



Judy Fox: Figures in Limbo

For some time it has appeared that in contemporary artistic practice the masterpiece has been replaced by the series. Indeed, for an artist to labor for months or even years on a single work of art, not as a comment on it or as an act of duration but simply in order to get it right, is rare in the current artistic climate. Can a work really be farmed out to assistants or tradesmen without giving up some of its essence? After all, the content of art is not something imposed on it from without; rather, it is developed within the context of the many and

often minute decisions the making of art entails. Perhaps it's time to reexamine the role of technique, not as an end in itself but as a rigorous personal exploration that provides the ultimate vehicle for an individual artist's expression.

Judy Fox's figurative ceramic sculptures exude an aggregate energy that is built up over time. In fact, it's difficult to think of them as inanimate; they seem to pulse from within. A four-year-long project, Fox's recent installation at P.P.O.W. Gallery, titled *Satyr's Daughters*, comprised four life-size figures of

seven-year-old girls, each representing a different ethnic makeup—African, Indian, Chinese and Caucasian—nude and on pedestals, so that the viewer looked up at them. Almost in another room, but near enough to take in the girls with his insouciant gaze, was a full-size figure of a nude man of indeterminate race, balancing gracefully with one foot on the floor. The walls were painted a deep forest green.

While the exquisitely detailed bodies and features of the girls are not idealized but rendered



Hand-modeled with unusual attention to detail, Judy Fox's life-sized ceramic figures exist in a zone somewhere between the real and the imagined, past and present, innocence and experience. In a recent gallery installation, the artist explored these dualistic concerns through five related sculptures.

BY CAROL DIEHL

in a straightforward manner that's completely contemporary, their hair has been formally coiffed into strange, archaic modes which make them seem like creatures of another place and time, more futuristic than historical. Similarly, Fox's sly satyr only hints at his mythical persona; he's as human as he is otherworldly. The magic here is in the subtle tension Fox creates between the real and the imagined, and in the lightness of her touch. The satyr's hands are raised as if to play a flute, yet the instrument itself is not represented. If it were, the figure

would devolve toward illustration, and the spell would be broken. Without the mythological aspect, however, we would be drawn to focus on the verisimilitude with which the satyr is rendered, and he'd end up as just another guy, a Duane Hanson without clothes. Instead, every aspect of the man's being poises him on a delicate line between the possible and the fantastic. He's hairy and his toenails are pointy, but not overly so. His abdomen appears unnaturally long, and his horns, nestled inconspicuously in his hair, are little more than bumps. At the cleft

between his buttocks, where you might expect to find a tail, the hair on his back ends in a seductive curl, and his penis is neither pendant nor rigid, but swirls upward with serpentine, half-tumescent suggestiveness. The expression on

Above, left to right, four figures from Judy Fox's installation "Satyr's Daughters": Lakshmi, 1999, 50 by 26 by 14 inches, Court Lady, 1999, 50½ by 14 by 11 inches, Rapunzel, 1999, 56¼ by 26¼ by 18 inches, and Onile, 1998, 50 by 15½ by 14 inches. All works this article terra-cotta and casein.

his face confronts the viewer directly and is one every woman will recognize: the practiced yet still compelling look of an accomplished seducer. He's checking you out, and he knows how to get what he wants.

This kind of frozen moment, the fleeting glance that puts Fox's satyr in direct communication with the viewer, is rare in sculpture, both contemporary and antique. Much more commonly, sculpted figures appear to be lost in their internal psychological space. The direct glance is less unusual in painting, and the particular look Fox has captured can be seen repeatedly in portraits by Ingres. Also reminiscent of Ingres—especially in the case of the girls—is the delicate translucent coloration of the skin, which seems to glow from the inside out. The girls' awareness of the viewer, however, is indicated by their stances, which seem chosen to convey an obscure symbolic message, while their eyes are focused outward on some distant point, as if they are being guided by celestial voices.

In these figures Fox is exploring the paradox of nudity as a representation of both sexuality and innocence, and she explains she was drawn to depict girls at that age because they represent both. "It's a compelling time," she says, "where you're beginning to be conscious of your beauty, but still don't know what sex is." This is the spirit captured in Degas's *Little Dancer*, which in part provided the inspiration for these pieces. Yet, in our present culture, which insists on viewing the complex subject of childhood sexuality solely in terms of adult dysfunction, it's possible some people could not go beyond a surface reading and be disturbed by her unclothed renderings of children, especially with a naked, adult male standing nearby. Fox, however, not only places the girls out of reach, she infuses them with such internal dignity that they appear to be as inviolate as her satyr is blatantly lascivious.



Olympia, 1995,
12 by 27 by 8 inches.



Above left, *Virgin Mary*, 1993, 37 by 11 by 7 inches. Right, *Attila*, 1996, 31½ by 21 by 11 inches.



Since the 1950s, when George Segal began casting the human form from life, much contemporary figurative sculpture has been achieved through that process. Indeed, Fox's figures are so anatomically precise that one first assumes they could not have been made any other way. There is, however, a delicacy and vitality usually not present in work that has been created using the casting method. The faces of most cast figures are in repose, and when the artist attempts to animate them, they most often end up resembling masks or caricatures. In fact, it's almost impossible to capture a truly realistic likeness with casting, because the material from which the mold is made places a weight on the skin that makes the expression inert and somewhat unnatural. In contrast, the faces of Fox's figures, like their bodies, are imbued by the artist with a refined liveliness that comes only with

careful hand modeling and painting.

Using terra-cotta and a steel armature, Fox starts with the feet and works her way up, firing various sections along the way, as needed. Once completely fired, the sculptures are painted with numerous layers of casein in thin glazes that allow the underlying colors to show through. Fox's image is derived from photographs she takes of her model, as well as from an art-historical example (or sometimes several). She

looks for inspiration to the early expression of a culture, then merges the historical prototype with the contemporary model, who may, to take the Chinese girl for example, be requested to reenact a position taken by a court figure in a Tang dynasty polychrome terra-cotta. Children being children, of course, they can rarely be cajoled into taking the exact pose Fox has envisioned, but with enough photographs she is able to mentally piece together an approximation of the pose she wants. At this point the sitter's personality ("along with the personality of the sitter's parents," Fox adds wryly) also becomes part of the mix, and Fox allows herself to be led by her interaction with the child to discover just who she is and let her individuality shine through. "Her image," Fox says, "contains more wisdom than any of my preconceived ideas."

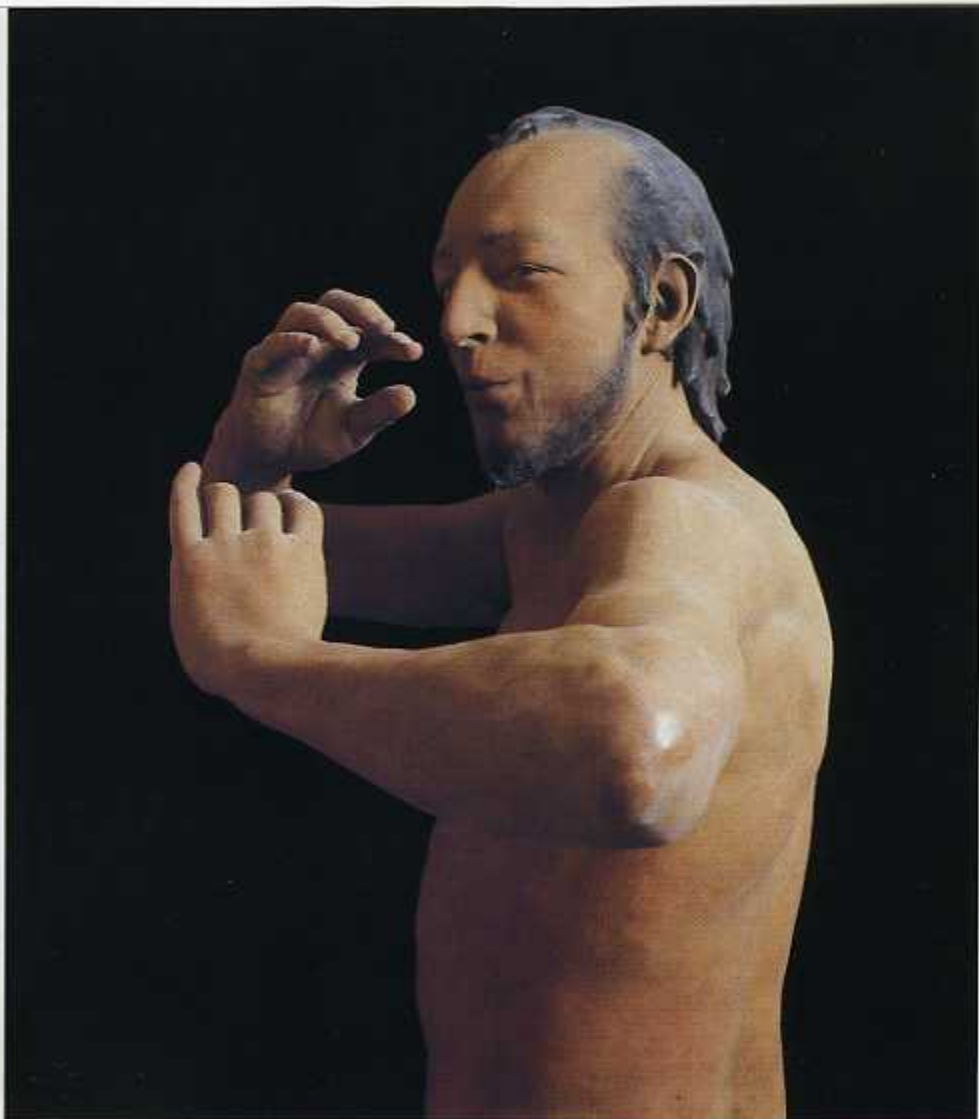
Fox was a liberal-arts student at Yale in the late '70s—a time, she says, "when all the smart artists had given up modeled figurative sculpture because they couldn't figure out a way to make it anything but trivial." When, however, a professor asked, "Why would anyone want to make clay people?" Fox took it as a challenge. "I came to realize," she says, "that the answer to how to put meaning back into figuration lay not with modernism, which is where everyone was looking, but in art history." She therefore studied art history in graduate school, where she was impressed by the way the figurative sculptures of earlier times portrayed a people's beliefs: their interpretation of themselves and human nature, embodied in what they conceived of as heroes.

The first Fox pieces I saw were life-size sculptures of babies at Exit Art in 1992. In contrast to the contained exuberance of Fox's girls, the

Life-casting, which Fox rejects, can never capture a truly realistic likeness, because the material from which the mold is made places a weight on the skin that makes the sitter's expression inert.

babies have a creepy quality, as if they're alive and dead at the same time. In them Fox was attempting to merge real infants with heroic models—Eve, the Buddha, Muhammad, Jesus, a Mayan chacmool, an Egyptian sphinx and an Indian bear totem. The peculiar tension of these pieces comes from the contrast between the adults whom the figures are impersonating and the infants that they are actually modeled from. "It's just like motherhood," Fox explains, "You do your best to shape it, and then it turns into something you have no control over."

Fox's attempts to blend a contemporary child with a cultural icon are also a response to increasing globalization. An enthusiastic traveler and observer of other cultures, Fox is



This page, two views of Satyr, 1999, from "Satyr's Daughters," 68 by 30 by 25 inches. Photos this article courtesy P.P.O.W., New York.



sensitive to the contrasts between her own country and those she visits, paying particular attention to the points where cultures clash and mix. While the continuing loss of individual cultural characteristics distresses her ("the more gods you have," she says, "the better it is for art"), Fox is aware that her own tourism is contributing to the phenomenon. "The world would be more interesting," she concedes, "if people like me weren't going around watering things down." In this context, it's possible to see Fox's work as an attempt to unite these disparate worlds without losing meaning. Indeed, all of Fox's work involves paradox and complexity, what she calls "the in-between," and it falls not only in between cultures, but between the past and the present, the real and the imagined, innocence and sexuality, the sacred and profane, life and death. "Things are in between, opposites at once," she says, "which conflicts with the American desire to render life in black and white." While the tendency in art lately has been to reduce everything to a single, easily understood concept, the real mystery of art

comes from readings that continue to reveal themselves long after the first glance.

Fox is the first to admit she doesn't understand everything that's in her work. "I sculpt with an anatomy book around, but I'm not really an anatomist. What I know is the texture of things. There's a point where I concentrate on the surface and just go on faith. Trying to have everything analyzed is the process of lopping off what you don't understand. You want to leave in what you don't understand, because that's where the richness lies."

Judy Fox's work demonstrates how contemporary artistic thought can be linked with powerful visual archetypes, a dedicated esthetic and relentless articulation to create images that mirror life in its complexity, depth and fragility. □

"Satyr's Daughters" appeared at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York [Feb. 17-Mar. 23]. A new show of Fox's works is scheduled for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wis. [Feb. 25-May 31, 2001].

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