Stephen Daly: Sculpture as Witness

The Art of Giantfighting

Stephen Daly

This essay was originally published in the October 2006 edition of Sculpture magazine.

Stephen Daly: Sculpture as Witness

by Michael Cochran

Many of us are familiar with the Stage Manager, in Thornton Wilder's Our Town, who observed and narrated the daily events in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. Historically, references to this concept of a "witness" or "observer" appear in ancient writings as far back as the Old Testament (Genesis 31: 51–52). But why is it that we rarely see a sculpture that assumes the role? To witness an event, it is necessary to be cognizant and aware of the activity being observed, which, of course, means to fully deploy one's senses and intellect. Several 20th-century sculptors, including Ed and Nancy Kienholz, Marisol (Escobar), and George Segal, have successfully used the human figure to offer their observations and perspectives on social, political, and personal issues. But in the last two decades, no one has created new work that addresses these concerns as concretely and successfully as Stephen Daly.

For over 20 years, Daly has been creating an extensive body of work from his studio in rural Texas while teaching at the University of Texas in Austin. Though definitely not a reclusive person, he develops sculptures and drawings by living and working outside the mainstream art community. His early undergraduate training at San Jose State University in California and later graduate work at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan provided a solid foundation for the highly crafted and intelligent work that he has consistently produced. The intellectual content of his nearly life-size bronze and aluminum sculptures and mixed-media drawings has always been carefully infused with a high level of paradox and an inescapably sardonic sense of humor.

Wooden sculpture

Looking, 1982

From his work in the early 1980s, particularly Looking (1982), to his recent tableau Controller(2003), Daly's cast and fabricated metal sculptures and mixed-media works on paper have clearly presented his observations of personal, psycho-social, and cultural issues. In Looking, an abstracted kneeling figure gazes into a mirror whose surface supports tiny abstract metal forms that float above the non-reflective surface. The figure expects to see his reflection but discovers a physical reality completely unrelated to the world as he knows it. The black hat that he wears, similar to the brimmed hats worn by priests, is a re-appearing form that Daly introduced after his mid-1970s Prix de Rome fellowship and many subsequent visits to Italy. A unique aspect of this sculpture is his use of a façade when representing the polychromed figure. The color is created with pastel on paper, supported by a wood and steel easel-like frame whose functional structure is completely exposed on the reverse side. Each cross-member is revealed, which provides the viewer with an early example of Daly's truth to materials and his fabrication process. The fabrication in this sculpture, as

in all of Daly's work, is meticulous but not obsessive. Unlike many other artists who hailed from California, Daly maintained his own sense of control of his materials and did not become part of the "Finish Fetish" group that was so dominant during the 1970s and 1980s on the West Coast.

Looking's tripodal structure recurs in several of Daly's sculptures, but what most dominates his aesthetic is a strong use of irony. In the case of Looking, we, the viewers, view the viewer trying to view himself. But what the figure sees is a mirror full of personal iconography that only he does or does not understand. The figure is formed by several triangles placed edge to edge. Head, torso, and legs together make up the "shaped drawing" as Daly refers to it.

Daly says that it was in Rome on the Prix de Rome fellowship from 1973 to 1975 that drawing really began to inform and assist him in shaping his sculpture. What makes his work unique is the intertwining of the two-dimensional and three-dimensional worlds. His drawings began to acquire three-dimensional elements floating out from the surface of the paper. In an early large-scale wall installation, Aquarium Wall (1983), the floating elements seem to dance rhythmically across the surface, some clustering in gregarious groups while others remain distant and isolated from the clusters. Susie Kalil, in her text from the catalogue of Daly's 1988 exhibition at the Marion Koogler McNay Museum in San Antonio, referred to these works as "particle drawings." She states that "their eccentric and often witty shapes comprise an idiosyncratic vocabulary from which emanate the organic and geometric imagery so prevalent in the tripods and heads." As Daly's drawings evolved, he began to explore a figurative image similar to his sculpture in order to develop a narrative within the picture plane. Occasionally, he has used a cross-gender dialogue in the imagery so that viewers can become witnesses to a personal interaction between the symbolic characters within the composition.

In The Hand (1992), Daly has positioned a silhouetted figure to witness and participate in the cacophony of visual "thought elements" that clutter the picture plane. Most of the forms are delineated in ink, but many are cast in aluminum and project from the drawing's surface. The Wall (2001) places us in the position of voyeurs as we observe the unfolding of a psychological narrative between the obviously male and female characters.

Abstract artwork

The Hand, 1992

The tiny drawn forms that usually float randomly are now organized to portray words of interaction and communication between the figures. The marks and symbols in his two-dimensional work continue to move off the surface, along with the figures, to further Daly's exploration of interaction, relationships, and the object as witness to its own world.

The large cast bronze Watchman(1988) observes the eight unique symbols that appear before him. Some of the symbols have obvious meanings — the mirror, the chair, the derrick, and the phallus — but others are more mysterious. Here, unlike in many of Daly's other sculptures, we participate in isolating and controlling the witnessing experience of the figure. Each small form is attached to a large vertical wheel that, when rotated by the viewer/participant, places the symbol within the focus of the sculpture's observer/figure. The figure, who wears the familiar brimmed hat, focuses his eyes myopically on the wheel to examine the symbol placed before him.

Female Head (1986) and Woman with Mirror (1988) are prime examples of Daly's use of variation in content within a standardized structural format. The symbols and marks in Female Head seem to elude frontal vision, attached as they are to the back of the head. Cast in bronze and stained with an ochre-colored oil pigment, the head rests on a gray cylindrical pillar of sand-cast aluminum. The simple vertical form resembles an inverted Doric column as it thrusts upward from its square base. The contrast of the warm ochre and the cold gray seems to isolate this head in a world of its own, disconnected from reality. The figure in Woman with Mirror, on the other hand, appears to reflect on her existence. Here, instead of using contrast, Daly has created a synergy between the similarly shaped base and the head by covering the entire sculpture with the ochre-colored stain, giving it a sense of totality and unity.

In The Collector (1991), the marks and symbols have become larger and are secured to a platform that resembles a serving tray. The male figure sees only what is directly in front of him and apparently wants to give his possessions away, but they are permanently affixed to the tray. Daly clearly points to the obsession with collecting objects that plagues our materialistic culture. As much as we try, it seems that we cannot transcend this fixation on the accumulation of consumer goods.

Extrapolating from the content and format of The Collector, Daly made a leap forward in the development and complexity of his work with Controller(2003). A cast and fabricated bronze tableau that measures a formidable 49 by 100 by 42 inches, Controller synthesizes over 20 years of Daly's work. The low height of the sculpture demands that the viewer lean forward to observe the many elements carefully placed on and under its surface.

Metal sculpture of a head

Controller, 2003

There is a sense of movement in the forms, but they are all firmly attached and under the observation of a large male head positioned at one end of the table. All but several forms are either under or out of range of the observer's peripheral vision. Daly's figures are typically unable to govern their environment, and the head in Controller is no exception; it is confronted with a plethora of forms taken from totally different dimensions of our culture, from the spindle-like shape of a nuclear reactor cooling tower to Brancusi'sEndless Column. Opposite the head, on the other side of this "cultural playing field," a handrail-like form on an extension could enable a participant to escape and perhaps return to the environment, if so desired. Moving around the sculpture is a fascinating experience that enables the viewer to observe this paradoxical world from different perspectives.

Even the dumbbell-like form suspended below the plateau and out of sight from the head takes on additional significance by hanging like a scrotum containing potential life. There is definite structure to these forms, which are carefully but randomly placed on the field. Like the forms in the earlier "particle drawings," these cultural and personal symbols seem to be moving about erratically as the "controller" witnesses but remains powerless to affect their positions. Again, metaphors abound. And, at a time in the evolution of our culture when nuclear energy and high technology are developing more rapidly than the creation of public sculpture, Daly's "playing field" becomes a Shakespearean stage where "we strut and fret our hour."

In 2004, Daly returned to pedestal-size works, similar to several pieces from the mid- 1990s, in order to develop a series of bronze portrait busts. As inFortress (1994), these recent figural works combine the familiar square base with an

upright stele-like column and ovoid head given simple facial features reminiscent of ancient Cycladic sculpture. His newer heads, such as Gridman(2004) and Funnel Hat (2004), seem to be caught up in a technological overload. The backs of the characters' skulls support extensive protrusions of coils and shapes that reflect the thoughts ruminating through their "implied" minds. And these are characters, with features that evoke feelings of empathy and even pity. In Hermit (2004), the figure appears to escape into the internal world of audio technology, a closed-off, defensive, "sound barrier" world that every viewer has sought or encountered, in which communication is frustrated or denied.

In February 2006, the Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV), Spain, installed Daly's 18-foot-tall bronze sculpture, Mentoring. The work was enlarged at UPV under the guidance of Pablo Sedeno and Carmen Marcos, both university faculty, following a one-third scale maquette created in Daly's Texas studio in 2003. It was then cast in Madrid at Studio 6 Foundry under the supervision of Sedeno, who was the overall project director.

Mentoring, 2006

Mentoring is an optimistic form that bears witness to the constructive nature of the learning process and recognizes those who give intellectual and emotional support to others. It's a complex sculpture with a myriad of protruding shapes that seem to emanate primarily from the right rear area of the skull, which is considered to be the creative side of the brain. The shapes are similar to Daly's familiar cones and vessels, but in this sculpture there is an additional figure. A tiny head resting on a small platform by the figure's left ear is quietly informing the student/apprentice. The large figure stares straight ahead while assimilating the information. The academic context is perfect for this work, and it will be a powerful presence in the university's extensive sculpture garden.

Scale plays an important role in Daly's work, and his smaller sculptures and drawings allow a more intimate interaction. Human-scaled works become mirrors for our own introspection and contemplation, projecting a self-reflection not as apparent in the large-scale work. People in all cultures strive to be independent, to witness their own personal and cultural experiences. This process enables all of us to better understand our environment and our live