", 1987

Courtesy: LedisFlam Gallery

"New Work," LedisFlam, Brooklyn, New York, 1989

"Snug Harbor Cultural Festival," Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, New York, 1989

"In a Dark Vein," Sculpture Center, New York, New York, 1989

"Urban Figures," Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, New York, New York, 1988

"Pond Virgins," Outdoor Sculpture Installation, The Sculpture Walk in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York

"The Blue Angel," A.I.R. Gallery, New York, New York, 1988

Permanent Collections:

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efforts. The dilemma of man vs. nature is one that numerous artists have recently addressed. Not many have had the courage, however, to address another question that seems to shout from these paintings, that of the validity of art. As examples, "Ladies of Leisure" and "Old Time Religion" indicate that art is for the time and situation for which it was created but loses validity when displaced to another setting. The notion of the validity/invalidity of art in specific situations leads us to question the validity of art in any situation. For an artist to ask this question almost amounts to heresy but it is always worth questioning our motivations as individuals and as artists as we attempt to bring greater understanding to our situation in contemporary society.

The sculptures of Deborah Masters explore the ultimate isolation of the individual. In "Divorce" we see three figures locked in a physical struggle over a small child held by a woman who cowers beneath an aggressive male. Neither the man, woman or child make eye contact with the others for they are so lost in their own misery that they can no longer communicate. The woman holding "Baby M" echoes this sense of isolation as she fearfully glances over her shoulder while fleeing an unseen (by us) terror. It would be difficult to ignore the political issues inherent in these works, the physical domination and the often subsequent physical abuse of the female, child abuse, child custody struggles and the unjust treatment of the female throughout history by the male power establishment. We are reminded of the inequitable treatment of the female in Master's sculpture, "Justice," in which a woman's severed head is utilized as a symbol for the impotence of women within the political structure of society. "Justice," also reflects, as do the other works, the frightening and harsh reality of being alone.

Closely tied to existential philosophy, the work of Arnold Mesches also deals with the isolation and impotence of the individual. Chandeliers hover dangerously and oppressively over single figures in "Three Chandeliers" and in "The Chandelier 2." These chandeliers do not illuminate the ambiguous space which appears to be neither interior or exterior but some surreal combination of both. The figures underneath appear to be stunned, saddened and resigned, caught in a situation in which there is no hope for extrication. The bellhop in "Three Chandeliers" carries two chickens, meant perhaps as sacrificial victims to placate an angry god, through by his pessimistic expression we sense the futility of his effort. The frantically exercising male figure in "The Chandelier 2" seems hopelessly ridiculous beneath the power of an enormous blood red chandelier. A small globe underneath the figure's arm gives reference to our insignificant place in the universe. In another work, "The Accordion Player," the figure is placed in a vast Pantheon-like interior. The tiny opening near the top of the dome admits a small amount of red light which like the chandeliers does not illuminate. The accordion player continues playing in a fatalistic manner reminding one of the legend about Nero's fiddling while Rome burned. To Mesches, it seems, the die cast; there is no exit.

Mesches, Graupe-Pillard, Tompkins, and Masters are tough, uncompromising artists. To explore the darkness takes great courage. We as viewers, also must have the courage to face, as these artists have, the difficulties of our contemporary situation and to work toward a resolution.

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