

The Reflecting Tool:

What We See of Ourselves in the Work of Benjamin Phillips

Benjamin Phillips' work indulges the narcissistic impulse in all humans, providing a mirror to gaze upon the self with meditative introspection. The mirror that Phillips holds up, however, shows not the beautiful or the vainglorious; rather, his sculpture becomes a tool throwing back critical reflections that reveal fears we each harbor about our body image and aging. Phillips directs our gaze deeper, revealing a surface peeling away in layers to expose uncomfortable realizations about self-worth and mortality. The reflection that Narcissus obsesses over in Phillips' work shows the parts we want to slough off; the blemishes, the scars, the seams, the blotches, the frayed edges, the fat, the gangly, the uneven, the misshapen; all the malapportioned politics of the body that gnaw away at our self-esteem and prick the fingers of our vanity leaving us feeling awkward and vulnerable.

In the four sculptures, two drawings and thirteen prints that make up Phillips latest show, "The Reflection Pool," we find Phillips' making tangible reflections of our fears in an attempt to turn an honest eye towards the glorification of the beautiful object and objectification of human beauty so prevalent in American culture. Boundaries between body parts are blurred, gender is either indeterminate or combined, materials are deceptive and invite tactile exploration to discover if surfaces are soft or hard, smooth or hairy. This focus on transgressing boundaries, blurring forms and mélange of materials echoes Phillips' own background. Having grown up in Canada, but born to American parents, Phillips chose to pursue his MFA in sculpture at Arizona State University to gain a unique position from which to levy an outsider's criticism. His recent experiences at ASU and living as an American in the heart of the country's 6th largest city, Phoenix, have given him a close knowledge of his subject that his work presents: the unhealthy focus on attractive surfaces in mainstream American society.

The materials and the casting process Phillips uses provide both an intimate sense of the human body but also create a featureless anonymity for each subject. Phillips cast actual body parts for the sculptures using the Forton MG casting system which acts as a base to which he adds rubber, reinforced fiberglass, decorative molding, silicone caulking, lead or goose down to create three-dimensional "drawings" of the human form. Each sculpture is 4-5' tall giving them a diminutive stature that gives the group a childish and elderly feel. This slight shrinking of scale enhances the vulnerability of the forms and engenders empathy in the viewer for the subject. At this scale, the subjects seem trapped between the hopeful expectations of childhood and the weight of burden and defeat of old age. It is precisely this moment that Phillips is interested in placing his audiences, a metaphor for the awkward eternal entrapment of humans who, regardless of their progress on the journey of life, forever inhabit this moment of looking backward at the past and looking forward to the future.

The nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ scale of the sculptures references the scale of bronze sculpture that is popular as public art in many cities and towns across America. Phillips' rough, feeble and awkward figures are the antithesis of the shiny, strong, confident ubiquitous

bronze monuments to clichéd human idealism. The compression of the forms in Phillips work is especially apparent in the pelvic areas of his sculptures. Genitals are nearly non-existent, which mimics the lack of a sex-drive when someone is wracked with self-doubt, depression or loss of body function due to age or illness.



A Work in Progress, 2011 (detail)

“A Work in Progress” dominates the gallery space at Eye Lounge in its depiction of a woman pushing an old, rusted wheelbarrow carrying a shell of a fat male torso. Here, the female subject ceases to carry the burden of the husband, the alpha male who degenerates due to age and dies, deserting the wife. The viewer encounters the wheelbarrow just as it is being upset and dumping its contents: the male’s useless torso, the arms outstretched bleaching as they anticipate coming to rest for good.



A Work in Progress, 2011



A Work in Progress, 2011 (detail)

In “Èffeme”, the viewer encounters a form of confused gender standing on a bucket. We see both a woman’s breast and the saggy breast of an old man. The piece brings to mind the concept of the breast as both a beautiful object and an object of ridicule. What is the impact of a man being ridiculed for having “man boobs” and what is the impact for a woman who has lost a breast or feels a need to have a breast augmented? The top of the figure’s head is missing and filled with a lump of lead that resembles a shrunken brain, hinting at the degeneration of the brain as time progresses. The toxic properties of lead also bring to mind the poisonous thoughts that inhabit our heads in times of depression and self-doubt.



Èffeme, 2011



Obsessive Man, 2011

“Obsessive Man” presents a male figure as if it were sleep walking towards a future of inevitable acquiescence to obesity. The man’s foot is raised, eternally stepping toward an inescapable future. A future realized in the fourth sculpture in the exhibition, “American Oedipus”. One of the more well-known Greek myths to Americans, thanks to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud’s coinage of the term, Oedipal Complex. Oedipus was originally a tragic-hero from Ancient Greece who overcame improbable odds to become king (a metaphor for the American Dream) and lost it all trying to avoid a pre-determined future, the inability to escape and the coming to pass of inescapable fate drives the hero insane (a metaphor for the American nightmare). Oedipus was cursed to wander blind and begging, living out his life as an exile from his homeland, a suitable story to communicate and personify the anxieties of a faltering people; an America that now faces a desperate future, lacking beauty and utterly vulnerable.

“The Reflection Pool” features a pair of charcoal drawings. The drawings, having been completed before the sculptures in the show, demonstrates the progression of Phillips’ creative process from 2D to 3D. Of the drawing, Phillips says,

“It is my intention to recreate the ‘magic’ of my drawing’s intuitive and eccentric nature in a stable and three-dimensional form. I have intentionally chosen names for both of these figures that fail to inform the viewer of gender of the body that they are looking at. Without a definite lead via the title, the viewer is forced to slow down her or his gaze and examine the body further. The eccentricities of my three-dimensional forms are endowed with this similar interest in slowing the viewer’s gaze and to promote an empathetic experience with some aspect of the figure.”

"Terry" and "Pat" are seen by the viewer from the back, naked. The sex of either person is indeterminate and could be interchangeable between female or male. The loose sense of form and heavy energy of the drawing is replicated in the physical forms of the sculptures in the show. In the drawing, Phillips presents his vision of the fate of both genders in mainstream America: male fades into female by developing breasts, female fades into male by growing facial hair, and a thick layer of fat obscures any hint at gender from the visible surface. Phillips seems to be implying with this drawing that once we stop having to advertise our sexuality to attract a mate, we lose gender separation and stop attending to our bodies as sexual vessels.



Terry, 2010 (charcoal on paper: 44" h x 30"w)



Pat, 2010 (charcoal on paper: 44" h x 30"w)

While sexuality is nonexistent in the main exhibition area, in the back room of the gallery viewers find a blatant portrayal of overt male sexuality. The series of thirteen prints, *Boys are Weird*, examines the universality of male masturbation. Men, regardless of age, class, race, vocation, religious calling or political affiliation find sexual release primarily by masturbating with a beautiful image or fetishized object in mind. These portraits of men in different states of ecstasy provide a stark

contrast to the attractive object that fuels their masturbatory impulse. Here Phillips is playing at iconoclast by presenting the viewer with a cartoonish reflection of a common, yet secretive, male activity that is the opposite of the attractive object that we expect art to be in a gallery.

In the main room, the four sculptures inhabit the gallery space like characters from a William Kentridge video projection and drawing installation. Kentridge reveals about his creative process, "The activity of drawing is a way of trying to understand who we are or how we operate in the world."¹ In the same way, Phillips' sculpture form a cast of characters dealing with mortality while trying to understand who they are and how they operate in our contemporary, mainstream society. Like Kentridge's observational animations, they do not judge or point fingers, simply reflect the fears and warnings of a white, middle class American.

The stark, naked forms of the sculptures recall the honesty in John Coplans' photos of his own body as a record of age and self-inspection. While the sculptures portray a certain honest, harsh reality, they also disorient the viewer as in the films and installations of Bill Viola, exposing both the beautiful and profane, the intimacy of the inner monologue and the tension with the view of the physical self as object. In Bill Viola's words from his artist statement, "The Body Asleep," we arrive at the state of affairs Phillips wishes to present to the viewer, "The larger struggle we are witnessing today is not between conflicting moral beliefs, between the legal system and individual freedom, between nature and human technology; it is between our inner and outer lives, and our bodies are the area where this belief is being played out."²

When Phillips talks of the sculptures in "The Reflection Pool", he likens the white, grotesque forms to the ghosts of Dante's *Inferno*. He envisions his creations as souls caught in a moment of eternal suffering. They represent the troubling psychology of the moment when each of us realizes our own mortality and life as a progression toward the hell of being trapped in an old, decrepit, sexless body for eternity.

Viewers will find the grotesque and the curious in Phillips work, but he is not interested in presenting a freak show to shock or titillate audiences, nor is his work a sentimental pandering to a nostalgic yearning for youth or beauty. It simply seeks to present a truthful eye toward the destiny of humans living in a ragged, dehydrated utopia where judgments made on surface appearance reign supreme and uphold a false dream that one gains happiness through amassing attractive objects and being an attractive object.

Kevin Vaughan-Brubaker, March 2011

¹ (Duckrabbbit Digital, 2010)

² (Morgan & Morris, 1995)

Works Cited

Duckrabbit Digital. (2010, April 13). *Review: William Kentridge: Five Themes*. Retrieved March 1, 2011, from Duckrabbit Speaks:
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Morgan, S., & Morris, F. (1995). *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*. London, UK: Tate Gallery Publications.