

September 2022

Head On

At the invitation of Dominique Lévy, I turned the idea of a sculpture exhibition at the LGDR in New York over in my mind for the past few months. Her proposal was to focus on heads – a familiar motif, given that the human figure, particularly in the sense of a portrait, was the first and still is the most enduring theme in sculpture. Even after the advent of abstraction in the early twentieth century, this motif did not lose any of its fascination, and artists continued to make likenesses of a model or invent an imaginary vis-à-vis. William Tucker put it in a nutshell, “Just the idea of making something alive through my touch and grasp was so exciting and also so primitive.”



In the choice of works for this exhibition, I refrained from following the usual historical threads strictly, given that time and space did not allow the compilation of an overview. Instead, the exhibition, which opened in early September with the title “Head On”, brings together thirty most unusual and surprising examples of sculptured heads from the twentieth century. The exhibition is a capriccio, for it flouts the canon of Modern Art in many ways. Casts in bronze and other materials are juxtaposed with ceramics, while slender figures stand next to ones that are larger than life. It was no easy task to exhibit these very different sculptures alongside each other, starting with the problem of the plinth. Help was to be had in unobtrusive shelves and tables, which were specially made for the presentation.



The heads displayed have one thing in common – they are not simply thought out, but have been shaped or worked by hand. At the outset, the processes of making sculpture are paramount and not preconceived ideas. These operations are full of contradictions, encouraging the building up of a figure, only to destroy it again, to caress and yet to attack it – to cast aside formal conventions and in this way create heads such as have never been seen before. This has been the achievement very often of artists who were painters at heart and only made sculpture on the side or for limited periods; they are well represented in the exhibition – André Derain, Jean Fautrier, Asger Jorn, Willem de Kooning and Joan Miró. These painters addressed sculptural themes playfully or deliberately, with the aim of challenging their own established gestures. De Kooning seems to have discovered in modelling clay an extension of his painting and when working on the deformation of the shape of a head evolved an autonomous sequence of depressions and elevations that took him beyond impasto technique. Fautrier’s heads, on the other hand, give the impression that the painter, while shaping the clay and fashioning rough-and-ready surfaces, discovered what matter could mean for his painting. For Derain in turn, his eclectic treatment of archaic motifs could offer an escape from his isolated situation in post-War France. The significance of such escapades for the artists’ painterly oeuvre often only became apparent in retrospect.



There are three sculptures by William Tucker to be seen that he made over the last few months. Instead of modelling them from scratch as is his wont, he cut chunks out of a plaster figure he had stored in his studio; to begin with, these just looked like amorphous objects, but he went on to add to them and chip away until heads emerged, poised at the interface between processual ambiguous form and recognizable facial features. This ambivalence is also true of Fautrier’s “Otage” with a silhouette of the head projecting as a comb-like structure from the amorphous mass, and equally of the late over-life-size figure by Jorn, which resembles stones piled up in layers. Jorn is represented in the exhibition by a ceramic figure inspired by Northern folk art, which is positioned next to the portrait of a young woman by Lucio Fontana; both works stem from the studio of Tullio d’Albisola on the Ligurian coast, where the two artists met in the 1950s.



The two fine unfired clay heads by Marisa Merz turn away from the viewer; rather than being imaginary portraits, they serve as markers articulating the space. Joel Shapiro addresses the legibility of volumes, which are cast as negative forms. His apparently abstract objects become heads when placed on a shelf to confront the viewer, perhaps even self-portraits, as he once indicated. John Chamberlain took inspiration from the Carnival of Venice and made his own masks in the late 1990s. Along the lines of his sculptures made from lacquered car parts, he focussed his interest on the coloured hollow surfaces. In Thomas Schütte’s “You and Me” two heads lean towards each other, yet remain separate, forming a symbolically charged double portrait. The heads are placed horizontally on their sides and thus become death masks.

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