

Maxwell Carraher's *Reaching Man*, and other bronzes

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Sculpture has gone through many transitions over the past century, both in terms of its form and content. Some of these transitions suggest an advance, while others a regression. Most of these attributions depend largely on what is considered modern. For example, in 1909, the famous French sculptor Auguste Rodin believed his cast bronze figure *Striding Man* would open the door to the new century of modernity. Four years later the Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni introduced his abstract bronze figure, *Unique Forms on Continuity in Space* (1913), believing that Rodin's work represented not the future but a culmination of the past. Boccioni further declared that his sculpture was the true symbol of the twentieth century because it revealed the human figure as a powerful machine-like force.

Like many sculptors who have worked with the figure over the past century, the search for symbolic meaning has played a significant role in their work. Whether Rodin, Boccioni or the later works of Henry Moore, the goal of these artists was to encompass an original style that reflected upon their time. In observing the work of the young California sculptor Maxwell Carraher, I detect a similar aspiration focused more on an expressionist point of view. Now in his mid-twenties, Carraher credits his father as being the source of his involvement with sculpture. While growing up, he fondly recalls watching him cast monster masks in latex from various clay models during Halloween. With leftover bits of clay, Carraher began experimenting with developing figurative forms. In that there was no course

offering in sculpture at his boarding school, he took ceramics instead. Here—much to the instructor’s dismay – he developed his understanding of clay as a medium not to build pots, but to construct and carve the human figure. Later, through the help of his father, Carraher learned the various steps in making molds for his clay prototypes. As he began building molds sturdy enough to support the intense heat of molten bronze, the artist soon realized the technical aspects involved in making figurative sculpture are complex. To learn these techniques is not something one acquires over night. One must think through each step along the way from clay to plaster to wax and to bronze. Finally, one must see the form not only with one’s eyes, but also with one's hands. The process requires considerable diligence, focus, energy, and a clear sense of intuition. In essence, it is hard work.

I have titled this essay after the most recent bronze sculpture by the artist, titled *The Reaching Man* (2014). Just as Rodin and Boccioni strove to attain a particular impression of modernity based on their symbolic views of the male figure, Carraher suggests a similar idea in his modestly scaled work. The dimensions are 29” high and 7” across at its widest point. The work represents a male nude projecting diagonally outward from a fluted column where the body has been harnessed with rope. The figure’s two arms are waving, perhaps reaching out toward the viewer. The design of the piece has the look of antiquity from Hellenic times more than modernity. Is the artist making a comment on life in ancient Greece in comparison with the present?

The narrative content of the work transmits a certain ambivalence, a kitsch masquerade, as if the figure were performing a dramatic role on stage.

The expression on the face of the figure suggests earnestness, but again, the motivation behind this expression is not easily deciphered. One may sense in Carraher's sculpture a powerful dramatic moment, an impulse towards transformation. Intuitively, the artist clearly knows how to incite emotion through his overall attention to the positioning of the figure. This implies that the artist understands that any true work of art holds more than a single response. The expressive narrative may be personal, social, historic, or mythological, or all of the above. Whatever it is, the viewer's subjectivity enters into the work as a means toward interpretation.

The Reaching Man is one of six works completed over the past three years. Other works by Carraher begin with a straightforward work, titled *Single Face*, and two others, *Man in Stone* and *Two Hands*, all cast in bronze and dated from 2012. Two additional works, *Three Faces* and *Man and Woman*, also in cast bronze, follow in 2013. Each of these sculptures has a unique quality of expression. Of the six works, *The Reaching Man* (2014) is the most complex and mature work by Carraher. Yet each of these works reveals the artist's immense capability in his search to establish a vocabulary of formal ideas that coincide with the expressionist values in his art.

The isolated visage in *Single Face* is particularly moving as it focuses on a distilled, yet complex expression. In our confrontation with the face, an ambiguity of meaning emerges, which could be read as a quality necessary to art. The eyes are squinted, yet the face emerges as remarkably human in its connectedness to the world, suggesting that the artist found the proper distance by which to bring life into this form and give it legitimacy. For this reason, the sculpture reads as something not just ordinary, but in some way

elevated beyond the ordinary as a fully conscious expression, an experience holding a reality of its own.

Expressionist sculpture is very much a part of the historical present. In some ways it suggests a reaction to the reductive geometric modules from forty years ago. Carraher's approach to the figure goes back to expressionist sculpture in the early twentieth century that includes the work of Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Ernst Barlach, Kathe Kollwitz, and Gerhard Marks. These sculptors were interested – as Carraher is – in how to invoke feeling in the figure, how to express the human condition, as the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre made clear in his writings on another Swiss sculptor, Alberto Giacometti. In the work of each of these artists, a modernist approach to the figure is shown through their subtle transformations of representation. I regard Carraher's *Two Hands* as offering such a statement. This simple and direct expression of two hands intertwined with one another is beautiful in its evocation. Even as the figure is not fully present one feels a connection that is ineluctable human, and very much within the space of sculpture. Arms and hands reach out to one another as they do in *The Reaching Man*. This offers a necessary counterpoint to the recent loss of tactile sensibility in the current “virtual” age, and also a promising statement on the sculpture of Maxwell Carraher at its best.