

Tom Moody, "Critical Mass," Art Papers, July/August issue, 1995

Critical Mass

Dallas Artists Research and Exhibition (D.A.R.E.) at the McKinney Avenue Contemporary (the MAC)
Dallas, Texas January 20 – February 26

In this survey or recent sculpture, which traveled from the Yale University art gallery to the newly-opened MAC in Dallas, sculptor Charles Long used a simple formal device to link abstract, representational, and conceptual tendencies. As Long put it, each of the show's fourteen works (by as many artists) occupies "about as much space as an adult human form if you could remold it in another shape." Spaced evenly across an expanse of varnished concrete floor and dramatically lit, the objects had a collective identity that bridged radical differences among individual works.

Among the exhibit's many leitmotifs, the excretory mass appears most frequently. From its tiny, literal incarnation as a micro-speck of an artist's feces on a white pedestal (Tom Friedman's Untitled), it expands into William Tucker's Rodinesque bronze turd, flattens into a pink puddle in Carl Ostendarp's Anything to Please, and gets squirted all over the place in an untitled work by John Miller. The allusions to bodily waste reflect the upsurge of interest in the "abject," a condition described by French theoretician Julia Kristeva and applied to recent art trends in a 1993 Whitney Museum exhibit called "Abject Art" (which featured Miller's scatological work).

In the broadest sense, abjection deals with the breakdown of meaning in an alienating, technological culture. The Whitney exhibit, which also drew heavily on the writings of renegade surrealist Georges Bataille, defined abject art to include transgressive femininity, the investigation of degraded elements, and works dealing with gender confusion and body horror. These themes surfaced with varying degrees of intensity in "Critical Mass." **Drew Shiflett's bricolage landscape, Kathleen Schimert's molten heaps of blue felt, and Emil Lukas' paper and plaster sandwich all have a rough, distressed quality, as if battling the forces of entropy, but Michelle Segre goes completely over the edge with a waxy little creature that looks like a cross between a deformed turtle and the Elephant Man. Replete with veins, skin diseases, and sagging folds of flesh, this grotesque effigy forbodes what humans may resemble after a few hundred years of watching cable and surfing the Internet.**

Lillian Ball's bright red sculpture of cast urethane looks slick and industrial on one side, lumpy and organic on the other. The smooth side resembles an enormous breast and the organic side has a rough-hewn quality making the breast appear amputated. Jack Risley's floor spill of cardboard boxes swaddled in a commercial shipping wrapper suggests packaging for upper middle class lifestyle accoutrements, as well as the boxes and body bags that are the final refuge of less privileged urbanites. Several works incorporating urban detritus signal a transition from the abject to the idealized: Maya Lin's crinkly, twinkly sphere of shattered auto safety glass, for example, turns the wreckage of our highways into a vision of platonic perfection.

Some sculptures functioned less well as autonomous creations than transition pieces or foils for other works. Judy Haber's Lump, consisting of a caulked and sanded brain coral hunkered down in a bean bag chair, is a one-liner that nevertheless links the exhibition's artificial and organic styles. Michael Gitlin's irregular polygonal solid of sanded, varnished wood—well crafted and thoughtful in its plays on hard and soft geometry—is a rather benign throwback to the purist abstraction of the '70s, but provides a needed contrast to the grunge elements of the show.

A few works are accompanied by anecdotal information that greatly affects their interpretation. Erwin Wurm's sculpture which resembles a lichen-covered dung-ball, becomes thematically richer when the viewer discovers that it's actually a massive blob of solid, slowly drying oil paint—you speculate about whether it's a painting instead of a sculpture, or how many years it will take to dry. Once you've learned from the title card that Lillian Ball cast her urethane breast from an igloo-shaped doghouse called a "dogloo," it loses the exoticism of the unfamiliar industrial artifact but gains something back as a kind of reconstituted Pop object. Maya Lin's safety glass sphere is slowly growing in size, like Pee Wee Herman's foil ball, as Lin glues on new glass fragments with silicone, but you don't have to know about the obsessive or ritualistic aspects of the work to enjoy it.

According to Long's catalog essay, "critical Mass" refers to the point in atomic physics when "mass can no longer contain itself and becomes an event." In other words, the title symbolizes

how a variety of factors—the skill of the artist, the discernment of the critical viewer, the gallery context, the relationship of objects to other objects, historical or anecdotal information—can transform ordinary matter into an “event” or experience that changes the way the viewer sees the world. As curator, Long’s role in this process included a healthy degree of self-interest. As he mentioned in his gallery talk, he chose works from which he wanted to learn something as an artist. Thus, his own desires became the most important factor binding seemingly disparate masses into a resonant whole.

Tom Moody, Dallas, Texas