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ART REVIEW

The Look of Love

By [BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO](#)

“I would say that I did a U-turn in my art in 1955 when I saw my first child being born,” the sculptor Manuel Neri has said. That is when he began creating the astonishing life-size painted figurative sculptures in plaster, bronze and marble that he has made for the last half-century. Before then he had been an Abstract Expressionist oil painter and a disciple of Richard Diebenkorn. “It was a fantastic moment. I realized then that the female body has the magic. The male may have the power, but the female has the magic.”

Mr. Neri, 76 and based in San Francisco, knows what he is talking about, for there is a magical quality to his retrospective at the Grounds for Sculpture museum in Hamilton. (The show is timed to coincide with his receipt of the 2006 Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Center, which has its headquarters there.) On display are more than two dozen of his figurative sculptures, which combine a brash contemporary sensibility with an attention to anatomy reminiscent of classical statuary. Most of the sculptures were made with the same model, Mary Julia Klimenko, with whom Mr. Neri has worked since 1972.

The sculptor mostly creates reliefs, sculptural carving with the form projecting from a flat background. This technique was used extensively in ancient times for classical temple statuary, with the figures carved from rock or wood or cast in metal. Some of the most famous examples are the low reliefs on the walls of ancient Egyptian tombs and temples, as well as the bronze doors by Lorenzo Ghiberti for the Baptistery in Florence.

While traditional reliefs fill the surface area of the support, often depicting multiple figures and scenes, Mr. Neri’s sculptures are more minimal. He usually depicts a single figure in various dynamic states of emergence from the background, which is invariably a fractured, irregularly shaped wall. Sometimes the figure is crouching, sitting or kneeling; at other times it is standing still. In every instance the posture is vulnerable and the pose startlingly intimate, as if we were watching a woman at home alone. They are all riveting.

There is also a certain psychological cunning about the poses Mr. Neri selects. Sometimes the figure looks straight out at us, but mostly she is turned inward, her face buried in the supporting wall. What is she thinking? We don’t know, for even when she is turned toward us her face is blank. The figures are somewhat reminiscent of early forms of primitive sculpture, especially fertility symbols like the Venus of Willendorf. This makes them even more intriguing, adding a layer of mystery.

Other unexpected pleasures to be found in these sculptures include a contrast between their intensely physical, rough surface texture, which at times makes them look unfinished, and the sensuality of the naked female forms. This quality is especially apparent in the plaster and ceramic sculptures, which clearly reveal the artist’s continued reworking of the surfaces and forms with his hands, or with a trowel and palette knife. “Maha — Ceramic Maquette XI” (1986) and “Maha — Plaster Maquette IV” (1984) are especially expressive.

The fragility of the ceramic and plaster sculptures led Mr. Neri to cast some of them in bronze, and more recently he has begun to paint them. The color enhances one's appreciation of the sculptures' textures and affords better contrast of figure and ground. When they are painted the same color, the figure begins to sink into the background and disappear; when they are different colors, the figure is thrown into bold relief. Color is a brilliant addition.

Though inventive, Mr. Neri, like all artists, is not entirely original. An accompanying catalog contains essays referencing the work of Rodin, Degas and Giacometti, among others, while the idea of painted sculpture is as old as art itself; archeological research has revealed that ancient Greek statues were originally painted. In the early 20th century, Alexander Archipenko, the Ukrainian-born Modernist sculptor, pioneered polychrome painted bronzes that often combined the properties of painting and relief sculpture.

But there is a sophistication to Mr. Neri's sculptures that goes beyond Archipenko in many ways; the atmospheric color, the elegance of their staging and simply the rawness of his figures, which quite happily flaunt the processes of their making. There is honesty here, even truth, but most of all there is love: love of art, love of the sensual beauty of the human form, love of life.

"Manuel Neri: The Figure in Relief," Grounds for Sculpture, 18 Fairgrounds Road, Hamilton, through April 29. Information: www.groundsfor Sculpture.org or (609) 586-0616.

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