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An Enlightenment Through Darkness and the Grotesque

Review of the 'Beautiful Beast' show at the New York Academy of Art



Rona Pondick's 'Wallaby' (2007-2012) in the 'Beautiful Beast' show at the New York Academy of Art. *PHOTO: RONA PONDICK/SONNABEND GALLERY, NEW YORK*

By PETER PLAGENS
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Beautiful Beast

New York Academy of Art
111 Franklin St., (212) 842-5966
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Revived Surrealism is practically required these days of figurative painters and sculptors who want to be noticed in the hurly-burly of the contemporary art world. The second most viable method is hyperrealism, in which jaw-dropping verisimilitude replaces weird distortion as the prime indicator of artistic gravitas. These two styles are spotlighted in "Beautiful Beast," a survey of contemporary figurative sculpture at the New York Academy of Art that stands as a modest, but effective, counterweight to the Museum of Modern Art's feckless ode to current abstract painting, "Forever Now."

Not that there is a unanimity of approach among the 16 artists—eight men and eight women—selected by Peter Drake, the school’s dean of academic affairs, on the basis of their being sculptors NYAA students admire. Mr. Drake said in an email that he has noticed that many artists engaged with abject imagery have moved away from what he calls “debased materials” and have turned to the likes of marble, stainless steel and ceramic. This wider range of materials, he said, “speaks to greater options for artists and more vivid experiences for viewers.”

The four best works in the show, in fact, all eschew “debased materials.” In “Wallaby” (2007-12), Rona Pondick (b. 1952) manipulates stainless steel into a mirror surface (except for the matte finish on the strange animal’s outsize and human left arm). “Mermaid” (2011), an ensemble of a life-size female nude and dog-sized worms by Judy Fox (b. 1957), is masterfully crafted in terra cotta and delicately painted with casein. And while the two trompe-l’oeil self-portrait high-relief busts from 2011 and 2013 by Evan Penny (b. 1953) are made with silicone and hair, they give off a material vibe that is anything but “debased.”

Among those artists who do employ “debased materials”—a rather strong term for such ordinary stuff as wax, resin, fiberglass, rubber and plastic foam—Monica Cook (b. 1974) contributes a grotesquely gutted seated figure, titled “Snowsuit” (2015), and Folkert de Jong (b. 1972) gives us a striding man called “The Piper” (2007), who looks like Abraham Lincoln after a paintball fight. On the downside, the whole-wall work—more a collage than a sculpture—by Lesley Dill (b. 1950) which shows a huge thought-balloon of black-and-silver imagery bursting from the head of a small seated figure, seems flimsy—both materially and conceptually. Three big, hanging self-portrait heads in pigmented rubber by Richard Dupont (b. 1968)—they look like the Evan Pennys, melted—suffer from the subject, color and form of the sculptures having no necessary cohesion.

Emblematic of the whole show, though, is “Bodyguard (for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater),” created in 2004 by Patricia Piccinini (b. 1965). A fanged monkeylike creature accompanied by a small video monitor showing a vaguely relevant bird and woman, this technically impressive work could just as easily be a prop for a dystopian sci-fi movie as it is an example of what sculpture is up to lately, which is something very downbeat. One thing you can say for current abstract painting: It allows itself to be happy once in a while.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.