DEATH IS IRRELEVANT

INTRODUCTION

Livia and Marc J. Straus

WE WERE 13 WHEN WE MET, 17 when we pledged our love, and 20 when we married and purchased our first works of art. Our collection reflects various ways in which we engaged with the last half of the century, and thus a partial mirror of our lives. For that is what an art collection can achieve.

Art, at its best, allows us to see the world and even ourselves in a new light. Consider the seismic change post-World War II, an era where imagination was buried in the horrors of reductive hate and destruction, humanity searching for meaning after the insanity of the Holocaust and rampant nihilism, turned to spirituality—disembodied—a canvas steeped in color with no margins and no limits. This is why and where we started collecting: with Rothko, Kelly, Noland, Andre, and Flavin.

We began collecting as students, simultaneously working and borrowing to buy art. The struggle and discipline were essential. The acquisitions made were hard won and what carried over was to only buy work we loved, work that mattered to us.

As times changed, so have our interests. We embraced the pop culture of Oldenburg, Warhol, and later Koons' two basketballs floating in a fish tank, *Two Balls 50/50 Tank (Dr. J Silver Series)* (1985) and Robert Gober's *Sink With Drainboard* (1984). These works were emblematic of the energy of our city then.

Female sculptors have been an important part of the collection, from Louise Bourgeois to the next generation: Kiki Smith, Jeanne Silverthorne and Rona Pondick. Pondick's five hundred *Little Bathers* (1990-91) were a sly twist on those graceful little ladies in their pretty pink bathing suits and ballerina tutus, so feminine, so delicate, yet armed to the teeth. The fearless power of this commentary is a strong example of the type of work we support.

Artists evaluating, editorializing, and addressing timely issues, inspire us: Gilbert & George, Bruce Nauman, Anselm Kiefer, and Ashley Bickerton with his riff on the escalating value of art in America. Recently, Paulo Nazareth's *Mocacine* (2017), a pair of beat up sneakers crushed under a rock, perhaps addressing the burden of geopolitics.

The 1980s were initially a time of artistic exuberance, the internationalization of the market and later a time of loss and tragedy. Artists we had befriended, whom we admired and loved, were suddenly gone. AIDS, the 'thinning disease' as it was referred to in Africa, had come to America, decimated the New York art world, and changed the course of artistic production. In the 1990s artists retooled, works became more cerebral, technological, personal, and performance based: Nam June Paik, Marina Abramović, Matthew Barney, and more.

Painting was always an interest, but it was more often in indoor sculpture that we found to be provocative and original. When Marc was fifteen, he showed his immigrant father from Ukraine an image of a new sculpture by Giacometti. His father had a strong visceral response wondering why anyone could live with an emaciated Holocaust figure. Sculpture could upend preconceived notions, especially when figurative. We seemed to always buy sculpture at the edge of public acceptance and surely this was a topic of much animated discussion by visitors to our home. It often caused discomfort as with the work of Patricia Piccinini, *Undivided* (2004, cat. 16) – a young boy asleep next to a monster. Damien Hirst's *Death Is Irrelevant* (2000, cat. 9), is a human skeleton suspended in the middle of two sheets of interlocking glass panes on the ground, subverting it's somberness with two ping pong balls that spin comically above the eye-sockets.

Our interests crossed continents as we traveled on never-ending studio and gallery visits: Berlinde de Bruyckere (Belgium), Folkert de Jong (The Netherlands), Entang Wiharso (Indonesia), and most recently Adrián Villar Rojas (Argentina) and Pavel Althamer (Poland).

The works that appear in this exhibition, *Death Is Irrelevant,* as well as the exhibitions to follow, are a diary of a shared life – our own, and perhaps more broadly with artists we support and the people we reach by encouraging engagement with these works.

The idea of sharing the collection, of making works we believe in accessible to others, came to

us when we made our sixth purchase: a 1961 Milton Resnick painting of deep blues and greens, a mass of overlaid oil paint thick as armor. We were called by the Israel Museum to thank us for donating this painting to them. We asked why they thought we were donating the work to which they replied that Marc's father, Sam, said we would. Sam, an impoverished refugee from the horrors of Europe, told us if we could afford to buy a painting, we could afford to be charitable.

His words stuck with us. And so, we have served on several museum boards and have endeavored to assist artists and institutions. In 2004 we founded The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, whose primary mission was to use art as a vehicle to teach the language of the imaginative process to an underprivileged area where there was almost no access to such art. Peekskill had already foundered and was crime ridden, the downtown derelict.

Now the museum is entering its sixteenth year. We are overjoyed and proud to have been part of the revitalization of Peekskill, New York. The city is booming, it is an art destination and every grade in the Peekskill School District participates in our art education programming.

Celebrating the next milestone, the museum has been renamed Hudson Valley MOCA. It is under the stewardship of Effie Phillips-Staley, an exceptional new director. It has had the extraordinary support of a Board, including Judy and Stanley Zabar, who generously provide time, funds, stewardship, and encouragement. Our children Ari and Sarena Straus, who grew up in an eccentric home that included art before we owned furniture, have always supported us in this journey.

This is the first exhibition of our collection at Hudson Valley MOCA in fifteen years. We thank Tim Hawkinson and Ken Tan, partners in Marc's New York City gallery, who both curated this exhibition. In addition our appreciation goes to Ken for rebranding Hudson Valley MOCA, and designing this catalog. We thank Stephen Wicks, the Barbara W. and Bernard E. Bernstein Curator at the Knoxville Museum of Art, who has been a close friend since his institution hosted our collection in 1999.

We are grateful to the staff of Hudson Valley MOCA present and past, and to the Peekskill mayors, present and past, and town council. They have enthusiastically supported us at every step including joining us in the vision of developing a sculpture trail in a now beautiful waterfront park.

We thank the gallerists all over the world who have helped us acquire the works of art we most wanted. And most of all, we thank the artists. We came to know almost all: Ellsworth Kelly, Damien Hirst, Gilbert & George, Milton Resnick, Anselm Kiefer, Rona Pondick, Folkert de Jong, and so many others including today's young, emerging artists. Our lives have been transformed and enriched though our engagement with their ideas and vision.

IDEAS DON'T DIE.

Tim Hawkinson

THE TWENTY-SIX SCULPTURES included in *Death Is Irrelevant* are indicative not only of a continued interest in contemporary figurative sculpture over the past forty years, but also the exponential increase in ways of presenting the human body.

Over the last century figurative sculpture was never assailed quite as vehemently as figurative painting, perhaps due to its physical relevancy. It is more immediate and visceral. The body has remained a fertile territory, a seemingly endless vessel to communicate necessary ideas in the most direct and compelling manner. This drive to materialize intangible concepts in corporeal monuments is shared between contemporary works and historical antecedents, even if not always discussed in the same terms.

Artists have idolized gods in propitiation, celebrated victorious war heroes, or captured memories of loved ones. Greek Kouroi, archaic figurines of the nude male youth, sought to memorialize the deceased in greater perfection; Romans carried around tiny sculptured reminders of loved ones or deities. Imagine the ancient Roman, thumbing the contours of the figure to alleviate tension or seek solace from a divine power. From the Kongo Civilization, 19th century Mangaaka figures were lasting physical documents of social contracts: divorces, land disputes, trades would be ratified and validated with nails hammered into them. Going back even further to a staggering 35,000 years ago, the enigmatic Ice Age Löwenmensch, a zoomorphic effigy sculpted from mammoth ivory, could have been a ritualistic icon that shared a cultural narrative of supernatural transformation, ideas memorialized in physical form.

Similarly, in a continuum with millennia past, the contemporary sculptures in this exhibition share an impulse to convey ideas: for example, fusions of personal autobiography, existentialism, feminism, modern events, queer politics, popular culture, and more. Some themes are unprecedented, a product of our present condition. Many are interpretations of archaic themes so ingrained in civilization's collective story that they inexorably thrive from generation to generation. Artistic voices from the margins continue to find ways to be heard and in doing so invent and expand definitions.

Take for example, religious motifs, in particular the Christian Pietà, Virgin Mary cradling the body of her child Jesus. Sam Jinks' *Standing Pietà* (2014, cat. 10) subverts the scene: a well-dressed elderly man supports a nearly nude younger man. Jinks' use of modern clothing and adroit hyper-realistic appearances atypical of Renaissance norms transport the moment to our current times. Jinks offers universal emotions of anguish and love in a more immediate and relatable form.

Patricia Piccinini, Jinks' senior in the practice of hyper-realistic sculpture, unleashes complex layers of themes in *Undivided* (2004, cat. 16). The tableau shows a child sound asleep in bed, embraced by what appears to be a hideous, revolting monster. The first response should be fear, yet it becomes clear from the peaceful look on the toddler's face and the creature's loving embrace that they care deeply for each other, this is a reminder that hate and fear are often hard-wired into the biased minds of adults.

Conflating themes of religion with science and

humor, Damien Hirst's *Death Is Irrelevant* (2000, cat. 9) presents a cruciformed medical anatomical skeleton mounted on two interlocking panes of glass. The final punchline? Two slapstick ping-pong balls air-lifted above the skeleton's hollow eye sockets. Like Duchamp drawing a mustache on Mona Lisa, it convincingly declares in one comedic swipe that no individual is elevated above the rest, and that the division between death and life is itself questionable.

Drawing from the current political and war landscape, the contemporary artist has at his/her disposal a wellspring of ideas to explore. The best ones are able to synthesize localized anxieties and express them in grand, universal themes.

Folkert de Jong is widely recognized for figurative sculptures that explore the persistence of misfortune and trauma, typically using dark humor to satirize power dynamics, war, and related vices. In this exhibition, de Jong's *Dust* (2004, cat. 4) is commentary on the Iraq War, begun a year earlier when an American led coalition invaded Iraq. A shell-shocked figure, carved from de Jong's signature material, styrofoam, is seated, surrounded by instruments of war: machine guns, ammo boxes and Molotov cocktails. Head titled back and mouth agape, has he submitted to the strain of the battles, or is he taking a moment to reload before the next kill? The dichotomy may be familiar in today's media-frenzied world where images have near endless interpretations.

Originating from Monte Cassino in Italy, a village nearly bombed out of existence by Americans in World War II, Italo Scanga's twelve-foot *Monte Cassino: The Broken Statues* (1984, cat. 18) is a harrowing testament to the destructive forces of war. The chilling figure, reminiscent of Giacometti, seems to be aimlessly wandering through ruins, clutching a fragment from the local church. Decades after WWII, sculptures like this still have the power to activate memories.

Perhaps because of their closeness to the human form, figurative sculptures are uncanny agencies to illustrate poignant moments of personal struggle, psychological anguish, and physical injury. In direct contrast to much of the history of figurative sculpture, where bodies have been depicted as whole and celebrated as temples of virtue, suffering in the deepest recesses of the soul are unabashedly exposed in these contemporary works.

Claudette Schreuder's carved figure *Crying in Public* (2002, cat. 19), diminutive yet heart-wrenching, is perhaps a self-portrait of the artist rendered at half the scale. The protagonist commits a social taboo by simply standing there, crying in public. In Pawel Althamer's *The Power of Now* (2016, cat. 1), a filthy figure dressed in proletarian garb, an unappreciated cog in the gears of a faceless, industrialized society, finds refuge on a common bench. His exhaustion is frozen in his posture. A soundtrack streams through him: the philosopher Eckhart Tolle musing how happiness can only be found in total acceptance of all that is. The juxtaposition is riveting for a man of scholarly rhetoric may never fully experience the laborious drudgery of the working class.

Berlinde de Bruyckere's *Le Femme sans Tête* (2003, cat. 3) is a truncated form, yet we recognize its humanness from the flesh-like materials of wax and epoxy. Headless and armless, crouched naked on a cold metal pedestal, this is a golem so vulnerable and fragile. Fragility is also a prevalent theme in the works of Dutch artist, Mark Manders. In his *Figure with Iron Ruler* (2004, cat. 13), an armless figure slouches precariously on a chair, one leg slung up from a single thread that is attached to an iron stand. The arrangement suggests an esoteric poetry of metaphors.

Mythologizing family members is yet another recurring theme in art. Entang Wiharso's *Inheritance* (2014, cat. 26), is a life-size tableau of the artist and his family around a dinner table, cast in ashy graphite. In stark contrast is a colossal metal fish on the table. The oversized fish could be a symbol of abundance, both a celebration of a current moment of happiness and a hope for continued prosperity for his young sons in an uncertain world. Wiharso, an Indonesian married to an American, explores

exigencies of immigration and his family's cross-cultural identity living between Indonesia and the United States.

Kiki Smith's *Mother* (1991, cat. 21) is a life-size papier-mâché torso of perhaps the artist's own mother. Her mother, Jane Lawrence Smith, a Broadway actress and opera singer before she married Tony Smith (the preeminent postwar American sculptor) and took a career hiatus as she raised three daughters, returned to her stage career later in life and died not long after. The mortal features of *Mother* lack precision due to the roughness of papier-mâché. The voluminous disheveled spaghetti of paper hair that trails onto the floor further obscures possible recognition. There is an incredible sense of impermanence here, like a dissipating thought on the precipice of unraveling, a memory barely retained.

Coming back full circle to my earlier mention of zoomorphic archaic sculptures, Rona Pondick's *Cougar* (1998-99, cat. 17) is a hybrid of the artist's own cast head and arm attached to a cougar's feline body. Size and proportions out of sync, awkward, the creature is unnatural, mythic and surreal. Like the anthropomorphized animals in fairy tales, animalistic features allow for a more accessible connection. This is an unnatural sight—it is unclear if the creature always existed in this state or if it is frozen in the moment of metamorphosis, a transmutation from the living being here to that of another realm, from mortality to dissonance. Ultimately it does not matter, the creature itself and the material form remain calm and stable, oblivious to the world.

In one of the works from his *The Theater of Disappearance* (2017, cat. 22) roof-top installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Adrián Villar Rojas mines the world's historical artifacts to assemble a fantastical group of cultural icons that transcend time and place. A young boy dressed in 18th century Napoleonic period costume is entangled with pre-Columbian 15th-16th century idols. We are left to complete what our shared notes of world history mean in our increasingly homogenous world. Perhaps by understanding the past we can maintain humanity's careful balance a little longer, before things fall apart.

In light of centuries of sculpted depictions of the body, *Death Is Irrelevant* demonstrates that there is still ample room for invention. The works in the exhibition are reincarnations and expansions of historical ideas, speaking directly to us, thus preserving and propelling the human story. Assembled over several decades with dedication and open minds by Livia and Marc Straus, for whom art has been a central component of their lives since they were both only twenty years old, these works are uncompromising, elucidating and challenging. There is an empathetic understanding of what it means to be human, to be alive.

Cat. 17 **Rona Pondick** *Cougar*, 1998-99