

CHRISTOPHER MILES

BLOOM

Untitled
(Ecce Homo Lancelot Marini)

2012

Acrylic, paper, and aluminum
83 x 60 x 30 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Photograph by Cecily Miles

Initiated by Picasso's experimental *Glass of Absinthe* (1914), artists began effectively questioning and re-envisioning the traditional uses for art materials like oil paint, marble, and plaster casting, as well as introducing real objects into their work. Such inventive artworks opened up new dimensions for sculpture and painting throughout the century. Postwar artists such as Lee Bontecou whose high relief patchworks of outward and upward thrusting structures punctuated by gaping cavities and tunnels were architectural/landscape surrogates for the human figure that further elaborated the frictions—and harmonies—between the flatness of the painting field and the three-dimensional. By the 1960s, all kinds of objects were being affixed to canvases to contest the boundaries between painting and sculpture, most notably in the mixed media works of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Along with sculptors like Claus Oldenburg who introduced the icons and logos of American consumer culture into the realm of subjective abstract experience, they worked at the juncture of abstraction and representation, alternating between literal objects, gestural brushwork and figuration. Strict hierarchies were compromised with sculpture no longer diametrically opposed to the illusionistic and literary affiliations of painting, but now in a reciprocating collaboration. Painting, likewise, instead of a

fixed, rigid rectangle, expanded into the realm of the sculptural and could be viewed from all sides, or as sculptural components. In the early 1980s California artist Richard Jackson was constructing massive sculptures of stacks of hundreds of individually painted canvases subordinating painting's traditional dominant aesthetic role to that of supporting actor. These artists critically reacted against formalist orthodoxy with its insistent march to irreducible material essence, paving the way for new conceptual possibilities in sculpture for succeeding generations. As heir to this disruption of the conventional support of painting and the subversion of medium specificity and autonomy so crucial to Modernism, Miles' sculptures fabricated from paintings or a process that is as much painting as sculpting, embrace a contemporary, hybrid aesthetic—one that allows for the pictorial to infiltrate the sculptural, with more contingency, cross-fertilization, improvisation, and less differentiation between genres in what author Johanna Drucker has called "eclectic materialism."¹ His mutant objects maintain a dialogue with a complex, interwoven system of art historical movements like Expressionism, Surrealism, and geometric abstraction, as well as with mass media, entertainment, and consumer culture. Critic Donald Kuspit described the manipulation of "old abstractions" as deriving from "a





Untitled
(Lynda Lee Stargazer Strangelove) [detail]

2012

Acrylic, paper, and aluminum
46 x 50 x 42 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Photograph by Cecily Miles



Untitled
(Vincent Price Oppenheimer Mullican) [detail]

2012

Acrylic, paper, and aluminum
51 x 54 x 36 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Photograph by Cecily Miles

wounded, disturbed state” in which “abstract art no longer brings us face to face with unexpected forces in ourselves.” That state is in part a result of the absorption into mass culture of the rhetoric of resistance on which abstract painting and sculpture depended in the past as well as the perceived failures of formal abstraction to be universal and transcendent in the face of more recent examinations of identity and culture. It has provoked an aesthetic response based on challenging such unitary claims of the past, consisting of “images of newly hatched forms... in a thematic of mutual fascination that continually extends the fall from modern autonomy and postmodern critical distance into a hothouse of fertile mutation.”² Via his bold, vivid brushwork, Miles re-engages the emotional wallop of Abstract Expressionism’s paintings associated with postwar angst. Reiterations of Cubism and Futurism abound in his playful geometry and point to the Modernist surge towards pure abstraction. His spindly-legged bodies recall the odd heteromorphisms of Surrealist painting and drawing. All these recollections seem to typify Miles’ attitude asserted in his (somewhat self-describing) essay for *THING*, an exhibition he co-curated with James Elaine and Aimee Chang for the Hammer Museum in 2005. These sculptors, he explains, seem to “grapple with and negotiate their relationships to the sculptural objects and artists’ practices that

have come before them...” and “an ongoing consideration of sculptural languages and sensibilities ingrained in the Los Angeles scene...the legacies of funk, light and space, finish fetish, pop, and hyperrealism.”³ For artists like Miles, former binaries like tradition and innovation, negation and affirmation, abstraction and representation, and high art and mass culture are not necessarily in opposition; the conventional boundaries between them are blurred and flexible. Simultaneously partaking of representational and abstract modes like many of the artworks selected for *THING*, Miles’ objects often act as stand-ins for all types of figures. By not harmonizing the conflicts between realism and the non-objective or between sculpture and gestural painting, he enlarges the possibilities for both approaches, promoting a wider range of metaphors and responses. Making painting an accessory to an object unbinds it from walls and encourages more spatial participation. He compromises the traditional integrity of abstract sculpture by infiltrating it with the pictorial, yet by the addition of evocative painterly surfaces inside and out he forces intimate encounters with the interiors of his pieces as much as the exteriors. Such differences are effectively exploited through a lack of formal perfection, their awkwardness and aesthetic crudity underscored by the juxtaposition of the cleanly manufactured aluminum rods.



Untitled (Vincent Price Oppenheimer Mullican) [detail]

2012

Acrylic, paper, and aluminum

51 x 54 x 36 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Photograph by Cecily Miles

Although the sculptures superficially resemble early 20th century Russian Constructivist, Cubist, and Futurist machine-like human forms, which were often associated with modern utopianism, the vulnerability and impermanence conveyed by the primitive handcrafting techniques dispossess such past uses of abstraction of any such illusions. They can conjure instead post-apocalyptic technological and environmental nightmares like genetic modification, or in a lighter mood, school art projects, playthings, sci-fi films and cartoons.

Many of these qualities first appeared in Miles' 2010 exhibition of jumbo glazed stoneware heads mounted on stainless steel poles called *Noggins*. A wide range of references emerged: Gothic grotesques, Buddhist demon iconography, the *Capriccios* of Goya, a repertoire of Surrealist and Expressionist facial distortions, even animated characters like Shrek and The Incredible Hulk. As with his most recent work, evidence of the hand was ubiquitous lending personality and quirkiness to his modeling. Grimacing and gaping orifices, warty phallic snouts, cyclopean eyes, gnarly ears and clotted jowls adorned all sides. Like a funhouse mirror, physiognomies morphed seamlessly and inventively into one another to form freakish composites of human and beast, at once grim and silly, entertaining and repellent. As with

some of the *Bloom* sculptures, the coloration, painterly glazes and textural finishes were descriptive of flesh wounds, bruises, disfigurement and disease. Hints of internal viscera could be glimpsed through surface cracks and recesses, ready to ooze or seep out and collapsing the borders between exterior and interior. The *Noggins* seem primarily to expand the expressive possibilities of the conventional human bust by simultaneously representing multiple psychological, physical and emotional states. Ugly and grotesque, these misshapen "phantasmagoria" disarm us of our secure sense of self and hint at a breakdown of order. Embodying male and female, the comical and horrific, the spiritual and earthly, perverse and normal, they bear witness to the complexities, disorientations, and contradictions—the non-fixities surrounding identity in our age of hyper mediation and technological domination. Similarly, the *Bloom* sculptures position the viewer in a discomfiting, ambivalent zone that Drucker sees as "filled with curiosity about hybridity, mutation, technointervention, metaorganisms, psycho-prostheses, mechanic interfaces, and tropes of an altered somatic condition."⁴ Dystopic visions abound in popular culture, art and literature concerning the monumental cultural and biological transformations that are occurring in the present. In contrast to transhumanism which

enhances humans via biotechnology, a posthumanist philosophy rejecting classical dualistic mind/body, organic/technological, nature/culture states, is attempting to radically reposition and redefine the role of humans today in light of questions about scientific and social “norms,” global uncertainty, ecological problems, and the rapid changes wrought by instantaneous media. For example, a more relevant humanism sees nature and civilization as deeply interconnected and dependent on each other for survival. Miles’ highly imaginative and eccentric sculptures alternating between the natural and machine-like imply that the borders separating these realms are becoming more fluid and further generate a great deal of reflection on these concerns. Owing to current tendencies that use multiple stylistic approaches as a way of subverting or critiquing previous totalizing narratives, Miles makes objects in an expanded field of influences that offers the best means of addressing and inquiring into the complicated and conflicting realities of contemporary existence. As crucial as being attuned to a rich visual history and culture, however, is his reliance on a traditional involvement with formal issues—the importance of choosing materials like paper, the type of paint application on surfaces, the manipulation of scale, shape, sculptural dynamics, etc.—that allows these ideas flourish. To wit, over a century and a half ago Auguste Rodin remarked, “Imagine forms as

directed towards you; all life surges from a center, expands from within outwards.” He might well have been describing *Bloom*.

Constance Mallinson, Guest Curator

¹ Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) xvi.

² Drucker, 156.

³ *THING: New Sculpture from Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2005) 15.

⁴ Drucker, 207.

Christopher Miles is an award-winning writer and curator who published extensively between 1995 and 2010. In recent years Miles’ creative practice has become his primary activity in addition to his academic life. His work has been included in multiple exhibitions in Southern California since 2010. Miles has taught at multiple art schools and departments in Southern California, including California State University, Long Beach. He now serves as the Interim Dean of the CSULB College of the Arts.

This exhibition is supported by the Board of Directors of the Pasadena Museum of California Art.

Cover:

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PASADENA MUSEUM of CALIFORNIA ART

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Pasadena, CA 91101

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RELATED PROGRAM

In Dialogue

Sunday, April 7, 2013

3:00 pm

Curator Constance Mallinson and artist Christopher Miles discuss Miles’ abstract yet evocative sculptures featured in his exhibition *Bloom*.