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The World of the Working Artist

Weathering the Iffy New Art Market with Bob and Marina

by Ed McCormack, pg. 12

Austrian Sculptor F.J. Rittmannsberger and the Hidden Language of Stone

A sense of the monumental is something that all too often seems sadly lacking in much contemporary sculpture. This can be in some part owed to the decline in the use of natural materials, particularly stone, which carries within its substance the weight and the history of centuries. But it also has to do with the inability of many artists today, so distracted by the trappings of the mass media among other mutable matters, to grasp and apprehend the mythic qualities underlying the superficial incidentals of our daily existence and embody them in their work. Thus they also fail to imbue their work with a sense of our common destiny.

The Austrian sculptor F.J. Rittmannsberger, however, is something of a fortunate anomaly in this regard. His work fairly breathes history and myth. Seen in a recent solo show at Montserrat Contemporary Art, 547 West 27th Street and also featured in the venue's year-round salon exhibition, Rittmannsberger's sculptures reveal a stylistic diversity that is all the more impressive for their overriding unity — perhaps proving conclusively that style is a function of character, rather than a matter of superficial likenesses. For not only does Rittmannsberger transcend the line between abstraction and figuration with an ease that would be the envy of many another artist, he also shows a great deal of variation within each mode of expression. Yet all of his work bears the stamp of his unique sculptural sensibility.

"Human Landscapes"

This unusual formal holism may very well be owed to a special sensitivity to his materials Rittmannsberger expresses eloquently in an artist's statement: "Stones and their formations have always attracted me, particularly stones which are formed by nature and so become sculptures with an archaic touch."

One is reminded of Michelangelo's statement to the effect that he did not so much carve the figure into the stone but find the figure trapped within the stone and release it. Rittmannsberger's approach appears to be equally organic, when he speaks of "the seeing and recognizing of already existing organic structures, which I can bring to life."

Indeed, Rittmannsberger invariably invests the forms that he brings to life with a warmth resonant of flesh, which comes across even in a nickel-plated piece such as "Torso." This curvaceous feminine form, with its ample hips and full breasts, possesses a voluptuousness that seemingly transcends the steely sheen of its surface. Indeed the tantalizing tension between surface and the form only tends to enhance the erotic quality of the sculpture. And the archaic quality of which Rittmannsberger speaks is especially evident here as well, particularly in relation to a stunning formal simplicity which simultaneously harks back to the fragmented figures of Grecian antiquity and primitive Yoruba sculptures, even while it also suggests a kindship with the early 20th century modernist carvings of Ossip Zadkine and others.

However, that Rittmannsberger's humanism invariably goes hand in hand with his formalism can also be seen to special advantage in a second, quite different sculpture that shares the title "Torso." This partial figure in soft marble is formed in the manner of Modigliani's painted nudes rather than the Italian artist's sculptures, which lacked the sensuality Rittmannsberger evokes here, incising the exquisitely elongated torso with subtle, fleshy folds, as well as with the prominent cleft of its sex.

Even when cast in bronze, Rittmannsberger's pieces project a similar sensuality, as seen in "Courting Couple," in which a male and a female are locked in carnal embrace, their rounded contours rhyming harmoniously, merging to become one strong yet graceful formal entity. Here, particularly, one senses a relationship to Rodin. Indeed, Rittmannsberger's approach to this erotic subject, which is bold but by no means offensively explicit, calls to mind Rodin's famous statement, "The vulgar readily imagine that what they consider ugly in existence is not fit subject for the artist. They would like to forbid us to represent what displeases and offends them in nature.

"Norway's Landscape"

It is a great error on their part. What is commonly called ugly in nature can in art become full of great beauty."

Like that great master, yet in his own contemporary manner, Rittmannsberger finds beauty everywhere, as seen in a piece in white Thassos marble called "Human Landscapes," in which four graceful forms flow upward like huge elephant tusks joined together at the top; as well as in an even more abstract sculpture in Morud serpentine marble called "Norway's Landscape," where an angularly semi-geometric shape with a circular hole at its center could suggest a stylized, severely simplified leaf. However, while this could at first seem the latter piece's only natural referent, one perceives within the horizontal striations of the green patina of the stone itself an even more prominent and poetic sense of a verdant landscape. It is such subtleties within the larger context of his sculptures, only yielding their richness with prolonged contemplation, that one discovers the complexity of Rittmannsberger's inimitable aesthetic.

Even in those works where the human figure is absent — and there are many, given this artist's fascination with pure form and the projected qualities of stone itself, as well as his ability to create an endless variety of abstract permutations of compelling universality — human emotion and a sense of the human presence are forever present in the person of the artist himself. One feels the force of his personality behind every shape that he carves. It permeates the substance of his creations, imbuing them with a mythic significance and a monumentality that seem destined to endure. — Maurice Taplinger