



Untitled. Handbuilt ceramic. 92.5 x 27.5 x 35 cm.



Progression. Handbuilt ceramics and bronze. 57.5 x 15 x 22.5 cm.

Consequences of Intent

The Earth Bound Figures of Dirk Staschke

Article by Scott K. Meyer

AN INFANT IN A HIGHCHAIR LEANS FORWARD IN AN effort to reach for something outside its grasp. Wings are visible over the shoulders and a first glance makes the 'baby' a cherub. But as conjecture begins concerning the miraculous event toward which he gestures, a side view reveals what we have

overlooked. The wings have been crudely nailed to the back of the chair and are not attached to the figure at all. In fact it is the straining forward posture that affords us this insight. The object of his desire is still unknown but, in this context, he seems suddenly earthbound; his wings clipped by his attempt to



Equilibrium. Handbuilt ceramic. 82.5 x 1.116 x 27.5 cm.

exceed his limitations. This is the world of Dirk Staschke, a world that cleanly defines those limitations and the consequences of defying them.

Early on this path, Staschke made a piece that emerges as prophetic. In it the bust of a baby is seen, its face contorted as it cries. The only other element of the piece is a pacifier coloured and textured to match the bust and placed maddeningly out of range. The convention of a bust rendering (cutting off at the shoulders) is now presented as actual physical disability and we see the baby struggling with the handicap instilled in him by his maker. Darkly humorous, the work effectively distills human need to its essence while endowing the sculpture with an eerie self-awareness – an approach the artist will use again.

In another work from the same period, *Progression*, an elegantly classical figure is seen striding forward on cloven hoofs that seem to have been fitted to the legless sculpture like prostheses while a devilish mask has been fixed to its face. Again attempts at forward motion are not without consequence. In this case, the viewer has been left to speculate what the temporal relationship is between the figure, the loss of its legs and their eventual replacements. Was the same sensibility responsible for all this, or do we have in the piece a record of its physical and spiritual decay? Here again is an approach that will become important to the artist's later work. The elasticity of time is used towards establishing universal truths

while giving voice to the dissonance between human design and entropy. The inclusion of these early pieces here is meant as a backdrop against which the later pieces may be viewed.

As Staschke continued to explore these themes, his figures became more classical in style. In fact they may be productively viewed as commentary on classicism; sculptures about sculptures. If classical sculpture and architecture are emblematic of the values of the age in which they were produced, Staschke appropriates and juxtaposes its elements towards making postmodern commentary on those values. In so doing he makes work which speaks to the human condition in our own time.

It is a remarkably cohesive body of work which is most productive when viewed collectively. Typically, one realistically-sculpted non-idealised figure is bisected by ornate borders, capitals, arches and pediments. Usually half or the entire head has been replaced by these elements. There is no colour or textural difference between them and the figures. Both are treated with the cracked patina of implied age. Legs and feet may sink into a confining/supporting surface. Hands are often shorn off as they reach toward the abyss between each other. In contrast to some of the earlier works, there is a strong symmetry to these assemblages. Instead of actual motion there is the subtle suggestion of potential motion as figures or a bust is balanced precariously on an inverted arch or



Reclinatus. Handbuilt ceramic. 37.5 x 67.5 x 22.5 cm.

decaying cinder block. They show no awareness of the limitations imposed upon them (unlike the crying baby). They are not of the time to which they reference and probably not of our own as they sit in waiting for something beyond our understanding. With titles such as *Equilibrium*, *Anonym* and *Facade*, they remain as enigmatic as any of the great ruins whose complete meanings have been lost to history. Indeed, they pose more questions than they answer. Herein lies their meaning and their power.

So who are these people? Staschke accomplishes two things with his strategic architectural inclusions. He keeps the identity of his figures general rather than specific while at the same time asserting a relationship between Man and what he has built. These figures may well be 'Everyman'; a position supported by the rather ordinary bodies being represented.

Why are some of the figures missing limbs? Is the presence of the limbs inferred as in the accepted convention of figural sculpture? Should their absence be interpreted as a disability purposefully given them by the artist? (Recall the baby and pacifier.) Is some later calamity implied, with the present versions the results of contemporary efforts at reassembly? I believe Staschke means these pieces to be catalysts for this type of speculation.

What is the ultimate relationship between the figures and their environment? The artist has chosen an idiom with historical precedent. Decorative busts,

figures, beasts and gargoyles do not appear unusual juxtaposed with building facades and interior spaces. Working within this precedent allows the artist to make subtle assertions concerning Man and building while preserving an inscrutable silence. Unlike the alienated figures of Segal to which we ascribe the melancholia of the disenfranchised, these figures remain emotionally neutral; a part but apart. They are so oblivious to their precarious positions that we begin to doubt whether our laws of physics affect them. (Are we being given access to situations of the mind where disparate concepts may overlap and occupy the same space simultaneously?)

Staschke's figures seem to have learnt well the consequences of human aspiration. They appear to be more patient now. Their once tangible mobility now only a possibility, they wait in static repose. Will they ultimately become engulfed and effaced by the world they presumably built. Are they reduced to environmental ornament having been robbed of personal identity or do they and their world complete each other making each piece a reconciliation? Staschke's ambiguity is purposeful and powerful. He has given us a world in which answering either yes or no affords fascinating consequences.

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