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Weekend FINE ARTS LEISURE

Is Sculpture Too Free For Its Own Good?

By KEN JOHNSON

CONTEMPORARY sculpture knows no boundaries. There is no material or technology, from dirt to video, that sculpture won't pick up and exploit for its own ends, and there are no formal parameters like, say, the flatness of painting to constrain it.

Certainly there is no primary style right now setting visual or conceptual limits. About the only thing sculpture cannot tolerate, at least in theory, is being restricted to two dimensions. This makes sculpture a zone of enormous creative freedom.

The down side is, if sculpture can be anything, then maybe it is not anything in particular. It loses a sense of tradition, identity and purpose. And it becomes hard for people to care very passionately about it (the way many people still care about painting), much less evaluate it. If you think that artists, like children, need limits, you may not like what has become of sculpture.

Freedom or delinquency then? You could start an investigation into the state of contemporary sculpture this weekend by visiting gallery shows in Manhattan.

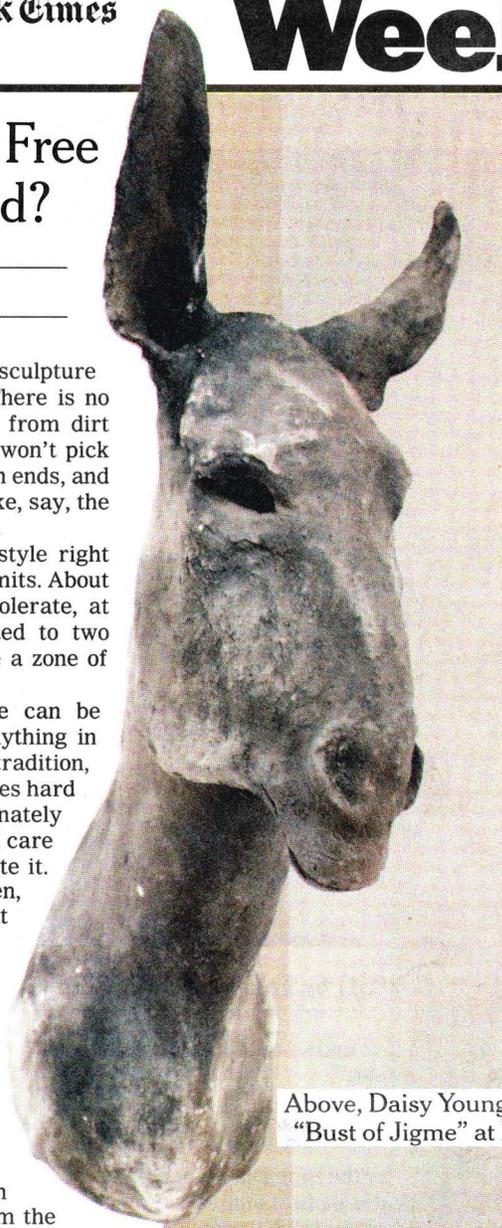
It would profitably begin with some historical stage setting, provided by exhibitions of Minimalist boxes by Donald Judd, an architectural excision by Gordon Matta-Clark and metal reliefs from the mid-1970's by Frank Stella.

An alternative to abstraction can be found in a retrospective of Daisy Youngblood's ceramic sculptures of animals and people, while Jon Kessler explores the anxieties of modernity in a show of new, electrically powered assemblages called "Global Village Idiot."

That there is still life in environmental installation is proved by a wavy, gallery-filling false floor by Vincent Lamouroux, a young French sculptor.

And exemplifying a relatively recent interest in Modernist design as subject matter are solo shows by John Monti, Jorge Pardo, Dike Blair and the team of Delia R. Gonzalez and Gavin R. Russom.

If after all that you want some fresh air — literally, if not necessarily figuratively — you can take a walk in Central Park, where the outdoor section of this year's Whitney Biennial is on view.



Above, Daisy Youngblood's "Bust of Jigme" at McKee.

... Daisy Youngblood

Realistic representation made a comeback in the 1970's, and one result was the estimable career of Daisy Youngblood. Ms. Youngblood, who is in her late 50's and lives in Costa Rica, won a MacArthur grant last year for her exquisitely sensitive, usually small ceramic sculptures of animals and human spiritual gurus. Her retrospective exhibition at McKee Gallery near 57th Street presents 18 works dating from 1975 to 2003.

Ms. Youngblood is not a painstaking detailer. She doesn't reproduce fur and she leaves eyes as blank holes, which makes you aware of the sculpture as a hollow shell. The white elephant head is missing its ears, the reclining horse has no legs. The clay remains just what it is — rough, not glazed or painted and scorched by the kiln. At the same time, the forms, masses and gestures of animal or human bodies are so finely realized that the raw material feels magically imbued with life.

Ms. Youngblood's animals also have distinctly anthropomorphic and symbolist qualities. The bust of her donkey Jigme is more like a portrait of an old and beloved friend than an objective zoological rendering. The bronze, half-life-size sculpture of a gorilla in a dancelike stance is a meditation on muscular masculinity. The elephant with its pensively downcast eyes projects earthy wisdom, just as the wonderfully relaxed, seated human figure of Sri Ramana Maharshi, wearing only a loin cloth, embodies transcendental humility.

In retrospect the single wall-mounted boxes that make up the Donald Judd exhibition at Van de Weghe Fine Art in Chelsea have a kind of resonance they would not have had when they were made, from 1964 to 1969.

The gallery calls them "Single Stacks" because they look like individual units from Judd's vertical ladderlike arrangements of boxes. Different ones are made of shiny copper, stainless steel or galvanized steel and some have Plexiglas panels that cast colored light onto the walls below.

The installation is elegant yet so austere as to have an almost funereal effect: the boxes are like containers for the ashes of Modernist sculpture. Of course, Minimalism did not kill sculpture, and now it is amusing to think of Judd's sculptures as Pandora's boxes from which the demonic energies of pluralism would soon be emerging. ...

Where the Shows Are

The sculpture exhibitions in Manhattan reviewed by Ken Johnson:

DAISY YOUNGBLOOD, McKee Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street, (212) 688-5951, through May 29.