

Stephen Daly

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by Susie Kalil

In an age when painting has sent forth enough seismic waves to move land masses, sculpture's less awe-inspiring shifts have engendered more curatorial contempt than investigation. Hard to ship, difficult to install, sculpture retrospectives have been few and far between. The paucity has been the brunt of many a facetious art joke as well. That sculpture is something you bump into as you back away from a painting is an adage that reflects just how much the medium has been shortchanged over the years. But when considering the work of Stephen Daly, such indifference is merely the tip of the iceberg. Upon examination of his highly idiosyncratic and intellectually forceful work, which spans over two decades, one immediately wonders why it has taken this long for the art world to place him in the top rank of American sculptors, in the vanguard of Texas art, and most important, in a class all by himself. Indeed, Daly has never adhered to current stylistic trends. Uncompromising, assertive, and sagacious, he encapsulates in his bronze and aluminum sculptures and mixed media drawings such deeply felt "human" themes as anxiety, pain and isolation on the one hand; nature, harmony, and protection on the other. His is a rigorously sexual art that explores communication and relationships — between the spectator and work, the individual and the group, between forms and their context, component parts and their union. Humorous, elegant, seductive, disturbing and fiercely psychological, his art encompasses feelings hard enough to put into words — let alone represent visually.

Whether Daly intends it or not, his work causes very complicated emotions in viewers. Resisting any single-leveled interpretation or response, the heads, tripods and drawings provoke questions more than they elicit answers. Paradox is rooted in Daly's art and is strengthened by such dualities as chaos and structure, dependence and independence, aggression and vulnerability. The disturbing attraction of many of his fluid, erotic formations is, in fact, heightened by their extreme machine style and by their being made from otherwise resistant materials. In the series of heads and tripods, of which there are variations in cast bronze, porcelain, aluminum, and plastic laminate — sexual imagery and bizarre anthropomorphic forms are contiguous with their geometric counterparts. Even as the heads reduce human form to its most elemental terms, there is a great variety of mood and gesture within that embodiment. The startlingly life-size, figural personages are isolated individuals whose rigid stances exude a strange physical presence. Most have a distinct human personality, characterized as they are by eyes, nose, mouth and arms. Some even wear jewelry or don a "padre" hat. All of them are fully absorbed in their respective activities. The narrative titles — Man Talking, Narcissus, Watchman, and the like, help cue the viewer to a condition or circumstance which can be simultaneously sensed as humorous, fragile, impressive, tenuous, powerful, even brutal. Admittedly, Daly's sculptures give viewers a queasy uneasiness, an agitation that is enhanced by the contrast of baroque flamboyance and delicacy of form. At any rate, the longer we look at their peculiarities the more attractive and repulsive they become. Corkscrew and needlelike forms protrude from their eye sockets; bulbous, pod-like shapes, spirals, and gangling tentacles seemingly jut from their scalps. Despite a figure's stasis, component parts take on a strange and wild internal energy. Things come out of things, pushing and nudging their other parts. In the tripods, for example, atrophied organs, innards, breasts, and phalluses hang from their protective armatures.

Both series of works invite private encounters that engender responses on visceral and imaginary levels. They stir up unacknowledged feelings and force exploration of unfamiliar psychological terrain in ways that may or may not be pleasant. For all this, Daly subverts viewer perception with surprisingly simple means. Specifically, sexual imagery, organic, and machine-like forms are not clinically rendered. Neither are they garish or horrifying. Rather, the constructed shapes are manipulated clearly and outright, albeit with a sense of the absurd. That Daly's work can be simultaneously experienced as humorous, alluring, and unsettling, in addition to imparting certain dualities in regard to tension and freedom, the representational and the abstract, chaos and order is a measure of the seriousness that is so central to his art.

Though Daly hopes that his works "increase personal awareness and make a small change in people's attitudes," it's obvious they do much more in their visual and psychological equivocality. Most certainly, the power from which the distinctive forms derive their strength evolves from the artist's conscious desire to engage the viewer. Such a response is not, as Daly well knows, simply a matter of how the mind receives visual material and observes it. Above all else, Daly aims to evoke the mysterious link between the viewer and object, even going so far as to manipulate the viewer into a position of voyeur. Indeed, the most salient aspects of Daly's art can be related to an obsessive fascination with the idea of engagement for its own sake. To this end, his art brings to bear a profound identification between the artist and his materials and a strong visceral identification between the artist's and the viewer's bodies. Yet the viewer is never so carried away by effect that he is disinclined to seriously analyze Daly's formal intentions. To all appearances, the artist's obsessive inner directedness is matched by methods of commensurate intensity.

As is the case with many artists working today, Daly toes the line between developing a visual language accessible to the public and creating the kind of deep personal imagery related to his life. The dialectic of the two percepts has been embedded in his art from the outset. Much of the artist's predilection for contrast and eccentricity springs from his undergraduate training at San Jose State University during the early sixties. Physically and psychically removed from the New York art world, California artists, especially those in the Bay Area, felt little restrained by the East Coast hierarchical definitions of fine art. Subject matter from the banal to the fantastic broadened art expression beyond the conventional expectations of painting and sculpture. The assemblagists, an active aspect of San Francisco's Beat-period art scene literally incorporated objects from everyday experience into their art with distinctly Surrealist overtones. Moreover, the non-utilitarian expressionist use of clay at that time presented a voluntary revolutionary attitude in American art. Although Daly was on the periphery of the wide-ranging creative inquiries postulated by such artists as Bruce Conner, Edward Keinholtz, Robert Arneson, and Peter Voulkos, he was attracted to their non-conformist stance and compulsive attitude toward materials, technique and humor. Emotive, eccentric or erotic alternatives to a solemn and deadset Minimalism which still retained the clarity of that notion were concerns that informed Daly's graduate work at Cranbrook Academy as well. At that point, Daly's inspirations ranged from Lee Bontecou's overtly sexual membranes, Eva Hesse's obsessively layered latex and rope sculptures that mix organic and geometric form to Bruce Nauman's body cast molds and Eduardo Paolozzi's metaphorical hybrids that combine the abstract, the figurative, and the classical. Their examples — the predilection for change, the use of multiple parts that work together in a collective group, the ardor to push materials — enabled Daly to synthesize in his sculptures the seemingly divergent paths of Modernist and anti-formalist theory.

Daly views his work in terms of historical lineage. Even so, try to pin a label on his art and it will slip right through your fingers. Attempts to bring a coolly evolutionary order to the work, or see it in the context of one art group or another prove more or less irrelevant upon close examination of his oeuvre. Although Daly reflects mainly on the dialectic of natural and mechanical forms, his art is not as coherent as one might expect; shapes appear, disappear, and reappear

sometimes intact, sometimes transformed. Daly's art is best examined, I believe, as a totality, as variations on a theme rather than as succinct chronological developments. What distinguishes the work is an inner consistency, the unfailing "essence" that emerges upon viewer confrontation. Daly's art can be seen in terms of a continuing perceptual investigation in which steady thematic development and formal disclosures are deftly balanced. None of the works are formulated according to a particular syntax. Rather, they represent the development of a highly personal lexicon that has undergone years of synthesis. Daly's early training as a classical musician, for example, facilitated the structural components of his sculpture in terms of musical form: the fugue; opposing rhythms; counterpoint; or areas of passivity juxtaposed with extreme activity. Moreover, a Prix de Rome during the mid-seventies and subsequent visits to Italy have afforded Daly the opportunity to scan the country's "bone yards" for images of visual attraction. Roman portrait busts, Janus figures, hermes, obelisks, ancient walls and buildings and fragments of broken sculpture have all been assimilated over the years in some form or fashion. But even those associations and relationships can be made in retrospect. The sense of time and historical significance such imagery procures is reinforced by the innate properties of bronze itself — longevity; a tensile strength; romantic, if heroic grandeur; the distinction of being both classically and contemporaneously referential. Not only does Daly's brand of historicism permit the adaptation of past practices to contemporary themes, it aims to somehow push the linkage into the future.

All in all, the disparateness demonstrates the fertility of Daly's imagination. Nowhere is this more evident than in the particle drawings, tripods and heads produced over the past decade. While the drawings are perhaps the least known in Daly's oeuvre, they are no less affecting. 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. While some of the images look a bit ominous, others are more humorous in their surreal overtones and formal complexities

A consideration of a sculptor's drawings is often problematic because of the inherent tension in the transition between two and three dimensions. It seems contradictory to visualize a tangible three-dimensional object by initiating it on a two-dimensional surface through illusionistic devices. Yet this seemingly divergent process releases the sculptor from the constraints of his materials. More important, formal considerations like edge, process, gesture, and the activity of mark making serve as reference points to expand the traditional role of drawing into a mode reflecting the concerns of sculpture. Can the figure be separated from the ground and vice versa? How does the sculptor sustain and exchange these functions? In *Looking*, Daly forces the viewer to make perceptual and aesthetic choices by questioning the difference between image and object, drawing and sculpture. Put simply, Daly presents a sculpture looking at a drawing. Significantly, the "mirror" which the figure holds is a conduit of spirals, doodles, and hairpin shapes. Does the drawing generate the shape? Or does the form come from the drawing? *Aquarium* tackles the various ways of perceiving space, scale, and image by distributing similar quirky but recognizable liner symbols — arrows, ziggurats, forked combs, spirals, and dots. On close inspection, the pale blue, yellow and black particles look like amoebae or pollywog shapes, bugs and other floaty creatures that simultaneously repel and attract one another as if subject to some sort of electromagnetic force. Strewn across a wall, the forms become societal — particles generate other particles, move into specific territories and assume individuating roles. Some particles are strugglers, some are hiders and still others are dominators. Looking a bit like linguistic code, the collective evokes the apparent random dispersal of hieroglyphic forms found on Egyptian obelisks as well as the directional organization of American Indian sand paintings. Though individual images may remain as simple, commonplace forms, their associative context is altered when brought together as a group. Just as mechanical configurations are transmuted into biological shapes, so does their plenary union activate a continuous interplay between chaos and structure, form and expression.

The notion of the particle as progenitor of life finds new meaning in Daly's series of tripods and heads. The former's dexterous convergence of organic and geometric modes spawns three-legged machine animals with protective shells and pendant organs that are evocative of some extraterrestrial being or post-nuclear hybrid. Indeed, their visceral vulnerability is disturbing, if not nightmarish. The entrails and profiles suggest intestines, guts, the mammary glands of a

pregnant dog, us crouching to protect ourselves. In these, Daly seems to say that if the tripods embody an anthropomorphic source of power, they do so with coexistent sensuality and aggression. Glider suggests a creeping aircraft or jet fighter armed with bombs and guns. However, its exact nature may be equivocal inasmuch as the piece's bulbous ovals and phallus shapes exude the robust sexuality of both genders. At times Daly appears obsessed with the idea of vulnerability. Yet the sensual aggression implied by his art never seems to go much beyond the elements of metaphorical or material transformation. All in all, Daly tempers visual paradox by subverting our traditional notions of space and form. Rather than rise, lump-like, from a base, as is the tendency of much Modernist sculpture, Daly's tripods seemingly float in an implied, nonexistent space. Indeed, the tripods beckon us to crouch down, duck underneath, and carefully inspect their exposed masses and voids. Like the tripods and particle drawings, Daly's series of heads strike a balance between organic form language and severe machine style by challenging the illusory aspects of bronze and aluminum. Whereas the tripods combine the metals in an attempt to get the sculpture off the ground, the heads utilize the material to isolate areas of interest and further qualify a viewer's sense of time and space. Interestingly enough, the majestic bronze heads are not weighted down by their industrial, tube-shaped aluminum bases. Rather, the fluted component becomes a machine metaphor for the body, thereby facilitating viewer engagement. What we discover upon initial contact are psychologically insidious activities that remind us of the enduring strength of Daly's forms and thematic concerns. Though plainly rooted in Surrealist imagery, this series seems more poignant, if not repellant, in its directness. Particularly striking is *Barrier*, in which a male head observes the spectator through a plate of glass. Whether or not the glass is a barrier ultimately rests with the viewer. You can see through it, but obviously you can't pass through it. Moreover, the figure is static, so the idea of a barrier can't be actively demonstrated. Rather, the glass functions concurrently as membrane and wall.

By engaging and disengaging the viewer, Daly thwarts the customary perception of an object. Indeed, Daly's ongoing dialogue with form and space depends on a witty sort of gamesmanship that intentionally keeps us at arm's length from reaching any solution. For the most part, the artist's decisions are rational ones that have been taken to the extreme. In *Hybrid*, for example, both the figure and the derrick-like plant it holds are in a state of transformation; they are somehow changeable and immutable.

If Daly's art has been modified in recent years, perhaps it has become more reductive, possibly more cerebral in its potentiality to distill and cultivate quantified information. Just how we accumulate knowledge and acquire facts is a primary concern of *Watchman*, a multi-component piece that features a figure transfixed before a large rotating wheel composed of a variety of objects, including the derrick form, a chair, a box with a phallic symbol, a mirror, a miniature female and male head. All of these configurations are items possessed by the figure; they are part of his territory. As he seemingly observes his inventory, the viewer chooses the image of contemplation simply by turning the wheel and clicking the object into position. Doing so not only arrests the flow of time but activates a complicated perceptual exercise that sequentially swings between viewer, object and figure.

Daly's art purposefully leaves the viewer with more questions than answers. Does the work provide an encounter, or is it an object to contemplate? Most likely the viewer contemplates the circumstances of the work rather than its objectness. If so, then the meditation only lasts long enough for the viewer to grasp the basic premise, whereupon the contemplation is no longer pleasurable, no longer an easy "ride", so to speak. At that point in time the work becomes an encounter and an engagement. If that moment occurs, then Daly has been successful in his efforts.