

## **Critical Mass (catalog), essay by Charles Long, 1994 Dallas Artists Research and Exhibition at the McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, Texas**

### **Critical Mass**

Critical mass is an exhibition of objects that attempts to draw from them a most basic quality: the presentation of a thing. It is an examination of a wholeness that is set apart from its context in such a way that it reinforces the impression that we exist as selves in and apart from the world that produces us. All the works in the exhibit share a concern with the appearance of wholeness and autonomy while separately addressing such inherent conflicts as difference between parts, formless form and insignificant consequences. In physics, critical mass is the quantity of matter necessary to sustain a chain reaction, when a mass can no longer contain itself and becomes an event. In a similar way, these inert bodies threaten to come apart. The exhibition space is used as a warehouse for these piles, chunks, cubes, stacks, balls and lumps. The viewer/object relationship is not taken for granted. Instead, it is an opportunity for experiencing the gestalt of that encounter. In fact, most of the work occupies about as much space as an adult human form if you could remold it into another shape.

The solid masses made by LILLIAN BALL are the filled up interiors of containers she finds. This three dimensional mapping is a kind of knowing by way of being. Filling an absence with expanding foam rubber, creating a prosthetic breast-like mass the scale of which may infantilize the viewer. However, mass need not have considerable weight or size but merely be a collective body. The weight of an idea is as likely to affect our lives as that of an object. Beholding TOM FRIEDMAN's white cubed pedestal elicits the antiseptic pleasures of pure form. The annoying .5 mm speck which is ceremoniously placed on it is a real piece of shit, from the artist himself. Its very lack of size only heightens the embarrassment and repulsive power. Here the base is elevated into the realm of pure forms while the object on the pedestal is as base as can be.

The two massive blocks of wood MICHAEL GITLIN's Tributary sensuously negotiate the 'who's on top' dilemma while finding some planes of concord. The title implies a contribution from a lesser body to a larger one; an incorporation. Though the union of these solids seems complete there remains a space between that invites the hand which has already been seduced by the smooth sanded surface which bulges and contorts. The fantasy of being allowed to go inside a solid space is not different from the common delusion that we are 'in' our bodies. In JUDY HABERL's Lump, an enormous brain coral sinks into a bean bag chair. This blunt image dismantles our carefully assimilated holistic approach to being in favor of the familiar western belief in the body as vehicle for the mind. Only now it is not even a vehicle, but a cushion. To the disembodied mind, size and scale are irrelevant, these qualities are measurable only against the constant of the human body.

The work begun by MAYA LIN is of indeterminate size. It began with one piece of broken safety glass being added to another and may continue to grow as long as there is broken glass to gather. The elements of the earth having been transformed into goods and discarded only to be organized once again into a glass planet. Post industrial or primordial, a mess becomes an organized mass if it can be read in some way. EMIL LUKAS' work is as much like a book as it is like a rock of stratified fossils and debris. A traveler burrows through this world by reading a passage through. The observations, having been made, are left to compost along with the objects observed. Interspersed in the layers of mass are mold spores, drawings, cast impressions, writing and more organic materials with no clear distinction being made.

The boundary between human achievements and waste is diminished in the unrelenting brown world constructed by JOHN MILLER. The miniature ruin atop the mountain invites projection similar to that of the romantic allegories of the Hudson River landscapes school. However, this allegory, tendered entirely in a thick, brown impasto, is of the artist seeking the sublime in nature but failing to acknowledge that primary urge which was to make something out of puddles of viscous pigment. As refined and lofty as art can be, there will always be a connection to the 'look what I made' part of our childhood. Toilet training, whether met with pride or shame, is the child's first opportunity to produce something significant in the world. Shamelessly, CARL OSTENDARP's Anything to Please, brings a big pink pancake into the middle of pristine white wall gallery space for everyone to see. It is an acting out of that innocent time before the social order is assimilated in a moment that is about to be lost forever to the repressed unconscious.

The volumes in JACK RISLEY'S work are for concealing the things of our lives. Moving boxes and blankets are employed in describing formal space by geometric and organic mass. Here, empty space is transformed into the solid commodified dollar per square foot of urban life. These works present the banality of stuff and its requirement that it be looked after and kept private no matter how mundane. Escape from the mundane in search of the exotic, KATHLEEN SCHIMERT fabricated Moon Rocks that are far more radiant than the disappointing gray chunks actually brought back from the moon. As a kind of fools' gold, they fulfill the expectations that were not met from the moon walk, providing pleasure in encountering something strange and other.

MICHELLE SEGRE's Untitled grotesque, turns that desire for the other into a fear of the unknown. The monster as icon is the embodiment of irrational being or conversely the body without form, an unpredictable growth, changing from one end to the other and yet still being whole. Simply because an object takes up space sets up a condition for conflict between its parts. **DREW SHIFLETT's conglomerations push this paradox to the point of collapse with a pile of disparate materials that vaguely constitutes a thing. The containment of this heap implies an identity, but the fragmented elements undermine that self, permitting it to exist only as a schizophrenic.** The entropic resolution of WILLIAM TUCKER'S philosopher head titled Thales is a state composed of all possible forms coexisting at once. Its surface suggests a primordial materiality where potential for difference is the only absent element, holding it back from becoming something specific. The pedestal for this formless materiality becomes a stage on which the repressed is given a role without direction. Deprived of a canvas, ERWIN WURM's ball of oil paint makes palpable the materiality of images. They are all in there and their superimposition allows them to recombine into an infinite number of paintings. Like a disembodied brain, there is an internal life being played out utterly independent of all other realities.

Within these dormant masses there is a potential for a chain reaction of questions which undo their image of completeness. The mass is only an illusion of autonomy and of wholeness. As autonomous object it is a representation of an idea of selfhood. As whole object it is a representation of a separation from origin and destiny. Concentrating on the single mass reveals the nature of the mind that perceives them. They inevitably suggest other objectified notions like god, nature, world, nation, family, lover, body, organ, mind and ultimately the very self which constructs these, which is the most persistently critical mass.

**Charles Long**