

Some Observations on Scale and Material in the Recent Sculpture of Penelope Jencks

by Jonathan Shahn

When I was a child, I was this little sort of streamlined body ... and here were these lumpy, huge bodies. A little child looking up at these large incomprehensible body parts...

I was trying to recreate the grown-ups I had known when I was a child ... they have become my own race of giants ...

One of the more absorbing preoccupations for many sculptors who work with the human figure is the question of scale. Both large and small scale, over life size and less than life size can be used in many ways and imply diverse shades and varieties of meaning. Some very unusual employments of scale are seen in certain of Penelope Jencks' works over recent years. With a vision particularly her own, she has created a series of enormous figures of quite intense intimacy, while concurrently fashioning another series of tiny, yet powerfully monumental figure-in-landscape works in fired clay.

The artist has summoned from her childhood memories of summers at the beaches of Cape Cod, images of a world of giant naked grown-ups; expressing what seems to be the mixture of terror and fascination a child could feel at being surrounded by these huge-seeming monuments of flesh. Walking around and through this grove of pale, lumpy and oddly proportioned figures, and being able to see them only in part at any time because of their closeness and size, recreates with great intensity the powerful impression that these seemingly limitless adult bodies could make on a small child.

But as one puts more distance between oneself and the sculpture, the figures begin to assume a more benign appearance, and the elegance of the forms and the artist's mastery of the gestures become more apparent. Here we see large over life-size scale assuming a different or even opposite function from that of monumental figurative public art, being both painfully intimate and formally powerful, even seeming to move back and forth between these two modes, or two kinds, of vision.

In a way, there is something about these little things that I did that can seem bigger by making them very small ... when they are that size, I can imagine them being very big, but somehow, when they get bigger, I have a harder time imagining them - they wind up looking small...

In some of the very small terracotta figure-in-landscape pieces, a different sort of scale-use seems to be at work. Here the tiny figures confer power on the surrounding shore-scape, generating vastness through the difference in size between the land and the figures themselves, creating a sort of infinity of space in a very small format. But this vast space itself is compromised, or contradicted, by the vague allusion to recumbent human form in the dune shapes that form the far background. Another kind of scale-relation has come into play, and with these hints of otherworldly, heroic-sized figure forms; the scale is altered still differently, the human figures turning ant-size. Of course, in looking at these small pieces of Penelope Jencks', done with such a light, deft touch, we are only vaguely aware of these notions of scale, being more aware of the rightness of the work.

I also moved into plaster, because I couldn't make terracotta figures that large ...

For some figure sculptors, the materials they use, the old standby materials, are like members of the family. Each has its own character and peculiarities, and can lead you in a different direction, obliging you to a certain kind of relation. Often the material can bring the artist to certain forms and ideas; at other times the idea/form can push the artist toward a certain material. And although this seems obvious, it's always worth thinking about the relation between the forms and the substance used, and how the deep familiarity of the sculptor with the material binds the concept and the medium together.

Plaster, applied directly, is unique among materials in that it is a combination of a soft pliable substance, applied freely, and a hard resistant one that has to be hacked, scraped and abraded or smoothed. In the monumental-scale direct plaster pieces by Penelope Jencks, we have a sense of a battle between these two functions of plaster. Nothing seems easily arrived at by a linear route, but rather the result of a long struggle, and their strength comes from many changes, rethinkings, cuttings-back, rebuildings; finally ending up as a piece of sculpture that has the look of having been many other sculptures in its life. We can see or feel their history in the final work. This can often be the case in sculpture made directly in plaster, and it often shows up in the physical qualities of the plaster surface, which, in its absorbent whiteness, can have some of the appeal of a good watercolor paper, inviting the sculptor to make various graphic markings part of the work.

I was doing terracotta figures because I thought they were very connected to the beach, because they are made of terracotta and sand ...the body shapes look like dunes

Terracotta and bronze have in common the fascinating property of transforming yielding, pliable material, usually clay and wax, into permanent hardness, capturing forms in mid-gesture, eternalizing and altering the qualities of softness and speed of modeled works in clay and wax into hard, enduring objectness. Penelope Jencks's tiny bronzes, and the small terracotta figure/landscape pieces discussed above, employ the characteristics of these materials/techniques sensitively, but without letting these same characteristics become the subject of the work. There is great restraint in the way this is done. This prolific and powerful artist has a long experience and great mastery in using fired clay and bronze in numerous large scale, even monumental, works, yet is also able to use the same materials in a most intimate and sensitive way.

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