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## **Naked Truths at the 808**

Mar 21, 2006

By Ken George [View Gallery](#)

BOSTON, Mass.—John Ashcroft once had statuary at the Justice Department clad in thousands of dollars worth of drapery. An unruly aluminum breast had apparently unnerved the then attorney general, an assiduously religious man.

Chalk it up to residual Puritanism, the ascendancy of the religious right, political correctness run amok or all of the above. But a patch of bare skin still has the power to elicit red faces and in some cases send the culture cops running for the drapery.

The uninhibited art of Penelope Jencks is a salutary antidote to all the priggishness. And you can currently see highlights from the last three-decades of her sculpture at Boston University's 808 Gallery. A 1958 graduate of the College of Fine Arts, Jencks' is perhaps best-known for the towering Eleanor Roosevelt statue in New York's Riverside Park.

In the latter half of her career, Jencks has scaled-up her work considerably. Roosevelt peaks at eight-feet and a granite Robert Frost commissioned by Amherst College will be of similar dimensions. The 808 exhibit displays nothing on either but does include plenty of miniature beachscapes, busts and human figure studies. And it is Jencks big, bold nudes — some must top nine feet — that cast the longest shadows in this retrospective.

While the eye-level views of genitalia are sure to make Grandma blush, Jencks plays it pretty safe — serving up less shock than awe. And although artistic riffs on skin and sea seem as old as the sea itself, her skill and the scale of her art rejuvenate these hoary motifs. This is especially the case in the full-frontal set-

pieces “Beach Series I” and “Beach Series II.” The former is a collection of life-sized terra-cotta nudes; the later, a series of plaster giants.

Here self-exposure is more the restrained Yankee variety than the thronged boisterousness of say, Miami Beach. Figures are depicted standing, seated, reclining, kneeling or in the process of disrobing. There are as few smiles as there is apparel. And the nudity is unexceptional, not steroidally-enhanced. With their paunches, sags and ample hips, Jencks bodies come closer to what we glimpse in the mirror rather than the movie screen.

The sculptor’s earlier work, consisting mostly of terra-cotta busts and figures studies, testifies to her mastery of naturalistic form and detail. In her series of self-portraits, notice the details of the contracting or extending sinews of the neck, shoulders, arms — sterling evidence of formidable sculpting chops, but rather oddly out of place amongst all the fleshy entropy. And the terra-cotta beaches were a bit of a misfire. This endless parade of diminutive seascapes, some populated with miniaturized bathers, veered toward craft-store kitchiness — or perhaps they were unfairly diminished in comparison with the grandeur of the other works.

The wondrous behemoths of “Beach II” exerted the greatest hold on my imagination. Ruted and pockmarked, these white or earthen-toned forms suggest ancient statuary; or perhaps a group of naked, wizened giants from a Swiftian universe. My favorite: a woman clutching her waist and scanning the horizon — in this case traffic on Commonwealth Avenue.

Like any retrospective there are minor annoyances. It is at times infuriatingly inclusive, so much so that negotiating the hefty lineup of sculptures becomes wearisome. Ironically, for such a comprehensive exhibit, I found it odd I couldn’t locate anything on Jencks’ monumental Roosevelt statute. More contextual material would be helpful — be prepared to shell out \$15 for a book surveying her major works, as I did.

A collection of this size requires space to breathe which the 808, with its open floor plan provides. And the gallery’s floor to ceiling windows imparts a whimsical dose of exhibitionism — pedestrians needn’t press their faces against the plate

glass to get an eyeful.

Readers had until April 2nd to press their faces against the glass. The 808 is located at 808 Commonwealth Ave. in Boston, near the BU Bridge. [Click here](#) for gallery hours and contact information.