



MATERIALS & PROCESS

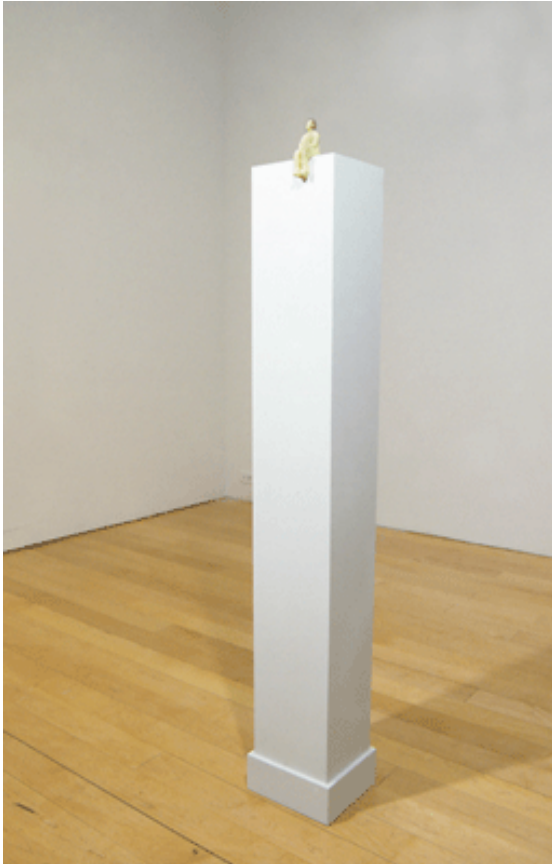
Where the Rubber Meets the Road – Jeanne Silverthorne

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In a recent column on Vulture.com, critic Jerry Saltz quoted dealer Gavin Brown about the outsize scale of contemporary art reflecting the outsize scale of the art world: “When we are able to fly around the globe in 24 hours, and that is a common occurrence ... these large-scale works might be an unconscious attempt to rediscover awe.” (Never mind that 1960s and 1970s Earth Works were awe-inspiring, supersized, and propagated in the vast landscape of the American West.) Curiously, today there is an antidote to king-size sculpture: an increasing interest in pocket-size work. Parallel to the incredible shrinking sculpture is that these pieces are handwrought by the artist. Embedded in the fast-paced, technology-based, global reach of the early twenty-first century is a simultaneous hankering for intimately created and displayed art. These little works may just be the next big thing.



Thelma, 2005. Rubber, hair and phosphorescent pigment.
4 1/2 x 1 1/2 x 2 1/4 inches, 11.4 x 3.8 x 5.7 cm. Edition of 10

This is a quiet counter movement by some artists who choose to make diminutive objects rather than massive ones. Matt Hoyt's (American, b. 1975) small sculptures of hand-held, hand-crafted rocks, chain, bone or twigs were on view in the 2012 Whitney Biennial. Christiane Lohr (German, b. 1965) makes tiny plant sculptures from burrs and thistles. Charles LeDray (American, b. 1960) sews miniature suits of clothing that could fit an elf. And Jeanne Silverthorne (American, b. 1950) is using platinum silicone rubber to create figures that are small in stature but big in attitude. While Silverthorne also makes installation projects of rubber tubing that can span a gallery, her human forms are the size of a coffee cup. When her mini people are poised, seated atop a tall platform, their littleness is exaggerated.

"I really like a range from tiny to large because shifts in scale are like shifts in power," the artist wrote in a recent email. "If you are looking at something tiny, you are in control of the object, you dominate. But if you are in a room-sized installation or facing a large object, then you are dwarfed by it, disempowered to some extent."



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Their stature reflects a shift in human experience in the world. When enormous work destabilizes the viewer even while enveloping him, the tabletop object offers an opportunity for quieter reflection and even some humor. “I guess there is an aversion to monumentality,” Silverthorne stated. “Somehow the grandiose gesture doesn’t fit with [my] obsession with mortality and extinction.”

Silverthorne’s little people are acutely honed in rubber because the material “was touchable, felt like flesh. It bounced and was funny.” The artist adds pintsize details to each form such as a rumpled sweater, wrinkled flesh, a smear of lipstick or a decorative bracelet. Silverthorne’s figures’ have a yellow bile hue (called “phosphorescent” by the pigment manufacturer, it enables the objects to glow in a darkened room) and she adds human hair to their heads. Through this very current material (Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Mona Hatoum, Mathew Barney, and Chakaia Booker have all used rubber in their work), Silverthorne is able to reclaim historic sculptural techniques including traditional modeling and casting.



Dad, 2013. Rubber and hair.
5 1/2 x 2 1/4 x 3 1/2 inches 14 x 5.7 x 8.9 cm. Edition of 10

She began working with rubber in the mid-1980s and has continued her fascination with the material. “It literally has no backbone... and therefore it flops around like a slap-stick vaudevillian. Also, rubber effects an ever-so-slight blurring of details, a kind of smoothing out, almost as though there is an echo of fluidity left after the pour has set,” Silverthorne explained.

Intrinsic to her use of rubber to create likenesses of people is the tension that rubber conjures; traits that are dreary, industrial, and dull. But Silverthorne makes objects reeking of vitality: human figures, thriving organic forms and plant matter. “I don’t really see it as lifeless and inanimate...” she said. “Perhaps there is a certain inertness to the material and that would certainly underscore the theme of entropy, of inevitable decay and loss of energy that runs throughout everything I do.”