

DESOLATED FIGURES IN ABSTRACT SCULPTURES

Beaumont's Reinvention of Western Body, by Dinah Guimaraens

Although it is the realistic aspects of Hanneke Beaumont's art - the figures themselves lying prone, sitting in, or standing up in desolated postures - that first attract the viewer's attention, the sculptures are developed formally according to the principles of twentieth century abstraction. Seeming to have been in some sense directly influenced by abstract American art of the '70s and '80s, Beaumont's European background is revealed through the Greco-Roman shape of her sculptures' faces. In fact, there is a purposeful tension established by the artist between realism and abstraction, nature and culture, feminine and masculine, modernity and classicism, all presented in these terracotta and bronze compositions. Her pensive beings sit nobly on a foundation of iron or steel bars, their anonymous faces expressing the loss of identity and the massification of contemporary society. But the viewer can also have the illusion that her modern figures are ancient, or perhaps not linked to any space-and-time references, such as in a post-modern novel. The human body is shown by Beaumont like the first natural instrument, compelled thenceforth by the Western cultural rules of behavior. Her androgynous and melancholic figures represent the technical manifestation of society impressed, over the centuries, to the body's expression.

Art, by definition, moves in the domain of the unreal, of the imaginary, of the unconscious. Even when the beings represented by the artist are founded in reality, it is not the realism which gives them their intrinsic meaning. The role of the human body in art in general has been to reflect socially the changing tastes and fashions of different cultures in different centuries.

Beaumont's immobile figures seem therefore to express the distinctive code of behavior and sexual restraint impressed to the body by Western tradition. The sense of a common human condition, defined by sexual desire, led to the belief that sexuality was an unmodified outcropping of the alien animal world, which the serpent had first fed to Adam and Eve.

The transformation in attitude toward the body, which was one of the distinguishing marks of the Renaissance, was not merely a return to classical ideals brought about by the revival of study of the ancient world, but was also a swing in the pendulum of emphasis within the Western consciousness from the body-denying to the body-affirming end of the philosophical spectrum.

The very concept of "man", of the human species as a whole, was grasped as a guiding principle of study and man was conceived essentially as "made in the image of God." The body is now seen as a microcosm; as God's metaphor for the world.

By the early nineteenth century, the classical tradition of the expressive body which Renaissance art had inherited from antiquity and passed to its successors appeared to have run its course as a wellspring of inspiration for the front rank of creative artists, and had become the hallmark of the conservative "academies." Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the focus of interest in the body had shifted definitely from the world of high art and imaginative depiction generally to that of more immediate and popular forms of expression.

The tyranny of beauty in Western societies has traditionally affected men as well as women. The debate relating to sexual politics has developed two different responses to the question of socio-sexual inequality posed by the requirements of physical attractiveness: the American response which criticizes the culture propagated by cosmetics industry and women's magazines and the European response which extends the vogue of physical attractiveness to men as well as women.

Beaumont's sculptures seem to rescue, in the late twentieth century, the classical values addressed to the human body as artistic expression. With her Greco-Roman-like heroic representation of human faces as well as the desolated postures of her sculptures the figures turn visible the preconstructed and institutionalized social values of contemporary culture with respect to the body.

The imaginary experience of the artist shows us temporal structures linked to the past, and dispositions toward the future. Beaumont's sculptures thus offer a solution to the paradoxes of human existence: through the power relations impressed to the body, we can see also the possibility of freedom presented to human beings in their life experience.

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