

Bronze

Plaster

&

Polyester



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The exhibition "Bronze, Plaster, and Polyester" proposes linkages among thirteen sculptors not commonly associated with one another. Except for Robert Arneson, these are artists who depend largely on casting in making their work, although they do use various processes in different ways to individual ends. Robert Arneson, Zadik Zadikian, John Ahearn, Tom Otterness, Peter Shelton, Judith Shea, Joel Fisher, Not Vital, Phoebe Adams, John Duff, Ron Nagle, Allan McCollum, and I were chosen by director/curator Elsa Longhauser for our work, not our working methods alone. This essay will consider the recent production of these artists rather than the specific pieces in the exhibition.

Changes in the art world can seem as capricious as in the garment or automobile industries. Movements come and go. They emerge from the unpredictable congruence of multiple factors: the studio work of individual artists; the energy of dealers; the commitment of critics; the art market's ready embrace of the new. Movements fade when the circle is broken, but while in sway, they may affect many artists' studio choices. A number of painters, for example, switched from acrylic back to oil paint coincident with the explosion of expressionist painting. The resurgence of metal-casting around 1980 marked rather than caused a significant shift in the making of American sculpture.

All casting involves filling a mold with a liquid or semiliquid substance that sets through cooling (metals), the reduction of water content (clay slip, paper pulp), or a chemical reaction within the poured substance (plaster, polyester resin, synthetic rubbers). One lure of casting is that pieces can be replicated exactly without the artist needing to be present. Cast objects are set and permanent; usually, they are not things an artist subsequently alters.

After Henri Lachaise died, in 1935, no modern American sculptor of importance, save Reuben Nakian, used casting more than occasionally. Bronze was avoided for diverse reasons. Academic sculptors had used bronze for monumental public statuary as well as smaller domestic pieces; its use was considered retrograde. Casting also was associated with European art at a time when American sculptors were trying to shake off Continental influence. Casting required a client. Unless someone paid for the first casting, or ordered subsequent casts, the expense was a great deal for an artist to take on speculatively. And modern artists almost always have worked speculatively.

Geometric forms are more readily constructed than cast, so casting made little sense to the sculptors of David Smith's generation, whose work was based on the constructivist tradition. Typically, casting involves several intermediate steps, and American sculptors were attempting to work as directly as the abstract expressionist painters. It was thought important that materials disclose themselves, and bronze-casting was seen as subject to illusionism. As sculptors moved away from casting, the number of foundries diminished, and the remaining ones became ever more costly.

Fabricated work reached its apogee in minimalism. A reductive movement, it left little for a second generation to do. Sculpture needed to be made more open. Any sculpture that followed had to be more accepting of varying materials and personality. Sculptors Richard Serra, Joel Shapiro, and Bill Bollinger, all a bit younger than the minimalists, were largely responsible for making casting respectable again for American artists. Serra's thrown-lead sculptures reinvented casting—direct, inexpensive, rough, and tough; they made many a minimalist work look academic. Shapiro's cast iron forms were spare but personal. They were as severe as constructed forms, yet each conveyed a strong sense of having come into being in a single moment. Bollinger found ways to realize large-scale pieces directly in the foundry. His are among the ugliest good sculptures I know.

These artists were responsible for some of the best sculpture of the early seventies, and much of it was cast. They brought back casting, and we were then all free to use it.

By this time, casting methods also had changed radically. Much more was technically possible than had been before. Newly developed silicone and urethane elastomers greatly simplified making the flexible molds necessary for pouring wax intermediates. Fused silica investment material (ceramic shell) made casting easier, faster, and cheaper.

If casting was generally ill suited to American sculpture from 1935 to 1975, it has frequently proved congenial to the sculpture of the last ten years. Cast forms, with the artist's touch hovering on their surfaces, tend to be more sensuous than constructed ones. Bronzes can readily be patinated in a range of hues; the color then seems inherent in the metal rather than applied. Foundries are set up to see a casting through from start to finish, thus freeing the artist's own studio time. With casting, pieces can be made permanent that have been started in impermanent but easy to work with materials such as clay, cloth, paper, and plaster. Cast sculptures are rarely unique; editions of six are common. With the art market booming, artists stand to make more money if their pieces are editioned rather than one of a kind. And because of their almost automatic connection to a historic tradition, cast sculptures are perhaps easier to sell than most other works.

Unlike fine-art bronze-casting, which has gone in and out of fashion, ceramic slip-casting has been used steadily for hundreds of years in the mass production of tableware and other household objects. In slip-casting, a liquified clay is poured into a plaster mold; the plaster absorbs water, causing the outermost clay to stiffen. The excess liquid clay is poured out and the object removed, dried, glazed, and fired. Hundreds of objects can be cast from a single mold. In ceramics and in ornamental sculpture, casting has been the chief means of mass production, from most of our crockery to the Greek Venus inhabiting many a garden.

Robert Arneson, one of our strongest figural artists, came out of ceramics, which once offered artists the freedom of working in what was regarded as a minor art. Arneson had the good sense

to focus on the portrait bust, often with himself as subject. Besides being the most expressive part of the body, the head is the easiest to build without an armature, since it can be constructed like a coil pot. The neck provides a ready base, and when rendered upright, the head does not read like a fragment. By modeling his heads larger than lifesize, Arneson gains doubly. The handling need not be so exact, and the face can have the good nature proper to giants. A number of the clay heads have been cast in bronze, and Arneson also has been working with cast paper in high reliefs (fig. 1).

Sculptors are given less to self-portraits than painters; it may be easier to keep flat what the mirror has made flat, rather than raise it back to three dimensions. Or, it may be that the quality of the sitter's outwardly directed gaze, so important in painted self-portraits, has no equivalent in three-dimensional work. One advantage of repeated portraits of the same person is that time itself becomes a subject. The work is a history. And repetition, deadening in most art, enlivens serial portraits, with each work subtly changing our understanding of all the preceding ones.

Arneson's is a sculpture of anecdote, with the stories often happening to his bearded alter ego, but at other moments to a Greek column or whatever else has presented itself to his fancy. Although the work is not as wide-ranging as H. C. Westermann's, it has a similar mix of humor and seriousness, a comparable commitment to grandeur. The world depicted is masculine in subject and temperament, outward rather than inward, full of lively pleasure.

Growing up in Soviet Armenia, Zadik Zadikian was rigorously schooled in both academic Soviet and Armenian art. There, past work was regarded very differently than here, and modernism did not exist. Although obviously at home now within contemporary art—he spent more than a year as Richard Serra's assistant—his feel for the past remains quite distinct from ours, as does his visual sensibility (fig. 2).

Casting is central to Zadikian's work, and he uses different aspects of the process at different moments. He is involved obviously with the romantic and heroic. In his earlier work, the heroic was evident in the choice of subject, format, and surface. For example, he modeled and cast in plaster a slick, idealized relief profile of the great emperor Tigran centered in a large medallion, which he then goldleafed. A number of the medallions were shown together, looking like both some great moment in near-Eastern Hellenism, newly unearthed, and the decor of a suburban Italian restaurant.

More recently, Zadikian has sought to convey the heroic through the working process itself, modeling larger-than-lifesize busts and body fragments that he casts in plaster and leaves very rough. Mold lines run across the forms like boundaries on a map. The pieces suggest wreck and fragmentation, as though they have come from a grand whole that broke up under the ravages of time. The traces of process that Zadikian leaves make us conscious of the artist as supreme progenitor.

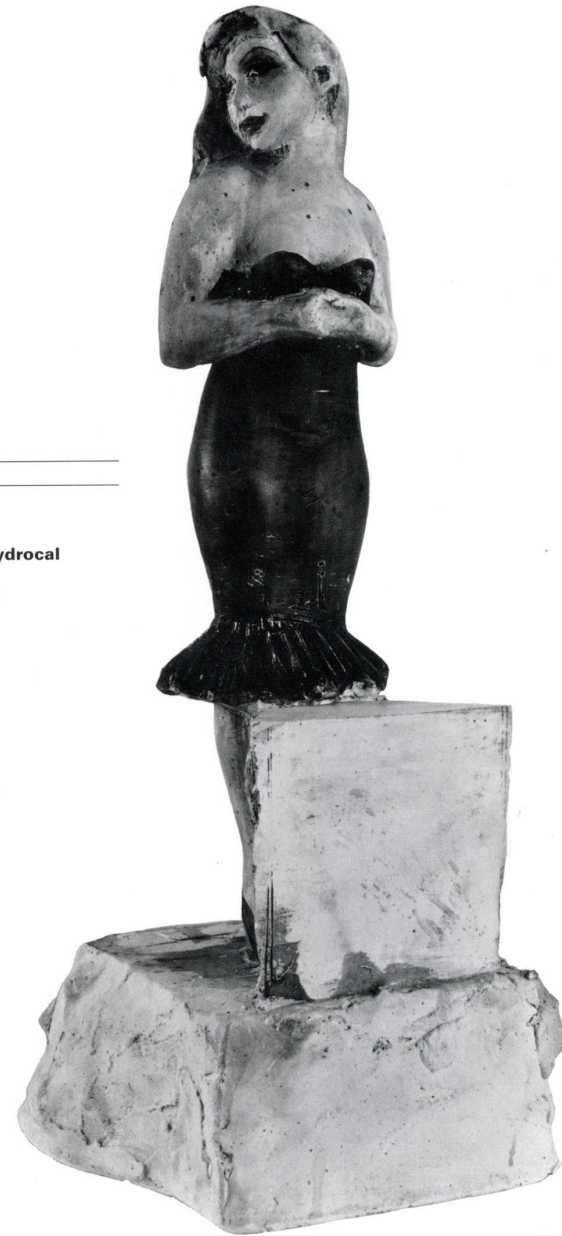


fig. 2
Zadik Zadikian
Margaux
1987
acrylic paint on cast hydrocal
18 x 7 x 9
photo: Ivan Dalla Tana

fig. 3
John Ahearn
Titi in Window
1985
oil on reinforced polyadam
72 x 30 x 12
photo: Ivan Dalla Tana



In his current fresco portraits, Zadikian is dealing again with issues of working process and historical aura. The source is Pompeian painting, but the consciousness is modern and the works are as much objects as paintings.

John Ahearn's sculpture is related to George Segal's and Duane Hanson's in that it is cast from life—more precisely than Segal's, less so than Hanson's. Ahearn is inventive in his subject matter rather than his technique. He and his assistant, Rigoberto Torres, have used life-casting to embody the black and Hispanic residents of the South Bronx where they live. Ahearn offers the people of his neighborhood affirming images of themselves. With the completion of four multifigure fiberglass-relief groupings mounted high on the sides of buildings, the work is quite prominent. One aspect of the sculptures' success is that once the people represented in the pieces are recognized, nearly everyone wishes to be cast. The reliefs foster local pride and the sense that ordinary lives are important (fig. 3).

In galleries, Ahearn first exhibited plaster reliefs that radiated a spunky energy, especially in the way they were painted with the vivid colors of the Caribbean. His subjects, possessing light and life, were conspicuously individuals. The more recent free-standing fiberglass pieces are modified life-castings. In most of them, Ahearn has paired up his subjects. In *Toby and Raymond*, a young man is shown crouching beside his bulldog. The aggressiveness of the dog is counterbalanced by the figure's quiet self-absorption, conveyed in part by a sweatshirt hood that looks like a monk's cowl. As we walk around the work, its meaning changes; threatening from the front, it seems almost meditative from the back. Ahearn has become increasingly involved with the formal aspects of his sculptures, although their quite particular content has remained the same.

Tom Otterness has developed a sculptural style perfectly suited to his ideas. His works are populated with figures that do everything people do without ever looking like them. Though their faces tend to be simple, their gestures are extremely expressive. In their utter efficacy, simplicity, and playfulness, they are not unlike three-dimensional versions of Keith Haring's subway drawings. Otterness's themes are broad, taking in great swaths of life: labor, sex, government, art, parenthood. Women and men appear in equal number and share equally in work, pleasure, and power (fig. 4).

Because his sculpture is in some sense derived from drawings, it has never been locked into a particular scale. His range has extended from approximately five-inch-high frieze figures to a more than life-size cast-bronze head and a monstrously large bronze snake, to the tin-soldier-size figures he is currently producing. The scale of Otterness's figures is determined in part by the number he needs to stage his narratives; complex events are enacted by many small figures, simpler events by a few large ones.

His most recent sculpture, *The Tables* (1986–87), comprises three giant picnic tables (with attached benches) lined up end to

end. On the left table, an Edenic scene is depicted; on the right, the military-industrial complex is shown at work. Old and new societies are juxtaposed on the center table. A huge spider surmounts the right end and a damaged globe the center, while a large bomb is being fished up in the midst of Eden. As many things are going on—as there would be in a small city. Although often explicit, at times the narrative remains ambiguous. When Otterness gives free rein to his wit, imagination, and energy, as he does here, he is at his best.

Peter Shelton is unusual among American sculptors: He is equally at ease creating complex installational works and making discrete objects. His first significant project, *SWEATHOUSE and little principals*, had 111 elements, with the central house of the title being surrounded by more than a hundred mostly vertical sculptures, composed typically of a single element held at a particular height by a pole. Since then, Shelton's architectural constructions, his single sculptures, and his strategies for relating them all together have increased greatly in sophistication. He is very adept with steel—forging, fabricating, and casting it with equal facility.

Most of Shelton's objects are unitary, many deriving from the human body or man's productions. Shelton's titles make this explicit: *bigfeet*; *sleepwalker*; *BIGHAMMER*; *STIFFSHIRT*. Each work seems to have a particular visual task; complexity arises from the interactions within the installations. Not coming out of a modeling tradition, Shelton is more interested in volume than surface, more concerned with the generally human than with the body's particular expressivity.

In *floatinghouse DEADMAN*, a shoji screen house, whose floor plan is suggestive of a sprawled-out body, is held aloft by multitudinous cables, each of which runs up through a ceiling-mounted pulley, across some distance to a second pulley, and then down to a counterweight (the deadman). There are fourteen different steel or cast iron deadmen, most tensioning more than one cable. All the elements are connected physically and metaphorically; the discrete sculptures keep the central house airborne, and their specific forms summon human presence.

Two steady and parallel movements have been present in Judith Shea's work; the first, an increasing dimensionality and size, the second, a growing emotional complexity. Her early works were of fabric, cut to her own ostensible sewing patterns and pinned to the wall. Leaving the wall, her sculptures slowly became more three-dimensional, going from flat, kourous-rigid forms to fully volumetric ones that sensuously moved out into space. Her pieces are figural, but the body is present only in the way it supports the cloth; there is almost no flesh. Generally, the pieces are directly cast from her wax and felt originals (fig. 5).

Shea emphasizes her touch, particularly with cloth and its draping. Here, our apprehension needs to be sensual as much as intellectual. Why is a piece of fabric posed in a particular manner, and what exactly is the relationship we are being shown? In



some pieces, Shea has grouped two figures—a girl and her doll, a dress lying inside a coat—and set up an interaction between the forms and, by extension, the persons implied.

Shea's work has a strong sense of past time and of present time drawn out. Although the style of the clothing does not place us in a specific past, we are not firmly in the present either, so that past and present blur. In recent pieces, Shea's figures hold geometric objects and seem to contemplate them; they are manifestly unheeding of our gaze. While we watch them think, we are made conscious of the circumstances and time of our own beholding.

Joel Fisher's working process is singular. First, he casts his own paper sheets. Next, he scans the paper's surface, looking for tiny embedded fibers that appear as miniature line drawings. Then, choosing one such "drawing," he draws it larger on the sheet. He makes many of these drawings. To begin a sculpture, he chooses a particular drawing, regards it as though it depicts an existing three-dimensional object, and constructs a version of that object. A single drawing can give rise to multiple sculptures sharing only an aspect of silhouette, and the same form can be rendered at a number of different scales (fig. 6).

Fisher's work shows an awareness of past art. His subject is in part the play of images, the flicker of shadows. As in certain writing we can hear echoes of other writing or sometimes summon a whole scene from a single postcard, Fisher's work revives

fig. 4
Tom Otterness
Angry Father
1984–86
cast bronze
edition of 3, number 3
17¾ x 24¼ x 3
photo: Ivan Dalla Tana



above: fig. 5
Judith Shea
New Man
 1986
 bronze
 26 x 16 x 12
 photo: Sarah Wells

above right: fig. 6
Joel Fisher
Crystal
 1982–86
 bronze
 edition of 3, number 1
 18 x 11½ x 11¼
 photo: Brian Albert

episodes in sculpture. But when we try to pin them down specifically, they slip away. Allowed to work their particular magic, his pieces are like Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise*, opening up to reveal many things, then packing down compactly.

Fisher has no commitment to particular materials or styles and is equally at ease working linearly or with volume, working with the figure or without it. But his pieces have a consistent human trace; they are never cold. Fisher's sculpture started simply in the early seventies; he forged his own tools, wove his own fabric and sewed a primitive garment, and made his own paper. Since then, his work has gradually come to take in more and more.

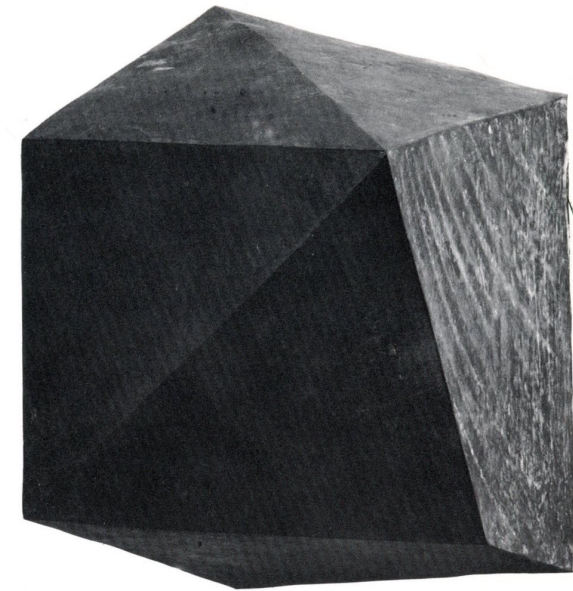
One constant in my sculpture has been the issue of reference: how we know or name things; how we link this form with that thing in the world. I have worked in series because the whole can help pin down the meanings of the parts. Viewed singly, the pieces may appear ambiguous, but in the group they become referential and specific. I use titles to support or undermine particular readings of the sculpture, to sometimes suspend a piece between the visual and verbal.

More and more, the work itself seems to decide how it will appear and thus what it will mean. The wax forms push and pull themselves into being in my hands. In one respect, my method has remained much the same: I can only tell what's wrong, not what's right. By constantly eliminating from the work what I don't wish it to have, my objects become much the way I would have them be.

I've wondered a lot about how I can get a sense of time and history into my pieces. I am conscious of time as erosion in classical sculpture, but those works remain forceful despite the loss of information and context. Inchoateness has been tamed. I am now trying to make a sense of history and experience originate within my sculptures rather than come in through quotation, as too often is the case in contemporary sculpture.

European artists are more willing to foster diversity in their work than American ones. Picasso is supreme in this regard; Gerhard Richter is an obvious contemporary instance. Like them, Not Vital is not committed to a particular style or subject matter, and he is willing to move about in both his art and his life. His drawing skill as well characterizes a range of activity more common in European than American sculptors. Born in that small part of Switzerland that still speaks Romansh, he studied in Paris and has lived in New York off and on for almost a decade. Despite his urbanism, Vital's sculptures often are infused with a strong quality of agrarian habitation, as though based on once-utilitarian objects that had accumulated on a farm or had been modeled on animals found there.

Contradiction is central to certain Vital sculptures. He makes works that are simultaneously large and small, composing with a kind of disproportion. For *Tongue*, he took a large animal's tongue, stretched it full length, cast it in bronze, and stood it



upright on a little steel shelf, the tip probing the air. We associate the tongue with taste, suppleness, speech, and gestures of derision. It crucially connects each of us with the world. In Vital's sculpture, the tongue is turgid, mute, posed erectly like a great isolated monolith. It is a simple piece but, like many of Vital's works, one that gives rise to feelings both funny and unsettling.

Phoebe Adams often makes her wall sculptures with wax and cloth in a gestural, almost improvisational manner, and then casts them in bronze. Her working method accounts in part for their seeming weightlessness, since the original materials are light enough to permit gestures to be frozen in space. The sculptures, usually cantilevered off the wall, float like baroque swirls. This lightness is enhanced by the richly colored patinas that run counter to the greens and browns traditional to bronze. The work has energy; coming off the wall, it thrusts about more assertively than much freestanding sculpture.

Some abstract sculpture seems quite self-contained and non-referential; Adams's forms, though, suggest loose renderings of the botanical world, with certain details heightened and the rest dropped out. She has a knack for both copying and distorting. Sometimes, she forces together quite diverse shapes. Although often evocative of particular emotional states, the pieces are not that easy to pin down. The temperament and expressiveness of her work, in fact, is more familiar to us in painting than sculpture, as is the expansion or diminishment of the elements. When

successful, the pieces are beautiful and haunting. The keyed-up energy of Adams's work sets it apart from the cooler and more meditative products of many sculptors today.

John Duff and his generation of sculptors, most of them now older than forty-five, have been showing in New York for almost twenty years. The issues particular to each sculptor have become clearer with time. Duff is very much concerned with the implications and possible extensions of early modernism and the expressive capabilities of geometry. He has been able to create convincing and refined cubist sculpture despite the fact that the planes of cubism, so persuasive on canvas, rarely before have been at ease in three-dimensional space.

Duff prefers to make things himself rather than have them made, and his pieces are strongly informed by his working process. He uses fiberglass (glass cloth and catalyzed polyester resin), which he casts most often into homemade plywood molds to form articulated wedgelike volumes (fig. 7). Usually, he mounts these on the wall, where they rise and twist rhythmically, conveying human presence without depicting it. His sculptures are visually and physically light; at moments, they seem to float quite free of the wall. The pieces variously appear to us as edge, surface, and volume, and so demand circumambulation as much as any freestanding works.

Where minimalism effectively played down touch, color, and working process, Duff uses them all to increase the expressiveness and content of his abstract forms. As a result, his work is lyrical rather than formal. His geometry is relaxed and wide-ranging, contrary to the "hup-two-three-four" units Joseph Masheck noted in minimalist sculpture. Duff's color, applied to the inside of the work, seems to radiate outward, further softening and subverting the geometry.

Ron Nagle's clay forms are vaguely suggestive of cups in their scale, material, and shapes. They are very thin and appear to be composed entirely of glaze. A smaller, handlelike mass often extends from the main body of the piece. Open at the bottom, mostly closed at the top, they are not useful containers. Whether seen as ceramics or sculpture, Nagle's pieces are eccentric. He has shifted the interest from function to rather perversely designed forms—and from those forms to their surface decoration, to which he brings a decidedly strange palette. With slip-casting, Nagle can make many copies of his forms upon which to work his glaze variations (fig. 8).

Nagle is a consummate glazer. He builds layer upon layer of glaze with successive firings, giving his objects a surface unlike any other. The glazes have a strong accretional quality, as though they grew on the pieces in geological time. His surfaces seem soft and can blur the underlying form, which is uncommon in three-dimensional work. Glazing often makes one conscious of gravity, because glazes, essentially liquid at the moment they mature, are likely to run downward. Nagle's glazes are frozen just



fig. 8
Ron Nagle
San Antonio Rust
1986
ceramic
3 3/4 x 4 x 2 3/4
photo: Charles Cowles Gallery

fig. 7
John Duff
Homoousian Column
1985
fiberglass, enamel paint, and shellac
67 x 21 x 21
photo: Zindman/Fremont

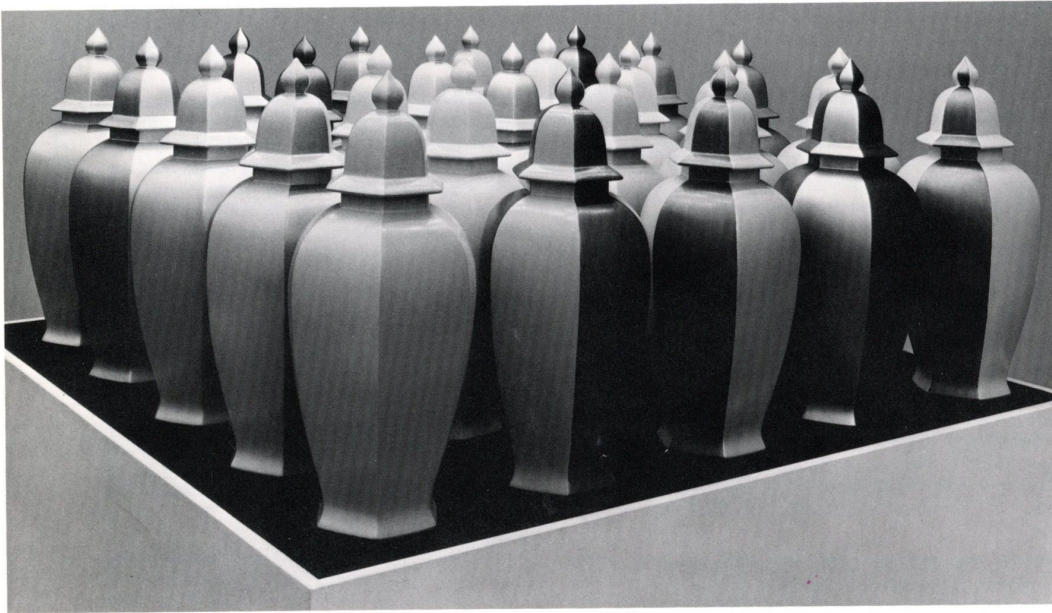


fig. 9

Allan McCollum
Perfect Vehicles
1987

enamel on solid cast hydrocal
30 x 8 x 8 each
(installation: Diane Brown Gallery)
photo: Bill Jacobson

before dripping off the pieces, leaving the impression that the surface may start moving again at any moment—that the work is somehow animated.

Allan McCollum has found ways to work expressively and creatively at the far edges of a number of different media. He creates art that is theoretical yet not boring. There are certain constants in his work: an absence of hand-marking; an openness to collaboration; an acute ear for language. McCollum repeatedly asks what makes a work of art different from other objects?

McCollum's *Surrogates* seek to undermine the aura of painting as a unique object. To make them, McCollum rubber-molded twenty small framed and matted rectangles, cast them in hydrostone, painted them so the centers were dark, the mats light, and the frames values of gray, and then hung them on the wall in combinations and arrangements that varied from show to show. Although image, mat, and frame are physically fused, the frame still helps us recognize the object. The frame also asserts the work's value; framing costs money and identifies the piece as worth money. When the *Surrogates* are seen and sold as original works of art, attaining the status they sought to undermine, they challenge our assumptions about the uniqueness of art objects.

Casting is the simplest way to make the same form many times; the original disappears and there are only endless copies. For his *Perfect Vehicles*, McCollum started with a Japanese reproduction of a classic Chinese ceramic jar, which he stripped of ornamentation, molded, cast solid in hydrostone, and painted (fig. 9). An object that had already been displaced in time, culture, and purpose is here appropriated to another end. Elegant and stylish as the *Perfect Vehicles* are, their identity and meaning are shadowy.

Currently, the situation in sculpture is extremely open and diverse; any grouping of artists risks being artificial and temporary. Thematic exhibitions, though, do offer the chance to recognize similarities among seemingly disparate artists. For example, Robert Arneson's work, which rarely has been linked with that of such younger artists as John Ahearn and Zadik Zadikian, does have much in common with theirs.

Increasingly, our direct experience of visual art has been affected by criticism. In consequence, we have often ignored the suggestiveness of form. At this moment, it is worth remembering the obvious: Works by different artists that are formally related may in fact be related in meaning as well (e.g., John Duff, Ron Nagle). Sculpture is physical; its meaning springs partially from the particular materials and methods used to make it. This exhibition has examined the broad range of work that various casting processes have made possible. If the show and the catalog suggest connections among artists not commonly associated, new ways may have been offered to regard the sculptures themselves.

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W. S.