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Ronald Gonzalez: Private Collection

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Ronald Gonzalez: Private Collection

Description
In Ronald Gonzalez’s latest series of sculptures, old leather satchels, small antiquated appliances, dulled tools, bicycle handles, shoes, a fencing mask, an accordion, a bicycle seat, a toaster and helmets, among other various found parts and outdated detritus are combined to evoke the heads and torsos of human-like forms. The viewer identifies the components at once as what the objects literally are as well as the specific body parts they figuratively describe. As such, his art calls for an exercise in perceptual shifts that allow for more than one visual interpretation. While some objects are manipulated, others are left intact, as Gonzalez creates paradoxically human and strangely inanimate assemblages. [excerpt]

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RONALD GONZALEZ:
PRIVATE COLLECTION
In Ronald Gonzalez’s latest series of sculptures, old leather satchels, small antiquated appliances, dulled tools, bicycle handles, shoes, a fencing mask, an accordion, a bicycle seat, a toaster and helmets, among other various found parts and outdated detritus are combined to evoke the heads and torsos of human-like forms. The viewer identifies the components at once as what the objects literally are as well as the specific body parts they figuratively describe. As such, his art calls for an exercise in perceptual shifts that allow for more than one visual interpretation. While some objects are manipulated, others are left intact, as Gonzalez creates paradoxically human and strangely inanimate assemblages.

In this exhibition the viewer encounters these life-size sculptures positioned in a long row, a formation that invites one to tally the ambiguities and permutations of the singular figures as they relate to the larger mass of bodies. A series of smaller models echo the configuration. These more intimately-scaled objects effectively stand-in for the seemingly endless permutations of figurative sculpture that comprise Gonzalez’s monumental oeuvre.

Gonzalez uses similarly constructed armatures for both large and small sculptures; spindly steel limbs, rectangular torsos, and metal bases appear to unify all the works. Wax, paint and carbon also unite the blackened bodies in color, as if they belong to one race or species. The uniqueness of each autonomous structure, however, resists their comfortable inclusion within a homogeneous group. In addition to the varied parts that comprise the strange physiognomy of every assemblage, many other objects affixed to their heads, chests and backs can be seen as talismans or weaponry, accessories that echo their unique identities.

Although figurative, these works cannot be identified as fully formed human bodies. Instead, they are marked by an absence of both anima and physicality. In other words, the sculptures do not intimate the presence of a complete figure. Their fragmentary components, in conjunction with the rigidity, repetition and relative plainness of their armatures, illustrate a tension between the implied lifelessness of the often machine-made objects and the persistent anthropomorphism of the humanly-scaled assemblages. For instance, Compression literally has the air squeezed out of it. An accordion, standing for a head, is pressed together; no sound can be made. Wires are secured around the accordion, prohibiting any release from its compressed, silent and functionless state. The bellows of an old camera, affixed to the center of its chest similarly is contracted, like a lung that is unable to exhale. In a more dire condition perhaps than the Tin Man without a heart, this figure is without air or sound. With a relatively minimal number of component parts, Gonzalez evokes both a body and its failing to exist as a fully human form. Although the Tin Man eventually realized that he had loved all along (and received a heart he could see and wear), Compression is bound to its breathless (non)existence. What’s left is a kind of exoskeletal form, a hard outer structure that reveals physical traces of its wearer, but not psychic or corporal embodiment.
Because these sculptures seem bodily, but not embodied, they approximate
costumes or armor. Often, Gonzalez implies that some kind of battle has taken
place: shields appear damaged by shrapnel, weapons are dulled, protective
helmets look worn, gas masks no longer function effectively. The works invite
comparison to war, not so much as a cohesive army of soldiers, but rather, as a
motley crew of lone, dejected fighters who have been defeated, shell-shocked or
ravaged in both physical and psychic ways. The restrained postures and stark
stands surprisingly counteract the former vigor and implied violence of the
imagined combatants. Night Hunter supplies its assumed fighter with a protec-
tive metal head covering, night vision goggles, a gun, a crossbow, a handsaw,
among other implements and protective gear. A model airplane dangling from
his right shoulder and star-covered training wheels fixed below its torso are
incongruous, and therefore unsettling, additions. The total effect of this armor
then moves toward the absurd and suggests a more ribald battle, one not
subject to the supposed logic or rules of “real” wartime combat. Because of the
queer, even threatening combinations of masks with toys and weapons with
household tools, the line between soldier and enemy, defender and assailant,
blurs. The war Night Hunter has fought is not simply imaginary, but instead calls
to mind particularly cinematic representations of war. Broadly speaking, the aes-
thetic of war, with both its horrors and heroes, is disseminated and popularized
through films. From Birth of a Nation to more recent accounts of the Iraq war,
people often picture combat cinematically. The viewer then sees Night Hunter
not simply as a jumbled assemblage of artifacts, but as a theatrical analogy for
how warfare is conveyed.

Filmic references are also seen in many of Gonzalez’s other sculptures, especially
those that recall the mechanical brute, an atomic villain or mutant alien race
of horror films and B-movies from the 1950s and 1960s. In these old films,
antennae look borrowed from television sets, noticeably rubber prosthetics
are glued onto faces, and in a striking parallel, various metal knobs, tubes and
boxes comprise alien robots. In contrast to the seamlessly and purely visual CGI
effects of present-day films, the costumes of the antagonists in these movies are
almost comically tangible. Gonzalez’s sculptures, like their low-budget B-movie
precedents, use these somewhat familiar materials to create a threateningly un-
familiar and even campy or sensational archetypal monster. To generalize, this
cinematic adversary and Gonzalez’s counterpart are anthropomorphized robotic
or beastly forms, but never quite human; heads are elongated, limbs, hands or
claws look like weapons, and hardened materials (metal, plastic, or reptilian
scales, perhaps) supplant soft flesh.

Fishhead specifically is redolent of a somewhat more recent and popular cine-
matic monster, the beast from Ridley Scott’s movie Alien. With its swooping and
abstracted oblong head, Fishhead elicits a horror and estrangement that seems
at odds with the original contexts of its component parts. Gonzalez constructs
this character’s head from a pair of rubber flippers and inserts a multi-pronged
fishing hook in its “mouth.” A child’s life vest becomes its chest, and a bull-horn
is strapped to its back. Rather than seeming buoyant, as is the function of its
components, or as fierce as it appears at first, Fishhead is ensnared and weighed
down. A small, heavy looking sack is taped to its chest, ultimately revealing this
monster to be both burdened and defeated. While it may lack the slimy aggres-
sion of its Alien counterpart, Fishhead nonetheless is as strangely biomechanical
and frighteningly metamorphic.
A self-professed avid watcher of film and television, Gonzalez does not limit his viewing the genres of horror, war films or monster B-movies. While his aesthetic generally may be seen as rather dark and macabre, a few sculptures surprisingly and somewhat subtly allude to early comedies. *Mute*, at first appears simply as an illustration of this soundless condition: kneepads cover the body’s “ears,” and a shin-guard obscures the entire face like a duckbill. With no visible mouth and the “duckbill” firmly pinned to the head, no sounds can be made or heard from the imagined body beneath. The work strikingly depicts muteness, until one notices the large, bulbous rubber form hanging from its back, an old-fashioned bicycle horn. At once the sculpture becomes a quasi-portrait of Harpo Marx. Known of course for never speaking on film, Harpo communicates instead with his litany of props: his bicycle horn perhaps is one of the most memorable.

*Limp Eyes* also alludes, again just obliquely at first, to a famous contemporary of the Marx brothers. A derby hat, dramatic and somewhat sad eyes, and a small, tangled fray of wires (standing for a moustache) in *Limp Eyes* turns into Charlie Chaplin. More specifically, the sculptures signify Chaplin’s and Marx’s theatrical personae. These character-driven, vividly silent comic underdogs—the mute and the Tramp—correspond to the complicatedly comic, tragic, physically expressive, absurd, doleful and even sentimental nature of Gonzalez’s oeuvre.

While *Mute* and *Limp Eyes* provide the viewer with a bit of comic relief, Gonzalez’s art never strays far from more acute portrayals of anxiety. Referring again to film, Gonzalez creates *Snuff Movie*, whose “head” is comprised of an old projector, from which a real film strip is wound and tangled onto the two reels. More horrific than a conventional horror movie, a “snuff movie” alludes to a specific genre of film, whereby an actual death is filmed for entertainment, rather than for documentary purposes. While “snuff films” are regarded more as urban legend than common practice, its undeniably distressing and grotesquely violent premise exists as a medium-specific form of sadism. The filmstrip, ensnarled between the two reels in front of the implied figure’s face, stands as a tangible metaphor for the gruesome twistedness of the film’s scenario, while the knives hanging from its chest implicate this body as the perpetrator of the crime. The imagined sound of the celluloid strip clicking through the reels, the elegant Art Deco curve of the projector, and the sleek calligraphic lettering of the company’s name are not simply nostalgic reminders of a pre-digital era. Instead, juxtaposed with the jumbled assortment of other tools, utensils, and mechanical fragments that surround the torso, the filmic head conjures a more complicated plot: difficult to discern, horrifically themed and unambiguously anxiety-provoking.

Previous writings on Gonzalez have mentioned that he coincidentally shares his hometown of Binghamton, New York with Rod Serling, the creator of *The Twilight Zone*. This television show similarly and amusingly engaged with the tension between concepts and instances of the “normal” and uncanny and reflected the prevalent sense of fear and suspicion felt in the early years of the Cold War (themes that also abound in the B-movies mentioned above). Gonzalez’s correspondences to film and television, however, cannot be understood as simply an homage to particular actors or cinematic icons of the twentieth century. Rather, Gonzalez creates work that more broadly and more poignantly considers how anxiety can be made tangible.
the historicity of Gonzalez’s sculpture is not limited to the hysteria of the atomic age, as his strange imagery, with allusions to violence and trauma, also finds its art-historical precedent in Dada, the artistic and literary movement that emerged in 1916. With its occupation with dismemberment, psychic dysfunction and traumatic neuroses in the aftermath of the First World War, Dada artists, especially those in Berlin in the late 1910s and early 1920s, created photographic montages and sculptural assemblages with military and mechanical fragments. Gonzalez seems to have taken up the artistic call to arms of the “Dadaist Manifesto” of 1918:

The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, an art which one can see has let itself be thrown by the explosions of the last week, which is forever gathering up the limbs after yesterday’s crash. The best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, holding fast to the intellect of their time, bleeding from hands and hearts.

Gonzalez’s assemblages of dissimilar parts parallel the Dadaists’ interest in finding material equivalents to express physical and psychical symptoms of shock, loss, hysteria, and trauma. The components of Gonzalez’s sculptures inspire associations of wartime threats and fears: the gas mask of Specter, the welding mask of Shield, and the helmet of Stranger look like they encountered the same violent fate as the even more macabre head of Skull. Charred and ghastly, the figure’s recessed eye sockets, pock-marked face and gashed chest reveal a wounded and ravished man. Humanity is lost in the discarded and ostensibly banal mechanical detritus. Although the work is intended to be recognized as a skeleton, it also very strangely and simply is a bicycle seat. Like a crash-test dummy, the bicycle seat bears the brunt of what looks like what might have been a radioactive explosion. The “skin” of the seat has blown open to reveal its strangely figurative pattern; it becomes a sort of Rorschach test with explicitly belligerent and militaristic associations.

The figuration of the sculptures, standing in disquieting opposition to the persistent objecthood of its parts, contributes to the total evocation of shock and dismemberment that characterize the Dada’s materialization of trauma. For Gonzalez and his Dadaist predecessors, bodies are markedly and often violently incomplete. The dense accumulation of various objects on the head and torsos contrasts with the starkness of the limbs, rendering them oddly incongruent. The arms and legs function as an extension of the pedestal, a framing device for display for the rest of the objects. As such, one imagines that the “real” limbs that correspond to each bust, somehow equally costumed, are lost. These dismembered, fragmentary figures, comprised only of ravaged heads and armored chests, evoke the melancholy, agitation and experience of a shell-shocked man. The bodies are not part of an optimistic and crisply uniformed army, but are tired and weary soldiers at the end of the war returning with makeshift uniforms, random spoils and disfigured bodies.
Ultimately, Gonzalez is a collector of found objects, historical references, and enigmatic associations. The pairing of quasi-figurative forms with outmoded commodities belongs both to the Dadaist and surrealist image repertoires. The emphasis on outmoded parts in these movements and their taking of familiar things that become uncanny through historical distance similarly applies to Gonzalez’s work. The elements that comprise his sculptures are relics and everyday objects of an earlier age. Gonzalez’s collection of materials and his process of burning, waxing and painting the surfaces appears to age them further. The objects are emblematic of the twentieth century, yet the sculptures are insistently contemporary. It is because these sculptures are made now that their strangeness are made stranger by the inclusion of apparently timeworn objects.

Gonzalez’s artmaking begins with searching and acquiring materials that may find its way into sculptures or are squirreled away in the studio. Gonzalez amasses and makes with almost equal prolificity, and the transformation of such a collection into sculpture is at once modern and mystifying. For cultural critic and theoretician Walter Benjamin, the collector served a useful metaphor to understand the material conditions of modernity. “It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle,” wrote Benjamin, “where, as a last shudder runs through it [the shudder of being acquired], it turns to stone.” While Benjamin, writing in the late 1920s and 1930s, looked to late nineteenth-century Paris in order to critically analyze the effects of high capitalism in a new age of social and technical conditions of production, Gonzalez also turns to the previous century and to its tangible remains to reflect on contemporaneity and the artist’s place within it. The enchantment that surrounds Benjamin’s collector, one who frees things from “the drudgery of being useful,” more than adequately describes Gonzalez’s artmaking process.

As collections of things, the sculptures stand in for Gonzalez’s own role as the collector. In Mortal, the figure is smothered, weighed down around his head, neck, chest and back with an odd menagerie of objects, such as a birdhouse, camera, harmonica, pocket knife, fork, scissors, shovel, just to identify a few things on the top layer. Once acquired, the objects are made useless, detached from its original function, and in Benjamin’s deathly terms, they feel a “last shudder.” Mortality is affixed to memory, which is found in the associations these things provoke, not just in the death of the object. The assemblage, now covered and comprised with this materiality, staves off mortality by making sure these things of the past have a secure place in the present. The objects, seemingly having been “turned to stone,” are enclosed within a new context for this collector, that here stands for his mortality and his humanity.
Gonzalez’s entire oeuvre can be characterized as a curious mixing of the future and the archaic. A fantastical race of robot-figures, emerging from the realm of science fiction, is comprised of bourgeois detritus and now antiquated possessions. The sculptures and their component parts undeniably call to mind historical precedents and remembered associations, but their tangible presence in the present and the relics that remain are not shadows of the past. They confront and persist; their visual effects are potent and relevant. Larger issues that have defined the past century—threats of war and violence, the vulnerability of the human body, increased commodification, anxiety about strangely intangible social relations, and the socio-political effects of high capitalism—are tenaciously current and quite acutely confronted in Gonzalez’s provocative collection.

— Shannon Egan, Ph.D.

Born in Binghamton, New York where he continues to live and work, sculptor Ronald Gonzalez is a product of his own environment. Since the mid seventies the artist has worked from his garage studio in upstate New York creating elegiac sculptures and installations that are embodiments of death and loss infused with psychic energy, grotesque narrative and witty pathos. Grounded in the legacies of the upright figure and assemblage art, Gonzalez works primarily in a series with small scale and life-size humanoid forms, made from steel armatures and assembled time worn objects and detritus from his surroundings. The sculptures emphasize the juxtaposition of singular figurative identities as resonating parts within the collective whole that are staged in groups or solitary lines dominated by a formal and poetic use of space, variation, and repetition. The artist's restless investigation of animating materials has produced a hybrid art of dissolution with apocalyptic and quasi-alien elements that eloquently convey a sense of mortality, nostalgia, private meanings and mysterious presence. Gonzalez received his BA from the State University of New York in 1982 where he currently teaches as Professor of Sculpture since 1999. He has also taught as an Artist in Residence at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY in 1993 and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC in 1996 as well as residencies at YADDO, Saratoga Springs, NY in 1998, Sculpture Space, Utica, NY in 1989, John Michael Kohler Art Center in 1998. He has received grants from the Pollock Krasner Foundation, 1986 & 1998, the adolph & esther Gottlieb Foundation Fellowship in 1999, NYSCA in 1988 & 1989 and NYFA in 1993 & 1996.

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