

Won Lee: The Pleasures of Form

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Modernism, almost by definition, is with a few exceptions a movement of painting; sculpture is, as Ad Reinhardt said, what you back into when seeking room to see a painting. That airily dismissive view of three-dimensional art still has weight, even in our enlightened postmodern world -- if we acknowledge the greatness of artists like Giacometti and Brancusi, we find few other artists intent on sculptural form, which by its nature successfully resists artists' and viewers' attempts to have it conform to a frontal, nearly two dimensional picture plane. As a result the pursuit of voluminous form has a vigor and newness that remains interesting as recent art whereas the art of painting, abstraction in particular, comes across as jaded and historically burdened. Despite the essentially frontal view the audience brings to all art, sculpture strikes me as needing space around the form entirely in order to make a complete statement about its function as an object and its lack of illusionary space. Indeed, sculpture is the experience of space itself, its shape the means by which we take within ourselves a sense of weight and objectified form, internalizing the dimensions of volumes that are deeply real instead of posing as reality, as happens so often in painting.

Painting fools us with its inevitable lines of perspective, whereas there is a rooted truth to the act of sculpture, making it the medium of choice for those who wish to interrogate the object without succumbing to a sight line, a particular point of view. Sculptural art often suggests by implication the notion of a figure, construing meaning into a defined form. Even work at its most abstract can quietly reference the body, a reversal of expectation, can require the viewer to count his own body as necessary to the art's esthetic perception (this happens often in the work of the New York minimalists, who kept things simple in the hopes that the audience's interaction with reductive form would take the place of the deliberate, grand simplicity of the sculptures involved). Material in sculpture cannot create subterfuge; it is unable to resolve form as an illusion, which is what happens so often in paintings. Instead, it offers the satisfaction of a pure objecthood, no matter whether the work is figurative or abstract. As a writer I deeply enjoy sculpture's refusal to be anything but itself; it is a piece of experience that relies on the innate honesty of its own materials.

Won Lee, a Korean sculptor now living in Toronto, Canada, believes in the essential sanctity of material, writing "The material stares at me,/I stare at it back,/ in time, it whispers, I whisper back,/it takes me to its heart." Lee is a

remarkable artist working at the same time on abstract and figurative forms. He attempts the recording--and recognition--of the spiritual in art that owes its effectiveness to modernist art history. His sculpture, especially the work tending toward abstraction, owes its chthonic power to the massing of raw forms, in which the overall gestalt of his compositions take on the mystery and force of art, in which, in the sculptor's words "the profane dissipates, shamans speak the moment's truth." Lee's struggle to create a three dimensional language of consequence began with figurative art: *Contemplation*, made of clay is one of the stronger works from a body of figurative pieces; it shows a half-naked woman her body in a lotus poses, partially covered with a shawl. The artist's skillful use of feeling is also evident in an untitled work, like *Contemplation* from 1999, in which a female figure modeled in clay kneels before her audience, the upper torso ripped open at the throat, with the left arm and right hand of the sculpture missing. These works of art, as with many of Lee's sculptures of this period, communicate states of raw emotion and yearning. Lee, unlike many artists today, is unafraid of making work that depend on emotion as much as on the intellect or form. This is not to say that the works exhibit sentimentality, only that the artist has not counted out emotion as part of his esthetic strategy.

Lee's powerful figurative work has given way, more recently, to more abstraction and a freer interpretation of figurative art. In one piece, we see what ostensibly looks like an abstract form in bronze, but after a closer look becomes the form of a standing figure covered from head to toe by a fabric or article of clothing. It is a very dramatic piece. Another work, also a powerful treatment of the figure, is a figurative form with a small head and massive body whose middle is open to the viewer, suggests a new take on Rodin's *Balzac*. Lee hardly even suggests the body here, only the presence of a person instead. Looked at abstractly, the artist's sculpture becomes a kind of large cone rising up to a point at its head. The sculpture can be read either way, extending its meaningfulness into abstraction as well as figurative art. In another work, clearly intended as a couple, a man and woman are represented in a strongly frontal orientation, their small, round heads in contrast to fairly large, if flattened torsos and a thick abstraction at the bottom of both pieces, made perhaps to weight them and keep stable outside of the studio or indoor gallery. Owing a bit to the figures of Henry Moore, the man with his striated upper torso and the woman with thick arms and the suggestion of a hip or skirt engage in complementary states of being. They are clearly recognizable as people, yet the influence of abstraction is never very far away. These two pieces demonstrate Lee's fluency as an artist interested in varying forms of truthfulness.

Indeed, truth keeps these sculptures alive, vivid and vibrant in their exploration of form. Some of the abstract works have inlays of polished bronze, which accentuates the surface and maintains a complex texture. The abstract works are raw forms that rise up into space--their verticality is in keeping with modernist traditions, the heavier bottoms stabilizing the rising bronze. Often figures are embedded in the material, so that it is hard to tell whether the figure is trying to free herself or has become part of the sculpture itself. This conversation, not entirely free of tension between kinds of forms, is central to Lee's art, whose grand refusal to give up either kind of style results in a vernacular of authenticity, experienced the moment the work comes into the sight of the viewer. Lee's ambition here is large without becoming grandiose; he appeals to our sense of form and propriety even as he experiments with what might work best for him as a sculptor. In his way, he pushes the language of three-dimensional art further away from complacency and easy acceptance of earlier modes of art. Lee, like many good artists now working, shows us the way toward a new experience, in which the enjoyment of form is defined often by highly intelligent figurative art. Abstraction, also a major component in Lee's oeuvre, shows form for its own sake. As a result, Lee attempts, very successfully I think, to present different styles in his attempt, at once moving and powerful, to reach the viewer.