



A.R. Penck: *Definition of Similarity*, 1970-71, tape, glass, newspaper, cardboard, 13 1/2 by 17 3/4 by 10 inches; at Michael Werner.

experience, and on occasion, the good-humored guitarist addresses a student's reading, or listens quietly, making a few notations on a score with an attentiveness equal to that of Struth; he is at once audience and subject of a viewer's gaze.

—Edward Leffingwell

A.R. Penck at Michael Werner

The German Neo-Expressionist A.R. Penck came to be known in the U.S. in the 1980s for paintings with pictographic, neo-primordialist imagery of human figures and other totemic forms. His sculptures, though less familiar, evoke the primordial themes of his paintings and drawings, but are created from ordinary or debased materials that allow distinct expressive effects. This show of sculpture from the late '60s to 1986 was held together by a leitmotif that runs through Penck's work generally: the idea of the "standart." A neologism (carrying the dual meaning of flag and measure in the English "standard" and the German "standarte"), the term denotes for Penck an elemental figure that is a generic model for imitation and reproduction but also an expression of a group's identity.

Many of the works on view had a laconic, mundane air deriving from both the modesty of their

constituent parts (common wood, bottles, cardboard boxes, tin cans, masking tape, tinfoil, wire) and the rudimentary manner in which they are painted and assembled. One piece from 1972-73, titled—as were several others in the show—*Standarte Model*, is a gray-painted construction comprising a mason jar set into a hole in the side of a cardboard box. Another *Standarte Model* from 1972-73 is a liquor carton tied together with twine, to which a couple of short cardboard-and-packing-tape tabs have been affixed. And a third *Standarte Model* is made up of empty green-bean cans strung together with twine.

Despite the seemingly anti-art and readymade quality of these constructions, they evince a

symbolic nature, suggesting archetypal visual representations of human beings. The open mason jar, for example, has been painted orange on the inside, perhaps to indicate an open mouth. Another piece, vertically oriented and created entirely out of packing tape wound around itself, has a tip that is bent over like the nose of a drooping head. Even more saliently anthropomorphic forms include a squat, upright mass of tinfoil from 1968-69 and *Hop* (1982), a rough-hewn, white-painted, twisting wood sculpture, both of which suggest the brooding stone heads of Easter Island and other prehistoric Oceanic art.

Although such pieces have a totemic air, they don't appear as merely general symbols or emblems. Rather, they seem to evoke particular beings, pointing not so much to concepts or beliefs as to their specific, material embodiments. *Definition of Similarity* (1970-71) is a construction comprising a phalluslike bottle wrapped in masking tape that rests partway in a hole in a box, and a headlike form created out of bunched newspaper, also wrapped in masking tape, lying on its side atop the box. Although the work suggests a primitive fetish referring to an abstract idea, it has far greater immediacy as an image of bodily abjection.

—Jonathan Gilmore

Jon Isherwood at John Davis

Stone can be perilous for contemporary sculptors. State-of-the-art tools and methods allow recalcitrant materials to be manipulated with remarkable freedom, but it's easy to fall in love with process itself—which makes Jon Isherwood's recent exhibition of carved stone sculptures all the more impressive. Clearly, his enigmatic forms, with their undulating surfaces and suave profiles, were achieved with a technological assist, yet Isherwood makes technology subservient to form, so that we are engaged visually, emotionally and intellectually well before we start to wonder how the work was made. Even after we discover the complexities of his approach (courtesy of a video installed in an adjacent space), his multivalent, allusive forms continue to declare themselves independently of their revealed history.

Isherwood considers his recent work to be related to the torso and head, an assertion borne out by even the most overtly vessel-like sculptures, most of which, at less than 2 feet high, are scaled to the upper body. In pieces such as *Inner Sense* and *Things Are Not Always What They Seem* (both 2003), rounded forms crowned with jaunty bands around their top openings seem to pull themselves up out of thick bases. They read simultaneously as portly bodies and bull-necked heads. The rhythmic striation and pitting of the surface emphasizes the sense of contained volume, but also implies that the stacked, bulging forms are flexible enough to collapse in upon themselves. Yet the roughly cut inflections also diffuse light, dulling the surface of one sculpture's Verde Green marble and obscuring the color changes of the other's creamy travertine, paradoxically making the squatty forms seem more dense and substantial.

The most recent works (2004) were the most unexpected. In *Charmed* and *The Voluptuary*, both dark gray Champlain marble and large at about 3 feet tall, Isherwood abandons the container reference for coils of ridged marble that magically spiral upward, as though defying the weight of the stone. The forms allude, fleetingly, to the

rounded volumes of Baroque architecture, to shells and sea creatures, to ancient votive objects and even to the upward-striving snake responding to a fakir's flute, without looking like anything but themselves. *The Sensualist* and *Findings*, a pair of biomorphic forms, both pocked like wave-battered coral, seem to struggle to heave themselves up from the floor.

How does Isherwood make them? The video showed him drawing with his hands in sand, making mounds and tracing spirals with his fingers. Computers capture these images, which he digitally elaborates before they are realized by computer-directed carving tools. Then Isherwood's hand again takes over the stone, refining, transforming, humanizing. In the end, his mysterious, evocative objects stir our curiosity and our imagination.

—Karen Wilkin

Marcel Odenbach at Anton Kern

In Marcel Odenbach's show of early black-and-white videos and more recent work, *Die ewig schaffenden Hände oder Für alle Kunsthistoriker* (The

Jon Isherwood: *The Voluptuary*, 2004, Champlain marble, 39 by 17 by 17 inches; at John Davis.



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