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VITAL VICTUALS: A (POST)MODERN REMIX

by Jeffrey P. Smith

David Schafer
Separated United Forms
CHARTA (2011)

Published last year by the Italian press Charta, *David Schafer: Separated United Forms* is a glossy vehicle for the sculptor's recent work. It is a fine collection of elegantly laid out images with a theory-laden text which struggles to find its focus. Its merit will largely depend on your inclination regarding theory driven art and writing. Is this book's use of theory a vice or virtue?

Showcased is Schafer's 2009 public sculpture "Separated/United Forms." A diptych of the grotesque, these elephantine bronze blobs are born from theory and veer, for better or worse, into the abject. Situated on the campus of Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, Schafer's bodily treatment of monumental abstraction alludes to the convalescing bodies nearby. A conceptual artist with a sensitivity to form, Schafer drew on his experience with electronic music by digitally sampling and reconfiguring another work, Henry Moore's 1966 "Reclining Form." This Postmodern remix of a modernist classic transforms Schafer into a D.J. of sculptural form through his digitized approach to the appropriation of ready-made motifs. The theme of Vitalism bridges the two artists, inspiring both to imbue sculpture with an animating force which makes abstract form and inert materials appear to be living organic matter itself. Schafer's riff on Moore looks something like gargantuan lima beans pregnant with semi-digested innards, or boa constrictors in the convulsive throes of peristalsis after a big meal. The duo of dyspeptic legumes is served up on a custom-made platform with built-in lighting to enhance chiaroscuro and reveal their pulsating vitality. This is frankenfood from a genetic experiment gone awry.

Most intriguing is the process by which they were realized. Using three-dimensional scanning and imaging technology provided by the hospital, Schafer's forms are digitally transposed and turned in on themselves, separated into fragments then reunited into a novel whole. The sculptures are cast without an original, at least not a tangible one, for the positive prototype from which the molds were fashioned exists exclusively in cyberspace. Henri Moore created vital presence with his hands, yet no manual labor determines form here at all. The final shapes are obtained from neither carving nor modeling. They are the synthesis of appropriated forms deconstructed on the computer. Antecedents extend from Moore to a host of modernists, including Brancusi and Arp. Schafer straddles the

ideological divide between a concern for concept and the desire of his forebears for innovative form as his postmodern reshuffle moves beyond a pastiche of rehashed icons. As a fugue-like variation on a theme by Moore, this work has the distinct appearance of formal originality not typically associated with theory-driven art. Instead, his appropriation of already-made canonical forms verges on a type of modernist classicism.

Through the coherence of its motivating idea and subsequent execution, Schafer's work earns its keep as concept art. But this book's heaping of theory fails to drive this point home with sufficient force and will only tickle the erogenous zones of those predisposed to such linguistic foreplay. The texts provided by Schafer and critic Jan Tumlir dovetail into a related whole. Interpretive essays are proffered in the first and last chapters by Schafer and Tumlir respectively, while the book's middle sections provide a detailed explanation of the sculptural process by Schafer. The contentions of both writers are diminished by their lack of criticality and economy even when they manage to suggest central themes and meanings. Clarity of argument is often obscured as both succumb to a distracting infatuation with jargon. A potential pitfall of concept art and postmodern theory is the often glib liberality with which they appropriate forms and ideas which aren't always earned. The usual suspects are rounded up, from Freud to Foucault, and Lacan. Vacant tropes like the "gaze," "mirror stage," "shifter," and the "lack" become mere verbal incense, like mystifying incantations of an esoteric sect. Failing to clarify, they serve only as shiny linguistic logos. Postmodern theory-speak is all too often like getting an entrée with a very heavy sauce under which one soon discovers there is no meat or potatoes.

In the concluding essay Tumlir provides an apologia, defending the work against public scorn. Monumental sculpture's struggle with popular opinion runs from Rodin's *Balzac* and Serra's *Tilted Arc*, to the myriad complications of Olafur Eliasson's recent *New York City Waterfalls* project, illustrating this ongoing plight before the public tribunal, Schafer's objects were received as mere baubles suggesting feces, fat, and genitalia. These reactions are not only appropriate; they are the very allusions, as Tumlir mentions, which suggest specificity to the hospital site. In combating various reactions Tumlir goes on to present multiple, even contrary, perspectives of interpretation to avoid any one as definitive. In asking what these sculptures really mean, he falls back on an old Duchampian conceit by outsourcing the creation of meaning to their audience. Lacking essence, all interpretations are permitted, and all are equally good, to boot. This approach makes the work's meaning indeterminate, and such open-endedness risks pandering by transforming it, like a Rorschach test, into a mirror for the viewer's identity.

Tumlir's use of semantic indeterminacy ultimately works against his own position, even as he leverages it in an attempt to deconstruct criticisms as arbitrary perspective. His denial of priority to a better or best interpretation becomes a hermeneutical trap which ultimately undermines the authority of his own point of view. How can he successfully rebut "philistine" interpretations when his interpretive premise denies the very possibility of such rebuttals? As a surrogate for an entire debate, public sculpture would be better served by a rhetorical willingness to confront rather than avoid its

challenging dilemmas. Time spent playing with multiple perspectives ultimately becomes a missed opportunity to focus on a coalescing set of central meanings Tumlr might have taken a stand on, ones which he merely drives by, rather than delving into. Readers will be left to themselves to tease out the main course from this Postmodern tasting menu.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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