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Reviews: New York

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Deborah Masters at Maurice Arlos Fine Art

The relation of figurative sculpture to contemporary art is increasingly problematic- not because, as a category of image making, such sculpture is moribund, but because abstraction has pushed representational art to the side, an affront furthered by new artists' predilection for high-tech imagery that rejects the handmade for digitalization. Figurative art has no place to go primarily because its formal problems and the origins of its creation are deeply related to feeling and craft rather than to intellect and electronic design. This is not to say that figurative sculpture lacks structure, only that it takes into consideration the interior life of the viewer because of the way it is made. Artisanal skill in the service of images lasts because it is a human attribute and as such is historically aware. The essential, often stunning newness of an art devoted to the moment excludes the weighty, history bound recognition of tradition in favor of a cultural expression that is primarily neutral in its innovatory present.

In the sturdy humanism of Deborah Masters's sculptures we see a tenacity and vigor that is born of historical method. She is a politically engaged as she is figuratively inclined: one of her recent projects is a series of panels titled *New York Streets* (2001), set in the immigration Hall of the New John F. Kennedy Terminal in New York City. Consisting of 28 8-by 10-foot modified gypsum panels, *New York Streets* presents the varied ethnicities and races of New York with remarkable energy and verve; those represented play and work within easily recognizable sites in the city. The panels describe American democracy in action. Masters's political commitment in art is matched by her local activism; she is deeply involved in community issues in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where she lives and works.

Investing her subjects with a classical gravitas, Masters hopes to express the dignity of all people, no matter what walk of life they may come from. In her recent show, she presented five larger-than- life-size figures, each sitting cross-legged on the floor.

As with her earlier figures, the sculptures of acquaintances Jeff, Jesse, Allison, Henry, and Coco possess a weighted seriousness meant to capture the nobility of the human figure. The immediate accessibility of Masters's personae argues for the democratization of art- both in the representation of the figure and in the intended effect of the viewer. We have come, unfortunately, to associate the Greek nude with a general elitism in classical culture; however, the implications of Masters's dignified figures turn to the idea that a democratic mimetics would see the inherent value in those whose circumstances are straitened. If Ezra Pound's command, "Make it new," remains central to art-making in the 21st century, the goal of the figurative artist might be a representation that describes and includes segments of society usually beyond the reach of the art world.

The true worth of Henry (2002), wearing jeans, with his hair done in corn rows, resides in the massive dignity of his person. Masters's piece respects both the generalizing ideal of archaic sculpture and the specific features and body type of her model. Henry's serious, even somber, unfixed gaze gives a depth to his persona. In art, he is recognized in ways that presumably do not occur as easily within the public context of his life.

Henry is offset by Allison (2002), whose gaze is equally severe, her short bangs and quite face contrasting with the striations scratched onto the surface of her body (the marks are made on the clay model for the final pour of polyurethane fiberglass into a mold). There is, as well, a group dynamic that results from the collective experience of the assembly: Masters's verisimilitude stems from a very real awareness that the strength of a group derives from a shared purpose of pose. Masters has given her audience a version of New York's inhabitants not so distant from Brooklyn poet Walt Whitman's odes to the common man.

We might casually assume that the five people in Masters's democratic tableau would be lost to our sight if they were not singled out by the artist. We might also believe that the representation of such imagery is sufficient to acknowledge the kinds of social pressures and change that are occurring throughout the world. One remembers, however, that Masters's work stems from a deep belief in the process of democracy, in which art is for the many, not for the few. Yet by invoking the language of figuration, she keys into a large tradition, one not always, or necessarily, democratic. Masters does her best to see figurative sculpture as a truly vernacular imagery. The impersonal ideal of archaic sculpture is made more particular, and more human, by Masters's inclusion of local participants in her life. She uses the sculptural tradition to make room for a new aesthetic, one that encompasses rather than excludes. Just as Masters's political activism is valent in a world indifferent to suffering, so her methods prove meaningful in art, which has left the figure for the shock of the new. Art can be and must address the human condition: Masters has shown that she intends to remain committed to an art that speaks to the living, even as it derives strength from the dead.

Jonathan Goodman



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—Jonathan Goodman

Washington, DC

Leo Villareal

Conner Contemporary Art

Response to Leo Villareal's digital light sculptures focuses on their trippy, techno, and rave chic qualities, finding little meaning or content. While it is true that he partially draws on the hawking effects of Las Vegas and pop culture, his "hypnotic" sequences of colored light bulbs and LEDs transcend their gee-wiz impact

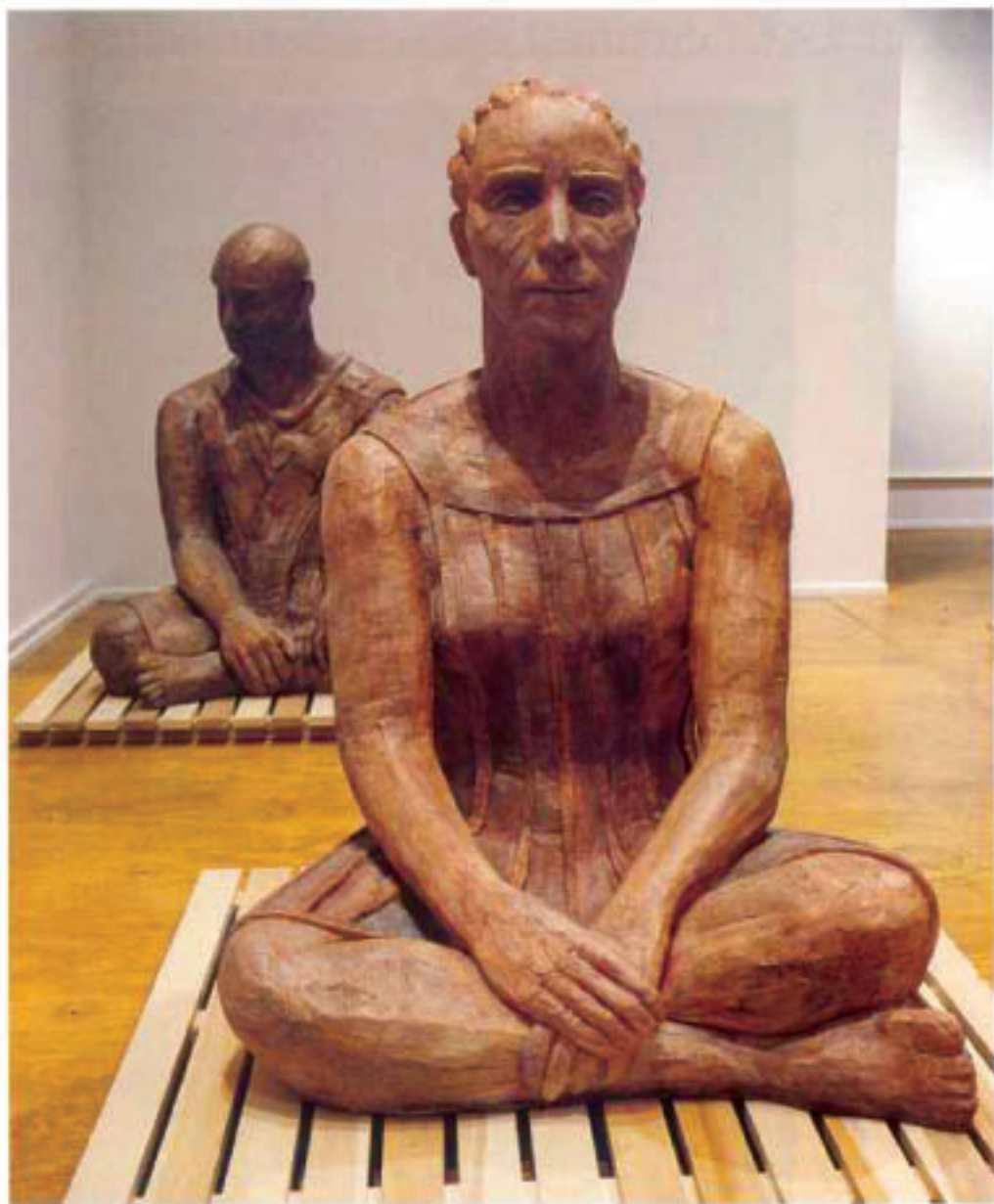
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New York

Deborah Masters

Maurice Arlos Fine Art

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Deborah Masters, detail from the exhibition "Revelations," 2002, at Maurice Arlos Fine Art.

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PETER BELLAMY