HYPERALLERGIC

The Political Resonance of Contemporary Sculpture

Sculpture at Luhring Augustine posits contemporary sculpture as a corrective to politically regressive monuments in the United States.

Jillian McManemin April 14, 2018

Installation view, *Sculpture*, Luhring Augustine Bushwick (courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York, photo by Farzad Owrang)

Monuments can be dangerous. They can wake the dead. At a time when Confederate and colonialist monuments are being debated and removed, contemporary sculpture has the capacity to join the national dialogue. Can contemporary sculptures within the art world serve as the corrective and restorative monuments so desperately lacking in the public sphere? *Sculpture*, a survey-style exhibition at Luhring Augustine spanning its Chelsea and Bushwick locations, presents a selection from the gallery's past and present artists. While not all of the works on view inhabit political roles, many address questions pertaining to our current sociopolitical climate.

"Revolution" (2007), by the late Brazilian artist Tunga (1952-2016), is an illuminated brass floor lamp surrounded by a web of galvanized iron forms, reminiscent of dragonfly wings, which are pierced through with giant aluminum pins. Braided wires hold up the "wings." The pins invoke the World War II phrase "put a pin in it," which references the pin trigger on hand grenades. The balance of conductive materials in "Revolution" creates a sense of volatile tension, of perpetual suspension in the harmonious moment before an explosion. Tunga's sculpture suggests that a successful revolution requires a collective pause.

In contrast, "Untitled 2" (2009) by Pipilotti Rist provides a glimpse of the world in which those in power fail to pause. A film still of a foreshortened tree trunk on a light box resembles a nuclear blast of reds, oranges, and yellows.

Oscar Tuazon's sculpture "Condenser (Vena Contracta)" (2015), a three-pronged tubular construction made of concrete and fiberglass, resembles discarded industrial piping or valves. The subtitle describes the smallest area of blood flow as it exits the heart valve. Rachel Whiteread's "Untitled (Double)" (1998), a plaster and polystyrene cast of negative space, is a counterpart to "Condenser (Vena Contracta)." Both pieces center on absence — Whiteread's in the materialization of negative space and Tuazon's in the emptiness of his concrete "heart valves." In this regard, they are monuments to ghosts.

Installation view, *Sculpture*, Luhring Augustine Bushwick (courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York, photo by Farzad Owrang)

The current political climate has changed me as a viewer. Objects that once seemed vitally rebellious fall flat. Christopher Wool's "Untitled" (2014), made of bent and intertwined strips of bronze and copper-plated steel, feels like a failed attempt at permanence. It is beautiful, but that's not enough. I am searching for a corrective monument, for the revivification of a moribund society.

We begin to recover with Simone Leigh's "Trophallaxis" (2009-2017). A cluster of black porcelain and terracotta breasts hang from the gallery ceiling in a chandelier-like formation, their nipples plugged with silver and gold. Antennae shoot out from all sides. The piece hangs just low enough to reveal scars on the breasts from boot marks — a host of violent scenarios come to mind. "Trophallaxis" projects a brutal history, but transfigures it into an assertion of women's power.

Tunga's "A Bela e a Fera – La Belle et la Bête" (2001-2012) in the gallery's Chelsea

Tunga, “A Bela e a Fera – La Belle et la Bête” (2001-2012), copper plated cast bronze, cast iron and iron (© Instituto Tunga, Rio de Janeiro, courtesy of Luhring Augustine, New York, photo by Farzad Owrang)

space echoes the senses of repression and liberation that characterize “Trophallaxis.” Bulbous copper-plated bronze forms are held up by copper and iron tripods and attached by slack chains to two intersecting iron canes. A cluster of empty iron vessels are fused together at the intersection. The vessels act as a kind of puppeteer. “A Bela e a Fera – La Belle et la Bête” recalls the Devil card in a Tarot deck. In the card, two lovers stand in front of the Devil. Although apparently held by chains against their will, the chains are loose and could be easily lifted.

Installation view, *Sculpture*, Luhring Augustine Chelsea (courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York, photo by Farzad Owrang)

Janine Antoni's "Caryatid (Crackled green glaze over red oxide on an ovoid bodied vase with a truncated neck)" (2003) is an inverted monument. A clay pot in shards rests beside a life-size photograph, turned upside down, of the artist carrying a clay pot on her head, with her back turned to us. Caryatids are sculpted female figures that serve as columns for architectural support. By inverting the photograph, the figure balances on the clay pot instead of holding it up. The vase carries the weight of her body — weight that it cannot sustain.

At the same time, Antoni endows the caryatid with the strength to break what she is expected to support. The careful presentation of the piece provokes us to meditate on what we are supporting and upholding in our personal lives and as a society — and if its shattering might bring about renewal.

Glenn Ligon, “Impediment” (2006), neon and paint (© Glenn Ligon, courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London)

While visually engaging, some works in *Sculpture* — for example, “Cube” (2015) by Tom Friedman, “Ripple” (1963/2015) by Philip King, and “Untitled” (1964) by Jeremy Moon — stall at the level of formal invention or novelty.

Sculpture’s strongest works are those that feel politically resonant today. Cady Noland reflects on the forms of power and control that structure the architecture of society. “Four in One Sculpture” (1998), is a dysfunctional barrier made of a painted white wood plank with 17 plastic sawhorses straddling it. The sculpture is placed at the entrance of the Chelsea gallery. Its presence reminds us that we’ve been *allowed* to enter. The piece provokes the question — what are the barricades of the art world?

One response lies in Glenn Ligon’s “Impediment” (2006), a painted neon sculpture that elongates the spelling of the word “slur.” Ligon paints the surface of the neon, giving it a backlit quality that accentuates the tonal contrast between the dark letters and the white neon light. He confronts us with what impediments prevent his name from being seen. It is the kind of corrective monument that we need today.

Sculpture *continues at Luhring Augustine Chelsea (531 W. 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 14 and Luhring Augustine Bushwick (25 Knickerbocker Ave., Bushwick, Brooklyn) through May 5.*