



Fin de siecle

by Michael William Pugh

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
Montana State University

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Abstract:

This body of work is a synthesis of images from primitive cultures, history and real-life experience. These works are the physical manifestation of a personal aesthetic which promotes looking at the past to reflect on contemporary society.

These works do not have any concrete message or meaning but are loaded with a number of possibilities which usually allow the spectator to arrive at some conclusion. In order to stage the most interesting set of possibilities I use devices like paradox and irony. These devices seem to form the core of many religions and forms of mysticism because they attempt to explain the unknowable (knowledge of God, life after death, etc.) with the spectacular and impossible. The best examples of this are from Christianity: Christ is dead but alive in everyone, his mother was a virgin but gave birth.

My attraction to controlling these sets of possibilities can best be explained by my undergraduate work where before I chose art as a vocation I was an anthropology major- and specialized in bone and stone object analysis. The monotonous processes of these scientific approaches eventually erased all mystery and romance from this science. I didn't really want to know what mundane functions, these tools had. I wanted to know the impossible and spectacular like if those objects had ever been handled by ancient astronauts or had any connection to the civilizations on Mars. This experience had instilled in me the idea that objects whose exact function or purposes remain a mystery are the most appealing because they promote the most exciting speculations-. This type of speculation is what I hope of the audience viewing my work.

My current body of work makes reference to ancient Roman sculpture because I believe it indirectly speaks of our time. The hyper-decadence exhibited by our society where junkies and serial killers are made into cinematic heroes is marked by a general spiritual and ethical poverty which recalls the bacchanalia of the late Roman empire. It is a historical archetype, i.e., history repeats itself.

I believe there is a certain romance to this type of decadence because it seems to be the polar opposite of spirituality and somehow closely related to it at the same time. The paradox of this idea is a theme that has always recurred in my work. For example, in the piece "Girl with Baby Bird," a young haloed girl nurses a mutated bird. The girl's composure is of calm spiritual satisfaction even though the creature and the act border on the horrific. It is at once sacred and profane. Another example of this paradox in my work is the sculpture "Harp," which depicts a young, lanky girl bent backwards into the shape of a lyre. Despite this painfully impossible position her face reflects a deathlike calm or inner peace.

My personal attraction toward the antiquated or "aged" surfaces of my sculptures is not simply a result of my archaeological background, but appeals to me for the fact that anything old has survived the test of time for a reason. More often than not, these reasons for survival are because of the sacred or precious nature of the object. I often try to destroy this preciousness in my own work by covering the surface with graffiti or by breaking off hands, heads, fingers or limbs.

Major influences on my work are numerous primitive and ancient cultures for the untold stories their artifacts leave behind. Anselm Kiefer and Stephen De Stabler are the contemporary artists whose approaches I find most appealing for their formal choices, references to antiquity, and apocalyptic themes.

Ultimately, I hope these works leave one with a sense of the cyclical nature of human history and serve to restore the romantic image in our own time.

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of

Master of Fine Arts

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

May 1996

CAF
N378
P9639

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Michael William Pugh

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

JULY 5, 1996
Date

Michael Reed
Chairperson, Graduate Committee

Approved for the Major Department

16 - MAY - 1996
Date

Russell H. Brown
Head, Major Department

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

7/29/96
Date

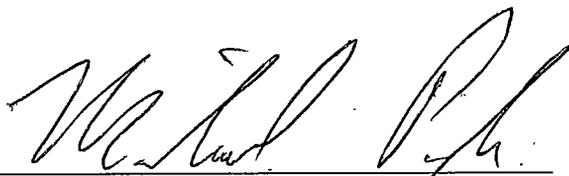
R. L. Brown
Graduate Dean

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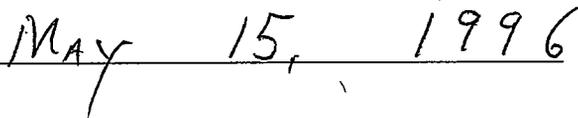
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Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "M. J. P.", written over a horizontal line.

Date

A handwritten date "MAY 15, 1996" written over a horizontal line.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

This body of work is a synthesis of images from primitive cultures, history and real-life experience. These works are the physical manifestation of a personal aesthetic which promotes looking at the past to reflect on contemporary society.

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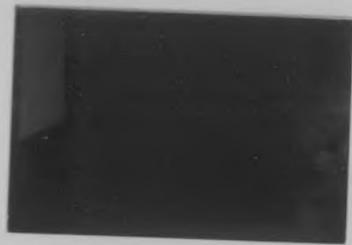
LIST OF SLIDES

1. "Girl with Baby Bird," terra cotta, bronze, oil enamel, 69", 1996
2. "Girl with Sword," terra cotta, wood, joint compound, iron oxide, 71", 1996
3. "Harp," terra cotta, 74", 1996
4. Untitled, terra, 67"; 1996
5. "Girl in Rain," terra cotta, plaster, wood, spray paint, 61", 1996
6. "Self-Portrait as Antiquated Monument," terra cotta, bronze, 66", 1996
7. "Conversion Device II," terra cotta, steel, 71", 1996
8. "Metaphysics," terra cotta, drywall, wood, iron oxide, 10' 2", 1996

MAY 1996
21

Push 1

22



Push 3

23



MAY 1996
24

Push 5

25



26

MAY 1996
26



PLASTIC
35mm
135

PLASTIC
35mm
135













