

Hanneke Beaumont: The Urgent Moment

by: Robert C. Morgan

Sculpture needs to evolve into the present moment. Most likely this will happen if critics are willing to re-evaluate some of the assumptions as to what constitutes advanced art. Given the ambiguous connotations as to what signifies sculpture today, it seems plausible to consider a new expressionist language in the wake of postminimalism and the overuse of the term “installation”. Such a language should be capable of signifying the meaning of existence in a time that appears uncertain and without direction. Amid the chaos of our era, we can no longer assume that the conceptual strategies applied to sculpture before 9/11 are necessarily the most advanced forms of sculpture or that the notion of the “expanded field” is as relevant today as it was in the seventies and eighties. The alternative, as implied in the work of Hanneke Beaumont, is that some of the most relevant sculpture being created today amid the ruins of economic globalization is less about the dematerialization of art and is more given to emerging forms of figurative expressionism.

In this context, renewed approaches to aesthetic distance through the use of traditional materials, such as cast bronze, iron, and terracotta, are clearly within the domain of Beaumont. Her sculpture exonerates' a new figurative tendency built on a clearly refined, though understated sublimity. Indeed, it is within the realm of the sublime that Beaumont awakens the potential for meaning in three-dimensional space by representing a distraught, yet poignant awareness of the self. This may be seen in the awe-struck, seated figure in *Terracotta #68* (2004), or in the walking figure, stepping into the unknown at a crucial moment of decision making, as in *Bronze #66* (2004). In this case, as estranged as this anonymous individual might be, there is a dignified notion within the appearance of its anxiety. As a human being, it is concerned about its fate, its place in the world, its ability to grasp its dilemma: the urgency of its life. While much of this might be seen as literary meandering, not deliberately intended by Beaumont, there is a suggestive quality about her work that leads the viewer to understand the terms of her expressionism as being within the realm of solitude. None of her figures to date carry a cell phone!

Such sculpture is capable of inducing a psychological affect. As shown in various forms of expressionist genres throughout the previous century, psychological content cannot be a surrogate for aesthetics. To illustrate the point, there is a clear distinction to be made between Hanneke's figurative art and the "body art" of the late sixties where the artist performed directly in relation to his or her own body. While both figurative expressionism and "body art" are ultimately concerned with the body, their approaches are quite different. In the performance works of Vito Acconci and Gina Pane - both of whom dealt with the narcissism of a transparent self there was an adamant denial of the formal attributes of sculpture. Their works were about intensifying the projected inner conflict, often based on a systemic methodology that in some instances inflicted pain. In contrast, the sculptural figurations of Beaumont represent the body not as a denial of formal attributes, but as a cohesive unity in which both formal and psychological elements function independently within the material presence of the object. This is made evident within such recent sculptures as her bronze and cast iron versions of *Telemones* (2004) where the upper half of the bodies transmutes into an extended wedge-like lever, thus consciously disabling the body's movement in space. One cannot divide the formal from the psychological in such a work; they are inexorably bound to the delivery of meaning. They become metaphors, symptomatic of an era where helplessness abides amid the chaotic disjunctions of the everyday world. This series could function on a monumental scale as ominous columns or architectural elements rising from the earth and then surprising the viewer when close up, by revealing the struggle and confusion that the figures endure.

I am not going to define Hanneke Beaumont's position any further than what I have stated, because it is clearly not within the spirit of her work to do so. Beaumont's work gives us a recognition of the self in its most distant and urgent moments. In contrast to expropriating a fragment from psychoanalytic theory, I will instead argue in favor of my own experience by returning to a statement I made in relation to her work three years ago in Venice:

While we may confront these feelings or even deny them on some occasions, there are few artists capable of bringing the language of form into focus and who give us the sense of relinquishment required in coming to terms with the endurance of the self. This is precisely the message I glean from these sculptures and the message that I believe they offer, in a world given over to the fragmentation of the self. Although they reveal a tragic view of life, Beaumont's sculpture also gives us the courage to go elsewhere and to be someone - without shame or regret.

Beaumont is an artist who searches for something real - a moment in time that holds a specific kind emotional reality. One that indicates a fulcrum, a turning-point that contains insight into how we see ourselves when confronted by the unknown. This is accurately expressed in *Bronze #59* (2002), where a figure leans out from a clay base with its hands in front of it. The connotation suggests that it is feeling its way in the dark and is in search of support from the surrounding environment. In this case, the figure finds support in itself. The viewer can also imagine this work as a towering force in monumental scale, hands outstretched, silhouetted against the sky. In *Bronze #70* (2004), a figure emerges from a fragment of earth. Beaumont uses the undulating piece of earth as an expressive device, perhaps an ominous sign. We take from these figures a sense of time, of being within time, a compressed moment filled with urgency and yet somehow the moment feels timeless. In essence, she gives a new view of the human condition where in confronting the chance events of the global environment, existence proves less self-determined than victimized by factors beyond our control. Still, as in the previous works by Beaumont, there is an undeniable sense of dignity represented in these personages, a sense of the central importance of humanity, despite the uncertainty that may have altered our way of seeing and believing.

Robert C. Morgan is a writer, international art critic, curator, poet, lecturer, and artist. His recent books include The End of the Art World (1998), Gary Hill (2000), and Bruce Nauman (2002). He is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture Magazine and Tema Celeste (Milan), and in addition writes for ARTnews, Art Press (Paris), and Art and Culture (Seoul). He holds both an MFA in Sculpture and a Ph.D. in Art History. In 1999, he was awarded the Arcale Award for Art Criticism in Salamanca, Spain.