

Idio Cognito (catalogue), essay by Nancy Princenthal, 1993

Idio Cognito

To the credit of curator (and participating artist) Caroline Cox, these eight sculptors seem brought together as much in the spirit of professional congregation and intellectual exchange as in a demonstration of unifying theme or method. What they have in common can be best defined by what they reject: there is no work here executed by commercial fabricators; close involvement with materials and processes is critical throughout. None of the artists proceeds according to conceptual specifications, whether formal or political. Though there is little overt figurative imagery, all of the work evolves organically, equal parts guiding image, intuition, and alert responsiveness to incidents that occur during execution. And there are no easy summaries, of individual works or the assembled whole.

Three of the artists work by putting together commercial materials – assemblages of “found objects,” these kinds of sculptures are generally called, though the term misleadingly suggests a passive process. Cox is at present following several directions in her work, all of which make use of components she creates from industrial products and stocks for later use. Sometimes she strings together plates of various sizes, some made of plaster or cut metal, others a compound containing glue and graphite or pigment. These are, literally, edgy sculptures, composed provisionally and seen only in profile, the full faces of their flattened forms eclipsed. A playful attitude toward right and wrong views – a subversion of conventions derived mainly from painting, with which Cox began her career – appears throughout her work (and is taken up by several other artists in this exhibition). Another series of Cox’ sculptures, including the untitled work shown here, begin with plywood cut into crook-shaped figures and laminated into segments that are nestled one inside the other. Traces of glue and plaster create a rough, scaly surface that Cox favors for its evidence of gravity and viscosity, or, in her words, of “nature not as biomorphic shape, but as a system of forces within which we are enmeshed.”

Drew Shiflett came to sculpture from drawing, and like Cox works by layering materials in ways that undermine the easy identification of inside and out or front and back. But Shiflett’s arrival at three dimensions proceeded from a more literal extension of work with paper, which for several years she wove into increasingly elaborate frames that ultimately assumed sculptural presence. Her current sculpture is still, in a sense, woven, from materials that now include cloth, wire, Styrofoam, plastic, metal conduit, and papier-mache. Though Shiflett’s additive process is slow and laborious, its object is not settled contours or stable mass but rather rough-hewn forms that seem as structurally and psychologically fluid as a contemporary city. Shiflett herself tends to see ghosts of churches in her work, as, for instance, in the upper sweep of Arch or Castle/Cut-Out. But a variety of other architectural associations arise, from staircases and chairs to, as in Throne with Snowballs, a royal seat that doubles as a commode. In this work as elsewhere, the pristine white of the materials, including styrofoam and tulle, makes a forceful contrast to the deliberate messiness of their assembly, an opposition as potent as that between its various allusions.

If the spatial complexity in Shiflett’s work, and particularly its tension between planarity and volume, can be said to carry forward issues first explored in Cubism, in Elana Herzog’s work the heritage of Dada and Surrealism is most evident. Herzog allows her materials to retain their full practical and emotive identity, for the most part manipulating only their scale and their mutual relationships. With gestures as deft as they are discreet, she transforms a few yards of metal shelf posts, a trailing necklace of plastic pearls and a bolt of mud-gray ultrasuede into an abstract figure of muffled perception, stately rectitude, and comic decline (Article OF, 1990). This is not to say that Herzog deals in explicit metaphor or scants formal concerns, and in this sculpture, as in others, she too challenges standing notions of interior and exterior, primary and secondary views. **Like Shiflett and Cox, Herzog also spins volume out of unpromisingly one-dimensional material,** such as an intestine-like tangle of thick, weathered nautical rope, loosely held together on the floor by a fitted bedsheet and studded here and there with open handbags (Untitled #1, 1992). Herzog is drawn to off-the-rack supplies for making planar form sculptural--elastic ribbon--or for making heaped material flat--embroidery hoops, a readymade analogy for canvas stretchers; these operations have the formal elegance and economy of a good joke. Untitled #8, its apron of yellow fabric laid demurely on the floor, its hem edged in a delicate scallop of red plastic beads, and its waist threaded by one of two unforgivingly industrial metal posts, trounces a whole spectrum of conventions that shades from the visual to the social.

To discuss Nene Humphrey's work in connection with Elana Herzog's is to see just how ambiguous the term "found object" can be. Humphrey, too works with industrial materials, including wire rope and metal screening, but their application is quite compulsively handmade, and the work's narrative associations come from way beyond the steel belt. For several years, she has been twisting open the strands of thin wire cable, or prying apart wire mesh, and working the crimped and shortened wires that result into a wide variety of nets and cages. Often, the forms are suspended from the ceiling, or made to hover just above the floor. In *Furious Memory*, dozens of casts of lightly clenched fists lie on a heap of stuffed white flour sacks, the whole held tight by a hand-knotted wire net. Similar hands, cast in bronze or, as here, artificial stone, have appeared in other recent work, where they stand as surrogate figures, a species of condensed and displaced portrait. In *Keeper*, a trio of them rest at the bottom of a net like the caught fish alluded to in the title. *Furious Memory* is more complex, its imagery suggesting dreams that lie heavy, resisting the confines of sleep. More broadly, it suggests Humphrey's interest in the mechanisms of memory—in the particular composition of the net it throws over experience, and the difficulties of retrieving its catch.

The remaining four sculptors are all, in varying degrees, involved with more traditional carving and modeling processes, though their materials include polyurethane, hand-hemmed silk and Styrofoam. Louis Dudis works with wax, which she usually applies over a styrofoam armature to create subtly biomorphic forms. In a recent body of work, the surfaces were worked to a glossy finish and articulated in a red and black pattern that could be seen as reptilian scales or enlarged organic tissue. Veiled, from a later series, is made of strips of wax-soaked paper wrapped around a forked form that suggests an animal's hindquarters, and also an extracted molar; either way, the lurking violence of the association is amplified by its careful, blood-red bandaging. The sculpture shown here, *Bardos*, has an altogether different surface, black and rough as charred timber. Its slow, attenuated form is segmented, a bulbous leading element seeming to feed, eye-dropper-style, the long central element, which in turn pools slightly at the bottom, before terminating in another dropper-shaped tip. Like much of Dudis' work, this quietly menacing, needling form has a distinctly erotic charge, and an undertone of dark humor. But it is also a self-reflective work that offers tactile and visual information about the nature of a medium and its manipulation, which relate it to less emotionally charged process-oriented abstraction.

Dina Ghen, who works with industrial plastics, also dwells on the physical properties of her medium. Polyethylene and polyurethane can achieve calibrated degrees of viscid translucence, and rigid memories of fluidity, that are impossible in other materials. But the crucial generating force of Ghen's work is psychic, and its figurative references are always discernible, androgynous and amorphous though they may be. Two forms she favors are balls and cones, which sometimes become breasts and phalluses, and at others testicles and skirts. In a few recent sculptures, she has covered balloons in resin and attached them to tall, con-shaped elements, creating festive but also ominous images of fecundity. In the sculpture shown here, a distinctly phallic, slowly tapering cone contains two barely visible forms, one of a small cluster of balls, the other a crescent, joined by a twisted cord. As overtly symbolic, even polemical, as a fetus in a bottle, this sculpture is also deeply sensuous, and darkly funny.

Holly Zausner, too creates figures that are doleful to the point of comedy, racked by tormentors who don't neglect their victims' funnybones. To be sure, Zausner generally elicits only the hint of a bleak chuckle, and that at the work's occasionally frank ghoulishness. Working mainly with hydrocal, a form of plaster, Zausner models bodies distorted by emotional duress; most often, they are extremely elongated, stretched diagonally from floor to wall or cantilevered from the wall in grim demonstrations of rigid tenacity. A recent series of sculptures consists only of heads, some of which are threaded with bundles of black raffia; the straw issues from eyes or mouths and connects one to the other, or ties them to the wall, or is trimmed into barely visible, bristly inner darkness. Ciphers of individuals in crisis, Zausner's bodies are nonetheless distinctly social. Their predicament is defined in relationship to each other or, more often, to the viewer whose physical security is challenged by their gravity-defying dispositions. *Final Stretch*, a grossly elongated figure slung from the ceiling by its midsection so that its head, hanging upside down, regards its single foot, is something of a mordant rebuke to self-absorbed withdrawal. But Zausner clearly feels sympathy, too for the impulse to turn inward, and to linger there.

This classic ambivalence—the particular pain of craving a public voice for an experience of impenetrable isolation—was Emily Dickinson's lifelong subject, and Lesley Dill has been exploring it in an extended body of work that literally incorporates the poet's words. Pursuing the idea, expressed throughout the poetry, that language (like art) shields its author to precisely the

degree that it exposes her, Dill has cut out Dickinson's words letter by letter from a stiff white dress that opens on hinges like the lid of a casket, or made verses issue from the open mouths of disembodied heads. In *Blue Holdings*, Dickinson's poem beginning, "I am afraid to own a body, I am afraid to own a soul" takes the form of blue silk letters that pour from the crooked elbows and fingers of two outstretched, slender blue wooden arms. It is a painstakingly handwrought image of offering, of confession, of almost sacramental introspection. And it is written in borrowed words and executed in part by hired hands, since Dill created this sculpture during a recent stay in India, where she worked with local laborers. These contradictions between private and public effort go to the heart of Dill's work, which questions precisely where the threshold lies for what we call our inner selves. It is a question asked in good faith, and she uses the sculpture itself as her instrument of inquiry. **This open-endedness, the use of the work to probe, without insisting on conclusive results may be said to unite the artists in this show.**

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