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Sculptors on Sculpture: Part Two

By Stephen Shaheen

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Installation view of "Beautiful Beast" at the New York Academy of Art.
(Photo by Peter Drake)

On the occasion of the group exhibition "Beautiful Beast," on view at the New York Academy of Art through March 8, artist Stephen Shaheen delved into the studio practices of each of the 16 featured sculptors: Barry X Ball, Monica Cook, Gehard Demetz, Lesley Dill, Richard Dupont, Eric Fischl, Judy Fox, Folkert de Jong, Elizabeth King, Mark Mennin, Evan Penny, Patricia Piccinini, Rona Pondick, Jeanne Silverthorne, Kiki Smith, and Robert Taplin. Part Two, a series of eight interviews conducted via email, telephone, and in-person exchanges, appears below. Part One can be found here. The interviews have been condensed and edited for clarity.

JEANNE SILVERTHORNE

Stephen Shaheen: In looking at "Frank" and "Phosphorescent Betty," as well as the other sculptures in your DNA portrait series, I am struck by the pathos of these figures, and the attentiveness of the renderings. They are cohesive but full of tensions: the feeling of frailty and biological decay with the use of human hair versus the perceived longevity of industrial rubber bodies; the combination of an organic "ready made" with a contrived form in artificial materials; intimacy and idiosyncrasy overlapping a sense of toxicity, waste, and manufacturing. Even the usual notions of immortalizing via portraiture are undermined in these diminutive, antiheroic, frumpy, and melancholic figures.

Considering your work more broadly, it has, at various times, broadcast meditations on diverse means of production: manual, industrial, and digital. These figures fall clearly into the first category. The idiosyncratic process by which you create them does not feel easily imitable by the second two; it seems that the intervention of an authorial hand at some crucial moment is essential in your work. As an artist whose career is spanning a period that has alternately emphasized various modes of creation, how do you situate yourself in this matrix, and what observations can you offer about the shifting dynamics in artist practices today?

Jeanne Silverthorne: Well, you are quite right that "Betty" and "Frank" are not "easily imitable" by digital processes. Of course I could have made arrangements to drag my two elderly (now deceased) relatives to a 3D imaging facility. But working from photos of them seemed less intrusive, to say the least (in fact, some of the portraits in the series were done posthumously, so a digital production was out of the question in any case).

More importantly, what I mainly feel is that I must *earn* the right to these portraits, and that can be done only by investing huge amounts of time (months and months) and excruciating amounts of attention (modeling in clay looking through two sets of magnifying lenses, using needles for tools, etc.). If the results have a "signature" (nasty word, I know) pathos or awkwardness, this is just a byproduct of my hand, of the kinds of rendering choices I habitually make. No doubt even these qualities could be computerized, but, to repeat, it is the element of time spent that matters to me.

In his recent book "24/7" Jonathan Crary makes clear the ways in which digital technology has taken away time. "Since no moment, place or situation now exists in which one can not shop, consume or exploit networked resources, there is a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of personal or social life…. Billions of dollars are spent every year researching how to reduce decision-making time, the useless time of reflection and contemplation."

Crary also points out that "submission to these arrangements is near irresistible because of the portent of social and economic failure — the fear of falling behind, the fear of

being deemed outdated." And while opting out of technology is not even a choice since to do so renders one invisible, a demand of the new social media being the construction of our personalities through it, he also reminds us of Hannah Arendt's belief that time was necessary to privacy and that both time and privacy were necessary for political responsiveness. According to Arendt, for an individual to be politically effective there must be a moving back and forth between the "protected, shielded sphere of private life" and the "implacable bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene."

These are crucial points for me. Since the early '90s I have been exploring the trope of the collapsed studio, the single-occupant artist's studio. This once-privileged (male) place of contemplation is now a ruin. And I have been interested in excavating that ruin, looking at the various items buried in it, ranging from its architectural details, infrastructure, and history to uncovering lost art genres, including that of the portrait. Meanwhile, the subjects of those portraits have also been lost — dead, deported, or in one case simply departed from my life. This is the reason for the ghostly but short-lived afterglow of the phosphorescence and the reason that I include DNA reports on each of them. That too speaks of a lost past, since the matrilineal ancestry report traces the geographical location of their genetic haplogroup for the last 15,000 or so years, thus connecting them to millions of other ghosts. The other DNA report provides their genetic "fingerprint," that part of their genetic makeup that makes them utterly unique. So even here we are dealing with the tension between or overlapping of the individual ("authenticity") and the reproduced (the endless transmission of "copied" DNA). That the figures are rubber — as you point out an industrial material — but sport their own real hair — fetish stuff — is another contradiction. Or perhaps we should think of these as parallax views.

In the archaeology of the studio I pursue many kinds of excavation using many media. There is the inventorying of physical aspects of a particular working space and casting them in rubber. The models for this may be actual pipes and circuitry or copies of those modeled in clay and then cast. Tiny fragments of the casting process — plaster and rubber drips and chips, etc. — are salvaged, enlarged in clay, and also cast in rubber or plaster. And we should remember, as Rosalind Krauss so memorably demonstrated in her discussion of Rodin, the casting process itself involves destroying the "original." Moreover, its multiple yields align it with the factory assembly line.

In addition to modeling and casting, I take photos of the studio and its processes, print them very small (1 ½" by 2") in black and white. I also make videos on the same subject, combining original footage and altered found footage to comment again on the studio and my own productions within it. These are also reduced to a 1 ½" x 2" format, converted to black and white, matted and framed and shown salon-style, embedded amongst the photos.

For some time now I have been making functional, rubber crates with faux-wood grain, an extension of an on-going interest in the invisibility of the "deep storage" of the

studio. Letters and song lyrics have been handwritten by fictional occupants of the studio. And recently I have become fascinated by the confluence of the so-called authenticity of handwriting or script and its present near-obsolescence and plan to begin writing in longhand and invisible ink a series of commissioned and found texts on the topic of invisibility, to be stored in cast rubber boxes.

Clearly the issues of authorship, of the hand, of the mechanics of reproduction have always been present in my project. Over the last four or five years I have occasionally made sculptures digitally as well. Usually I do this when I want to save time. Digital technology is an invaluable tool. Not everything has to take forever. But increasingly I find myself preoccupied by the creeping extinction of private, slow time and its opportunity for reflection. As long as we are mortal, time will always be of the essence. Spending time or saving time — these are now, more than ever, political as well as personal choices. And when time-saving technology comes with the ceaseless necessity to constantly master new programs, devices, and applications, when time saving actually becomes time consuming, the choice is made even more complicated.