

Imitation of Life

by Dan Cameron

The slippage between states of dreaming and waking is symbolized in the sculpture of Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz by an ongoing tension between the purely visual qualities of the work and a type of functionality that is enacted without ever being applied. Cradles rock, pendulums swing, books are held by bookends, shoes slide onto feet, dogs chew bones and a faucet does not stop dripping. However, the crib portion of the cradle teeters precariously above the viewer's head, watches dangle hypnotically from disembodied hands near the ceiling, bookends become beasts of burden, feet and shoes are fused into the same object, the dog is revealed as a skeleton made from cartoon bones that resemble its dinner, and the drips are revealed as pieces of fruit squeezed from an unrepairable faucet attached to the trunk of a tree. This surrealist tendency is achieved within the scope of a visual "first glance" that is based on the expectation of finding a certain logical order within the world. Once the more whimsical aspects of the work are revealed, however, its ties to the world's logic become accentuated rather than erased.

Considered separately, these works can be appreciated less as extensions of the same riddling order, and more as unique investigations into the kinds of paradoxes that each form seems to represent. For example, *I Wake to Sleep and Take my Waking Slowly* (1994), the cradle work in the first example, points to what the artists describe as "the state of grace of infancy", as well as the distance one has to lower oneself to reach the "common ground of maturity". But the close proximity of danger implied by the imaginary infant's precarious and inaccessible state can also be interpreted as the authors warning that the world's promise of protection needs to be taken skeptically, as well as an assertion that the infant's state of extreme fragility is what in fact enables it to remain "above it all". If such an interpretation of birth seems a shade too pessimistic, it needs to be taken in stride with some of the artists' reflections of death - for example, **Eliminating the Unconscious** (1994). In this piece, the stage is literally set for the "reader" of a sculptural stack of spurious self-help books to commit suicide, by stringing a noose (provided) over the hook of a large chandelier. The titles of the "books" - **Maybe You're just Inferior** and **The Insanity Racket** are two worthy examples - mock the intensity with which recent generations have come to place the advice of self-styled experts over and above their own lives experience.

In other recent works, the passage between life and death (and sometimes following the later), is noted as a kind of suspended equilibrium between two finite points, the first of which is unknowable, the other inconceivable. Perhaps this explains to some extent the occasional appearance of hypnosis as a theme within their work, as in the piece **A Cure for All Remedies** (1994), wherein the sculpture's movements represent an actual attempt to create, through kinetic means, a bona fide hypnotic effect on the viewer. Rather than delving directly into the area of psychotherapy, however, the title suggests that the search for a cure has in turn become one of the great problems of our civilization. In other words, we no longer require a cure from the ailments that plague us, but rather from all the misguided attempts to make ourselves feel better. Into this breach steps art, which also asks us to "keep our eye" on something without ever specifying what that thing might be. We might actually succeed in placing ourselves in a trance, but without an intermediary to direct our mental energies, the danger becomes one of leaving ourselves open to virtually any available influence.

In one of their least elaborated but no less pointed works, *Life begins at 40* (1994), Martin & Muñoz seem to question what it is we actually do with the time span that comprises our life. A lone elephant supports a gradually expanding mountain of apparently leather-bound books. The top most (and heaviest) volume bears the work's title, while the next lower (and slightly smaller) is entitled **Life begins at 50**, and so on, until one gets to the lowest and most modest volume, **Life Begins at 84**. The artists' implication seems to be that if you wait until forty to begin your life (specially by searching in a self-help book for answers), you are already too late, since the dream that was deferred extends all the way back to infancy. In the context of this argument, the symbolism of the elephant is specially telling, since, as the animal that never forgets, she is perpetually in the process of placing the past in context with the present - something we mere mortals generally forget to do.

Nature is frequently, though not always, used as a point of contrast with man's follies in Martin & Muñoz sculpture. In their notes for *Under a Moon Nailed Fixed* (1993), the sculpture of a dog-skeleton gnawing a bone, the artists refer to "the innocence of the eater who will be eaten", as if to claim the food chain as another system of poetic justice. With its posture of complete involvement in what is doing (one can almost see the wagging of the tail), the dog is an image of unself-consciousness in regard to its ultimate fate. The position of man in relation to this system seems to be spelled out in the two tree-based works that the artists have produced:

Fruits of the Wound (1994) and A Merciless Symmetry (1995). The former presents a barren tree producing fruit through the attachment of a faucet to its trunk, while the latter shows a similarly lifeless tree, its trunk split down the middle with a butchers knife, surrounded by fresh red apples. In both examples it is clear that man's intervention plays a critical role in reanimating the apparently lifeless plant, and yet the act of adaptation seems quite violent, as if it were a kind of visual argument in favor of a manifest destiny. While it may be pointless to reduce Martin and Muñoz's sculpture to a fixed world view - indeed, the humor in the work argues against such rigid interpretation-, it seems clear that the metaphors produced by this collaborative team represent an attempt to explore some of the deeper aspects of their philosophies about life. Not only the works embody a strong distrust towards the place given to rational thought in most accepted notions of western civilization, but the artists unusual ability to distill these meanings into a single visual statement privileges the perceptual over the conceptual to an extent which is quite rare in current art. At the same time that they produce riddle-like parables about modern existence, they do not shirk the artist's obligation to invent a new formulation of tactile and even sensual pleasure. Like the philosophy conveyed by their predilection towards visual paradox. Martin & Muñoz's critical awareness is balanced by the knowledge that no matter how far the human species evolves (or devolves), we will never invent a credible substitute for experience.

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