Interval
The conditional monuments of David Robinson
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Upon encountering the beast, one confronts a seemingly endless series of allegorical shifts: the mythical centaur, with uncharacteristic complacency, supports an equestrian, who sits astride his incredible mount with equally incredible slack insouciance. This complex set of relationships is soon overtaken by another, for the attitudes of the two figures are not merely equivalent—they are exact replications of one another. One is left to wonder not only who is leading whom, but to what end?

This equestrian monument deftly shakes the genre loose from its assumptions, making the horse and rider equal partners in an unfamiliar enterprise. It is an uncanny thing, familiar but made strange, that tugs one both back and forward to the Ur-world of a collective unconscious, and forward toward an ungraspable future. As an unfamiliar enterprise. It is an empty, and it is this space surrounding the work that we must pause of understanding. It alludes to something invisible or unsolicited Proposal for a Public Monument readily admit the disaster that befall them. Have they been forsaken in the desert or rightfully ignored in some urban plaza? Meanwhile, the sightless/seeing eyes of the centaur/rider superimpose their deserted or rightfully ignored in any contemplation of his work must penetrate this cultural/historical overcast, find some purchase on these questions, or skirt the significance to be found there.

Both myth and monument are uneasy grist for contemporary sculptural practice, embedded as they are in historical time. To resurrect the forms wholesale and without irony, as Robinson apparently does, is both extreme and extremely unlikely to succeed, and the unreasonableness of this proposition suggests some fundamental change in our attitude toward history since the heyday of allegorical sculptural representation. This is a moment of discontinuity. History has become commercialized. It is now far more practical to us as a malleable and reactive material than as a rigid, though permeable, shell. If Robinson's past figures have struggled to maintain their position outside this protective structure, Interval is ideally and disquietingly suited to the newfound terrain.

Robinson plays upon our current ahistorical sensibility by engaging in a historically grounded traditional form—representational modelling—to allegorically express our alienation from any culturally defined past and future. Precisely because they are nearly forgotten, the conventions he challenges draw our attention to the corrosive relationship we now keep with the past, and with the idea of culture that is stretched by it and us. In resurrecting the form outside of its extinct cultural milieu, Robinson has exploited its new availability to speak historically and, coincidentally, in opposition to globally culture-consuming capital.

Resurrecting the convention in the starkest light, Robinson's Interval makes use of the artisan's ability to create unique objects to address the defining aspect of postindustrial workaday world: reproducibility. Reproducibility of text, sound, image, object and now life has multiplied and diluted the cultural contexts surrounding any given concept, freeing us, to some extent, from our bonds with history itself. World-culture, or "consumed culture" is rendering the social landscape an uncanny place, fit for narcissism and nihilism but little else. Is this the apocalypse our society so avously conjures up to haunt our horizon? This theoretical day of judgement looms incessantly, and Robinson seems to suggest that we consider our options, if any, to escape its hypnotic pull.

In order to read the allegory represented by Interval, the viewer must adopt a stance "within" history, a position that would have seemed perfectly natural some few hundred years ago or in an imagined non-industrial culture, but one that is increasingy unpoplar if not untenable in the globalized world. It seems we are safely within the capitalist regulated field of professional artistic activity only when we take a critical stance toward a specific history, whatever history, a stance that comes to locate itself outside history itself in the whatever-moment of discontinuity.

The right to institutional critique is increasingly emptied of potency, standing the activists among us on the high ground. Left or right as political terms are obviously and importantly moot within this discussion, as are race and religion, all rendered inert by the value of novelty. In this situation, the germane question is no longer "Whose history is it?" but "Can (this) history continue?"

The objective of Robinson's work is clearly not the glorification of a single past, but an emnoblizing of the human ability to maintain a past at all, one that is at once both captivating and inspiring. His sculptures bear the marks of the progressive assault on cultural belief systems, but they equally acknowledge the flawed rationale of their forebears. The skeletal miniatures of Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones and Unsolicited Proposal for a Public Monument readily admit the disaster that befall them. Have they been forsaken in the desert or rightfully ignored in some urban plaza? Meanwhile, the sightless/seeing eyes of the centaur/rider superimpose their double vision upon all equestrian monuments that precede them. Given the chance, will the rider ever resolve the relationship with his mount, let alone his foe? Has he the chance? These works all speak from within the historical continuum, discredited as it is, with directness apt to measure the easily earned ironic distance we may now claim as a right under capitalism.

No matter what scale or situation, whether in public or private hands, these sculptures ask, impractically, to be considered as monuments, for our dubious ability to maintain history is the condition upon which the works' monumentality is based, not their size or site. It is a quality that would be assumed within the logic of the monument, but its
questioned existence in these works becomes part of their content as well. They make do, humbled, bordering on irrelevance, unable to properly inhabit information—plenty, story-less time. Robinson’s output to date has rarely faltered in its attempt to portray the contingency of subjectivity that is equally the task of many if not most contemporary artists. It is his insistence on historical continuity, on bracketing rupture, which puts him at odds with much current practice. His stance, it would seem, is as radical as it is conservative.

As in a myth, Robinson’s sculptures appear to face long odds and a precarious fate. Inherently public sculpture in a privatized age, physical markers in an uncanny landscape, these misbegotten creatures of myth and history will succeed only through their ability to endure, drawing our attention to our own cultural past. I

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suites à une longue période de recherche et de création en atelier, loin du regard de l’autre, l’artiste, pour ce projet récent, pousse plus loin l’exploration d’un nouveau matériau. Fontana, qui avait travaillé auparavant avec la terre cuite et ensuite avec la terre crue et séchée, explore l’univers du plâtre comme lieu de transplantation à l’intérieur duquel elle insuffle la sensation d’un premier contact et d’une véritable rénaissance. “... je tente d’accueillir la rupture et la perte, dit l’artiste. D’une certaine façon, je provoie ce que je redoute le plus. Face à cette situation, je cherche des solutions. Je compose avec mes peurs.”

Fontana explore ici la matière jusqu’à ses racines. Les deux matériaux essentiels sont la terre, qui nous ramène à la nature et à l’organique, et le plâtre, que l’on associe plutôt à des manifestations culturelles. Le plâtre sert habituellement à des travaux de maçonnerie. Dans l’œuvre de Fontana, il se présente comme un sol culturel immaçulé, s’entrelace avec la terre noire et, de là, naît un jeu amoureux et singulier entre Éros et Thanatos. Deux matériaux hétérogènes dans un rapport fluctuant: soit que la terre émerge des profondeurs du plâtre, soit qu’elle s’enfonce en lui, soit qu’elle prenne le dessous en formant des plis lourds, épais, soit encore qu’elle le ronge ou se glisse et se dissipe sur ses surfaces. Un matériau laisse ses empreintes sur l’autre. Ils se transforment mutuellement, prenant une nouvelle identité et deviennent un tout dans l’ensemble de l’œuvre.

La mise en espace dans la galerie crée des tensions complexes sur des axes verticaux et horizontaux, et rend leur elasticité palpable. Plusieurs compositions, réunissant des fragments de différentes formes et factures, sont posées sur le sol. Amas de neige fondante, vestiges du passé, matérialisations de structures spirituelles, croisements de la terre ou morceaux extrêpés du mur, les composantes anticipent un mouvement qui n’est possible que dans le désir et l’imaginaire, réve­lent une possible enveloppe dans des directions opposées de découl­lement et d’aterrissage qui se produisent en même temps et ne peuvent exister que dans l’œuvre.

“Le plâtre permet l’abstraction, note l’artiste. Je ne le rattache pas à une époque ou à un lieu particulier. Sa blancheur agit dans mon travail comme le vide de l’espace ou de la page blanche. Il s’offre, vierge, sans traces ni inscriptions, pas d’his­toire. Le blanc est matière. Il “supporte” ce qui survient et accentue par son éclat l’impor­tance de ce qui lui arrive, la ren­contre avec une autre matière. Le blanc est lieu.”

Gabrièle Fontana compose et crée l’espace dans la matière. Le mouvement dans l’œuvre trahit les gestes posés dans le proces­sus de création et rend l’expres­sion transparente. À travers cette transparence, le spectateur peut voir, vivre la création en y participant avec sa propre expé­rience. L’artiste sculpte sans pêtrir le matériau. Elle laisse le plâtre s’écouler jusqu’au point où la décision d’arrêter cet étalement s’impose. À ce moment, l’intervention est incluse, elle produit des formes droites et angulaires avec la surface lisse. Alternant le mouvement spontané, qui découle des pulsions provenant du matériau lui-même dans son état liquide, et le mou­vement contrôlé par la main de l’artiste, Fontana capte la puis­sance de l’instant qui demeure vivante dans l’œuvre. Alors que le plâtre sèche vite, craque et s’effrite, elle laisse les emprein­tes de ces différents étais se révéler.

L’artiste montre la plasticité du plâtre sous un angle qui éclaire en même temps la fragilité et la capacité de résistance du matériau, ainsi que sa douceur et sa durée, sa fluidité, sa fixité et sa fébrilité. La rondeur de certains formes est accentuée par l’angularité d’autres; les surfaces poreuses et feuilletées rendent plus évidentes celles qui sont imperméables et polies. La force et la provocation se transforment.