

## The Unfathomable Figure:

### Hanneke Beaumont's Sculpture by Donald Kuspit

Remarkably pensive, yet at the same time resolute, Hanneke Beaumont's figurative sculptures present themselves as the heirs to those of Lehmbruck - there is a similar moodiness, a similar introversion - but also to those of Donatello, who gives us heroism as well as suffering. Beaumont has said that her figures deal with separation. Again and again we see them testing each other and themselves, coming close yet remaining apart, self-involved yet struggling to become involved with each other. They seem at once resigned and meditative -- accepting and perplexed, as it were -- about what seems an unresolved process. As the eloquent figure in Terra Cotta 56 makes clear, they enact it through body language and facial expression, conveying the figure's inner complication even as it gives them a theatrical presence. They are actors in a drama of estrangement, their bodies vehicles of emotion, but also autonomous flesh. To convey a human being in all its vulnerability and dignity is no mean feat, and but all the more pressing at a time when there is talk of the "post human", and a dismissive rethinking of the human, as though it was entirely reducible to genetic determination and environmental manipulation. Beaumont's figures are a defiant reassertion of the human, in all its pathos and complexity, worthy of the Old Masters, however intensified by a modern sense of the futility of human existence.

Side by side, juxtaposed as though to confirm their irreconcilability, Hanneke Beaumont places the reclining figure of Bronze 27 and the seated figure of Bronze 29 (both 1996). Similarly, the cross-legged, rather self-contained figure of Bronze 25 -- its arms wrapped tightly around a symbolic mass of primordial matter, which the figure clings to self-protectively sits next to the somewhat more open figure of Bronze 26 (both 1995-96). Its arms stretch the length of its legs, which are spread wide apart. Its head is lifted, if not exactly held high-but much higher than in Bronze 25 -- and its body is no longer huddled in on itself, but strikingly visible, indeed, forthright. The figure is "letting go", as Beaumont says, in contrast to the more self-protective figure of Bronze 25. The two figures that constitute Bronze 35 (1996) are also at odds, if replicas of each other, down to the detail of the geometrical base on which they stand. They turn toward each other, even as they walk away from each other, and exist at opposite ends of a space neither seems inclined to cross. The space clearly represents the abyss of the emotional distance between them. Their alienation is ironical not only because they are the same, but because their separation is self-imposed.

In a different vein, but also following Beaumont's strategy of juxtaposition, the figure in Bronze 36 (1996-97) seems to have broken out of the womb-like object behind it. This apparent container, as I read it, is now a ruin of fragments, and the sober figure turns away from it. The figure remains on its knees, seemingly vulnerable for all its determination. Even more dramatically, the intense figure in Bronze 45, crouching like an animal poised to spring (Beaumont thinks of it as threatened) turns away from the bizarre object its body faces. It is as though the rudimentary matter the insular figure in Bronze 25 holds has metamorphosed into an enigmatic, molten shape impossible for any figure to encompass. In Bronze 49 a figure perches on a related mass, sitting on a minimalist base--an abstract construction, as sober as the figure. The repeated figures in Bronze 44 are in a similar situation.

The intricate relationship between the figures in the installation of Bronze and Cast Iron no. 48 enact a contemplative state. Beaumont refers to this striking installation as the Melancholia series. The larger-than-life black bronze figure looks back over its shoulder toward the rough cast iron figure. Reflecting on its previous state, the formidable bronze figure appears to have stepped out of the past and into the present taking with it knowledge and experience. In this state of melancholia it moves forward with optimism.

These works make clear perhaps the most fundamental of the many subtle contradictions that structure Beaumont's sculptures: between an organic, somewhat archaic figure, as its primitive robe-like garb suggests it is no more than a minimal covering for the naked body (like Gothic drapery, the clothing becomes inseparable from the body, even part of it, a kind of extravagant skin) and an abstract geometrical construction, its simplicity, sobriety, and clean-cut look in startling contrast with the richly textured, strangely positioned, expressively complex figure. (The patina adds to the "moodiness of the figure.") Elevated on this simple yet dynamic construction, Beaumont's figure is ennobled, as the corten steel bases of Bronzes 25 and 26 suggest. Even when it seems like a creature that has escaped from its cage but is unable to leave it, and so remains a prisoner at heart -as in Bronzes 45 and 49 - its dignity is enhanced by its "heightened" position. Nonetheless, the tension between figure and base is far from resolved -- they remain juxtaposed rather than integrated, however related through scale and proportion--so that their difference continues to generate tension.

As the various Term Cotta works of 1995-96 indicate, the clue to Beaumont's figure is its relationship to clay. Bronze 26 derives from Term Cotta 25 (in the former the head is tilted downward rather than outward), and the shards in Bronze 36 seem related to the object in Terra Cotta 26. The figure seems puzzled by the clay object between its legs. If the dense object the figure of Terra Cotta 25 holds is unformed clay, then the object in Bronze 45 is that clay become wild and explosive.

The tension between control and loss of control, even if it is never lost, is a sub text of Beaumont's sculpture. Control is symbolized by the poised, determined figure (however troubled), while the texture, for all its controlled look- whereas the painterly gesture applied to "Le Courage, 1994 seems uncontrolled--implies the loss of control, as a threat. Composed of two parts, three life-sized terra cotta figures are surrounded by fragments of clay symbolizing the fragmentary aspects of life. Although these figures sit together in a group they seem separate and indifferent to one another, inactively looking toward a fourth figure. This fourth figure is set apart and above the others, holding some of the fragments of clay, representing courage, the kind of courage one needs to find in one's self by accepting life in all its dimensions, constitutes the inspiration for this series.

Bronzes 25 and 26 clearly offer a contrast of moods, however much the mood in both is reflective. The difference in posture is a difference between dependence and independence--ocnophilia and philobatism, to use Michael Balint's terms.(1) Similarly, the difference in position between Bronzes 27 and 29 conveys the difference between togetherness and separation. We seem to be looking at the systole and diastole of a single state of consciousness.

Indeed, Beaumont renders intense states of complex consciousness with astonishing clarity and consistency, amazing focus and single-mindedness. Perhaps the most intense and complicated state appears in Bronzes 45, 49, and 44. The former is a tour de force, encapsulating Beaumont's technical and theatrical skill as well as her vision of humanity. The figure in it is particularly magnificent--brilliantly conceived, heroically convincing. It seems to be staring into the distance, seeing what no one else can see. It seems to expect something, or else the threatening shape it turns away from may not be what it expected. But its textured form already gives it decisive presence. Can one say that it has been shaped from the mass that confronts it, and turns away from the mass so as to avoid dissolving back into it? Is that very material mass like the marble block in which Michelangelo saw his divine figures? Beaumont's more perturbed figure seems to express the spirit of the turbulent material whose space it shares, giving human shape to inhuman force.

Definiteness and indefiniteness are another sub text. But the persistent, steady glance, at once intense and contemplative, wary and detached, other figures--the glance that is the core of their seriousness, and makes them seem prophetic--is not only outward but inward. Beaumont's figure sees what is fated in inner life as well as in the world. It is subjectively as well as objectively aware. When the figures in Bronze 35 look at each other, it is one figure looking at itself as well as at another figure in the world. It faces itself, even as it turns toward the world. Its encounter with itself is thus doubly strange, for the self is a stranger to itself because it is inhabited by the other even as it struggles to separate itself from the other. Separateness, indeed, is a constant of Beaumont's figurative sculpture, alongside the possibility of empathic closeness, which always seems to abort, as in the composition of 48, part of the Melancholia series.

Beaumont's figure is a universal symbol--a self-symbol. Its predicament and suffering, integrity and doubt, are ours. It is gender-neutral, or perhaps androgynous--sometimes curved like a female, but with what seems to be a male face. It is, in any event, a generalized figure, harking back to tradition. But perhaps it is "post modern" if that means bringing together expression (the all too human figure) and construction (the austere abstract base), which is what modernism had to keep apart, as T. W. Adorno declared. Sculptural integrity today no longer consists in being pure--all expression or all construction--but in combining the opposites, without reducing the tension between them. This is what Beaumont has done. Her accomplishment is all the more convincing because she is able to convince us that what seems like a technical feat is, in fact, emblematic of deep emotional tension.

*Notes (I) Michael Balint, Thrills and Regressions (London: Maresfield Library, 1987), p. 33 distinguishes between "ocnophilic clinging to objects or part objects (Beaumont's broken vessel, a surrogate for the body, qualifies as one) and the philobate's "standing upright on his own" (p. 38), apparently without the support of any object. One might say that Beaumont's juxtaposed figures embody the tension between the two. The mix of intimacy and autonomy in Bronze 35 epitomizes their situation. I venture to say that the massive object in Bronze 45 and the shattered object in Bronze 36 represent different aspects of Mother Earth, the medium-matrix of us all. The figure that turns away from it asserts its independence from the mysterious maternal source of its being, even as its melancholy and fallen position convey its dependence.*