

Distance, Difference and Memory: the Sculpture of Robin Peck
Robin PECK, *Distance*, Diaz Contemporary, Toronto, November
25 - December 22, 2010

Dion Kliner

Numéro 95, printemps 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/62953ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (imprimé)

1923-2551 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Kliner, D. (2011). Compte rendu de [Distance, Difference and Memory: the Sculpture of Robin Peck / Robin PECK, *Distance*, Diaz Contemporary, Toronto, November 25 - December 22, 2010]. *Espace Sculpture*, (95), 38–39.

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"...and there, ahead, all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that there was where he was going."

Looking down onto the rectangular white tops of Robin Peck's sculpture, I think of the architectural wonders of the Fertile Crescent recovered at the end of the 19th c. in stark black and white photographs; and of Harry's hallucinatory aerial vision of Kilimanjaro ("House of God") as he succumbs to death at the end of Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*.¹

After forty years of work as a sculptor, all of Robin Peck's work and thinking are distilled into the lopsided purity of his new gypsum-plaster stepped sculptures. Shrines to the memory of sculpture, architecture and three-dimensional design, they are historical reliquaries of Cubist collage, Soviet and Dutch Constructivism, the reductivism of Brancusi, American Minimalism, Conceptual Art of the early 70's, contemporary post-modernist consumer-object art, whiteness and the crystal metaphor.

In Peck's œuvre since the early 1970s, the stepped form has been a periodic constant. His use of it now looks back not only over his own

history, but further, to a time of epic, biblical architectural history, and beyond even that to the geologic time in which crystals are embedded. The regression is to something fundamental: distant but still vital precursors that can dwarf the present. As forms and images, we have lived with them our entire lives. These are Ur forms (those from which all others flow, irreducible). We know them from Babel and Marduk, Giza and Saqqarah. They rise out of the sands of legend and imagination, a staple of movies and novels.

Just as Kilimanjaro is sacred to the Masai of Kenya and northern Tanzania, mountains sacred to other

cultures have been the influence for a transformation into, or location of, sacred architecture. Mount Kailas in the Trans-Himalaya, upon which the forms of Hindu temples are based, is one. Mount Moriah in Jerusalem (the historic site of Solomon's Great Temple and current site of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock) is another. Solomon's Temple, as described in the Hebrew Old Testament text, is one of the bases by which the crystal metaphor makes its way into architecture (sacred and otherwise) and sculpture. For the crystalline architectural fantasies of the German Expressionists, for Robert Smithson, and for Peck, it is a seminal story.

Robin PECK, *Distance*, 2010. Installation view. Courtesy of Diaz Contemporary. Photo: Toni HAFKENSCHIED.





Robin PECK,
Distance, 2010.
Detail. Courtesy of
Diaz Contemporary.
Photo: Toni
HAFKENSCHIED.

As much as Peck's sculptures are reminiscent of monumental religious and funerary architecture, the nascent architecture of ancient altars (a stylized expression of the sacred mountain and the act of "going up"), the stepped, crystalline forms of modern skyscrapers (the architecture of commerce), and gigantic crystals, they are not sculptures of any of these things; rather they are sculptures *like* many things. Most of all, however, they are representations of their own internal structure, and their making. Peck begins with the ordinary cardboard containers of everyday life (cereal, shoes, a toaster, a television) collected from his role as a consumer, assembled into a stepped form. Then he buries them in burlap and plaster, applied by hand. Peck considers plaster his primary material, and this commitment makes him one of very few sculptors to do so. Often used provisionally or experimentally (as a step to another material or in the development of a model or study), there is an amorphousness to plaster. Yet at

the microscopic level, it has a crystalline integrity as rigid and unyielding as the stylistic conventions of ancient Egypt. Rarely is plaster accorded the respect of a "permanent" material, but it was just this transitional quality that stimulated Giacometti to paint many of his bronze sculptures white. In Peck's devotion to whiteness and concentration on texture as indices of the physical properties of plaster, the speed and manner of its application and the involvement of the hand, his work has resonance with the paintings of Robert Ryman. For Peck, texture is also suggestive of real and metaphorical distance (memory). This texture is the memory or sublimation of the haptic experience of buying and consuming the contents of the cardboard boxes. That experience then becomes the texture or "handling" in the process of plastering.

Like the early modernists and later, sculptors like Donald Judd, Peck's sculptures get their effect "from a very simple composition of

lines and planes" (Henri Gaudier-Brzeska).² Paradigmatic American Minimalist sculpture was crystalline, the forms and serial construction paralleling the forms and serial growth patterns of crystal systems, their surfaces hard and smooth. Trying to get loose from the grip of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalists avoided the look of the hand and adopted the machine made. Peck retains the crystalline, but returns to the hand and to texture.

In their construction, this group of sculpture is straightforward; three stories, three boxes. The structure is blunt, but also elegant, musical; 1-2-3, 1-2-3, it is a waltz and a haiku. It may also be figural: head, torso, legs seated. Generally varying in size between half- and full-size figures, the sculptures are human scaled in their relation to the pyramidal form of a sitting, Buddha-like figure, its greater stasis more sculptural than a standing figure.

Given their scale and placement on the floor, we are forced to view Peck's sculptures from a position

above. This is the long view, the epic view. It might also be the no-less-ideal view of something small held up-close, in the hand. In both cases, the perspective given is that of the maker's, privileged and ideal. When close attention is paid, each of the sculptures is similar, yet subtly different. In these differences lies their individual identity, but for Peck, "it's a somewhat indifferent identity." ←

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NOTES

1. Ernest Hemingway, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories*, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961.
2. Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, NY: New Directions, 1970.

Dion KLINER is a sculptor and writer currently living in Vancouver. His work can be seen at the Vancouver Art Gallery's upcoming exhibition *Unreal*, from January 22nd through September 5th, 2011. He is a frequent author of catalog essays, and is a contributor to *Flash Art* with some regularity.