



Choreography of Attitude

The sculpture of Peter Mühlhäußer embraces many sensibilities that make for fresh entries into the history of figurative sculpture. Statuary as a rule carries with it so much historical baggage that the task of lifting the gravitas away is usually an impossible task.

The German born Mühlhäußer has successfully figured out a few ways to lift this burden, without sacrificing the integrity of his work. He defies the gravity both in gesture as well as in narrative. He balances well various attitudes of his subjects, that can give a viewer several subtle choices of emotional response.

In "Frohlocken", 2008, the sculptor has made a buxom female nude with ironic smile whose pose lies somewhere between dance, drunken balance and the buoyancy that only certain states of ecstasy afford a soul to have. She is endowed with great girth but defies gravity with the same weightless defiance in which only illusionist painters are allowed to luxuriate.

The male figure "Mocker" has the same fluid mocking dance as the obese "Frohlocken". He, however, carries with him a menacing fitness in his stance and physique. It is almost as if Mühlhäußer has composed a full figure Messerschmidt, the well-studied Austrian Baroque sculptor from the mid- 1700's. He bears not quite a grimace, but projects an ironic mockery that is only detectable after some study.

The real power in these otherwise comedic characters lies in their very competent and reverent rendering, as well as a patina that belies the artist's irreverence toward conventional statuary. "Frohlocken" has been finished in shocking pink acrylic somewhere between peptobismol and the shade of a cheap lipstick. This might not sound beautiful or carefully thought out, but it accomplishes the same otherworldliness as some of the colors of Francis Bacon's triptychs from the sixties. If isolated they are nauseating, but paired with particular forms and narratives hold interesting psychological power.

Equally as compelling and far more poignant is the figure entitled "Phoenix". This is a portrait that covers so much interesting ground within the world of statuary. It is a mythic portrait of the artist's grandmother, who is ill and transcends this burden with a dance. The figure balances on one leg while throwing her body forward in a way that speaks of youthful rites of Spring. Except for a clearly invincible spirit and character, it wouldn't be an anatomically flattering or modest sculpture. But this is its essence and power: no modesty is necessary in life's celebration, near its end, with the heroism of no regrets. This piece is a triumph both in narrative and physical accomplishment, as well as subtle engineering. She is an unashamed and glorious version of the "Old Market Woman" (from the Hellenistic Period that may still be viewable at The Metropolitan Museum of Art) with the same kinetic qualities. One comes to terms with her vulnerability, the contemporary version seems to pleasantly mock her own mortality.

Medardo Rosso had begun a great argument for the power of anti-heroic sculpture at the end of the nineteenth century, serving as a great nemesis for Rodin's melodramatic modeling. Daumier had used caricature both in style and mocking narrative. Peter Mühlhäußer has been able to collect many contemporary and art historical notions to mix into a wonderful cocktail of pathos and heroic defiance.

He has also been able to afford himself the pleasure of mockery without aggression or self-effacement. Balance seems to be his key ingredient in composition, narrative and attitude.

Mark Mennin, New York, 2009