

sculpture

October 2015
Vol. 34 No. 8

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org



\$7.00US / CAN



From the Executive Director

This issue of *Sculpture* includes the psychologically penetrating work of Belgian artist Sofie Muller, the labyrinths of renowned American artist Robert Morris, the glass sculpture of French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel (including the fountain sculptures recently installed at Versailles), as well as an examination of the process behind Marc Quinn's monumental *All nature flows through us*.

October always has a strong educational focus as well. This time, we feature the innovative work of Mary Bates Neubauer (winner of the ISC's 2015 Educator of the Year Award) and a preview of the 2015 Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award winners, which offers a first glimpse of the amazing new talent emerging from schools around the world, and the faculty members behind it.

If you are planning on attending the ISC conference next month in Arizona, you will have a chance to see the works of all these artists. The student show will be on view at the Step Gallery in Grant Street Studios, where Mary will also receive her award. Hope to see you in Arizona.

—Johannah Hutchison
ISC Executive Director

ISC Board of Trustees

Chair: Ree Kaneko, Omaha, NE

Treasurer: Prescott Muir, Salt Lake City, UT

Secretary: F. Douglass Schatz, Potsdam, NY

Jack Becker, Omaha, NE

Chakaia Booker, New York, NY

Dana Martin Davis, NC

Richard Dupont, New York, NY

Carole A. Feuerman, NY

Jeff Fleming, Des Moines, IA

Carla Hanzal, Charlotte, NC

Michael Manjarris, TX

Susan McLeod, FL

Andrew Rogers, Australia

Frank Sippel, Switzerland

Fisher Stolz, IL

George Tobolowsky, TX

Boaz Vaadia, New York, NY

Philipp von Matt, Germany

Xawery Wolski, Mexico

Chairmen Emeriti: Robert Duncan, Lincoln, NE

John Henry, Chattanooga, TN

Peter Hobart, Italy

J. Seward Johnson, Hopewell, NJ

Josh Kanter, Salt Lake City, UT

Marc LeBaron, Lincoln, NE

Robert Vogeles, Hinsdale, IL

Founder: Elden Tefft, Lawrence, KS

Advisory Board

Bruce Beasley

Robert Edwards

Ralfonso Gschwend-

Craig Hall

David Handley

Jim & Karen Linder

Elizabeth Strong-Cuevas

Hans Van de Bovenkamp

Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Recipients

Magdalena Abakanowicz

Fletcher Benton

Fernando Botero

Louise Bourgeois

Anthony Caro

Elizabeth Catlett

John Chamberlain

Eduardo Chillida

Christo & Jeanne-Claude

Nancy Holt

Mark di Suvero

Richard Hunt

Phillip King

William King

Manuel Neri

Claes Oldenburg & Coosje van Bruggen

Nam June Paik

Beverly Pepper

Judy Pfaff

Arnaldo Pomodoro

Giò Pomodoro

Robert Rauschenberg

George Rickey

Ursula von Rydingsvard

George Segal

Joel Shapiro

Kenneth Snelson

Frank Stella

William Tucker



46



34

Departments

16 Itinerary

20 Commissions

80 ISC News

Reviews

74 London: Giorgio Andreotta Calò

75 Miami: Antoni Tàpies

76 Chicago: Barbara Cooper

76 New York: Nicola L.

77 Salt Lake City: Conrad Bakker

78 Berlin: Marianna Castillo Deball

78 Dispatch: "Surround Audience,"

New Museum Triennial 2015

Features

22 Sofie Muller: *Mental Sculptures* by Peter Lodermeyer

30 *All Nature Flows Through Us: A Conversation with Marc Quinn* by Robert Preece

34 Robert Morris: *Navigating the Labyrinth* by Phyllis Tuchman

40 *Lost In Eden: A Conversation with Jean-Michel Othoniel* by Francine Koslow Miller

46 *Visualizing Data: A Conversation with Mary Bates Neubauer* by William V. Ganis

52 *The International Sculpture Center 2015 Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Awards*



40

76



On the Cover: Sofie Muller, *Clarysse*, 2011. Patinated bronze figure and burnt wooden desks, figure: 97 x 58 x 35 cm. Photo: Studio Sofie Muller.

Sofie Muller
Mental Sculptures

BY PETER LODERMEYER; TRANSLATED FROM
THE GERMAN BY ELIZABETH VOLK





“Those diseases which medicines do not cure, iron cures; those which iron cannot cure, fire cures; and those which fire cannot cure, are to be reckoned wholly incurable.” Sofie Muller is fond of quoting this statement by Hippocrates, the famous Greek physician and founder of the science of medicine, fascinated by the fact that even after 2,400 years, it has lost nothing of its validity. This Hippocratic doctrine directly relates to several motifs found in Muller’s recent “Psychonomics” series, but it is also important for her sculptures in general.

In “Psychonomics,” various specialty scissors, sometimes old and rusted, stand for “iron,” i.e., for surgical instruments. “Fire” is a recurring element in Muller’s work, or rather, the traces left behind by fire — combustion residue, charred wood, burn marks, and soot. In recent years, she has developed, to virtuoso perfection, a very special drawing technique that exploits smoky soot from candle flames. She uses this soot, among other things, to produce delicately spectral sketches of bodies and body parts on paper, their immate-

Brandt, 2011. Patinated bronze and burnt wood, 133 x 35 x 40 cm.

riality redolent of x-ray photographs. However, the “Hippocratic” and, in the broadest sense, medical, aspect is only one of Muller’s interests. Her works repeatedly center on existential themes such as injury and traumatization, psychological fragility, loneliness, and the longing for company. Above all, though, they explore the human body as a vehicle that expresses mental states and the condition of the soul.

In her native Belgium, Muller is one of the most successful sculptors of her generation. She first gained renown with disturbing, psychologically sensi-

Tristan, 2007. Patinated bronze and examination table, figure: 134 x 34 x 38 cm.

tive, and technically demanding bronze figures of children and adolescents. Her very first figurative sculpture, *Wannabe* (2002), already indicated the direction in which she was headed. A boy wearing shorts and an oddly outdated and out-of-place jacket stands straight, trying to make himself as tall as possible. The form apparently follows the boy’s self-perception. Only 60 centimeters high, the figure broadens toward the top, its proportions expanding, as if it were only a question of willpower to finally be a grown-up. Whereas *Wannabe* reveals a somewhat amusing aspirational state of childhood, the later figures are shown, for the most part, in depressingly extreme situations. Over and over again, Muller’s bronze sculptures deal with the challenges and excessive demands, the psychological fragility and emotional insecurities, that accompany the transition from child to adult. *Brandt* (2011), one particularly impressive example, would appear to be a realistic, life-size portrait of a boy leaning listlessly against a wall in boredom or sadness, were it not for the trail of black drag marks at the height of his head that appallingly indicate some sort of self-injury. Up close and from the side, we see that the left half of the boy’s head, which is made of wood, not bronze like his body, has been completely burned: it is a drastic sign of an inner wound, possibly the trace of a traumatic experience literally burned from memory.

The situation is somewhat subtler with *Tristan*, the slight figure of a boy perching on the edge of a real doctor’s office examination table. He sits there waiting, his shoulders drooping, his hands pressing into the cushions, as he gazes into space — that is, if he had any hands and eyes. We only notice at second or third glance that his hands are missing, having seemingly disappeared into the upholstery, making the boy literally unable to “handle” the situation. His eyes — and this holds true for all of Muller’s figures — have been blurred to gentle hollows comparable to those in Medardo Rosso’s famous wax busts. Muller, who admires Rosso, says, “If the eyes are rendered realistically, they immediately attract all the attention; this is something I want to avoid.” The blurring of the area around the eyes is an enormously effective aesthetic measure because it activates the viewer’s imagination. Since it is not possible to gain eye contact with the figures, we are forced to become more sensitive, turning our attention from the external to the — purportedly — psychological state of mind of the person portrayed.

Muller notes that her figures of children and adolescents are always “psychological portraits” of persons from her private life. She takes care, however,



not to divulge an individual’s particular story or set of problems. The openness to different associations and diverse, even contradictory, interpretations is an important aspect of her work. Accordingly, the sculptures have largely been set up in sensitive contexts, which allows for extremely divergent ways of understanding them, depending on the spatial environment and exhibition theme. Thus, some viewers have placed the figure of *Tristan* in a context of autism or child abuse — but one may also interpret the work simply as an example of being lost in one’s own little dream world, a frequent trait of overly sensitive teenagers.



Right: *Barbara*, 2012. Still from video and sound installation, directed by Dries Delputte; sound by Bart Stolle. Above: Detail of burnt sculpture.

Clarysse (2011), which is probably Muller's best-known work, received much attention during its presentation in the group exhibition "Forever Young. The Myth of Youth" (Kunsthalle Nuremberg, 2013–14). In *Clarysse*, a young girl sits bent over her school desk, her hands extended upward, as if in fright, over the place where her head should be, but where we find only an oval burn mark on the desktop. The benches and chairs in the rows ahead have also been singed to different degrees, as if they had been caught in a fiery blaze. Few viewers would be able to look on such a forceful scene without conjuring memories of traumatic experiences at school. Muller implies that the installation is autobiographical. As an adolescent, she experienced blackouts in which the entire world seemed to sink into a black hole of unconsciousness. The choice of title—an allusion to Clarisse McClellan in Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*—signals Muller's identification with the character's serious, introverted nature.

The strong psychological presence of Muller's isolated figures does not depend on the trenchant alienation of their realism alone; just as important is



STUDIO SOTIE MULLER

the handcrafted execution, minutely carried out down to the last detail. The fact that Muller originally comes from the medium of painting also plays a role. In retrospect, she is grateful for her solid, rather traditional education, with life drawing as an important cornerstone, because this grounding provided a sound basis for her freely modeled figures. The unusual polychromy of her bronze sculptures indicates her painterly sensitivity. Since the customary patinas for bronze (in standard green, brown, and black) were not sufficient, Muller looked up a bronze specialist acquainted with the material's chemical and physical details, and he helped her to achieve untraditional colors such as white, red, and blue. Muller's high standards of craftsmanship also owe something to the fact that she comes from an old, established family of antique dealers. Having grown up in a household where it was normal to be in the presence of Old Master paintings and sculptures, mostly from the 17th century, she has always measured her works against the standards of historical art.

Against this background, *Barbara* (2012) seems almost sacrilegious, at least at first glance. Muller's Web site <www.sofiemuller.be> features a video documenting the process behind the work. We see a near-to-life-size, Gothic-style figure of St. Barbara, holding her attribute of the tower and the palm branch of martyrdom, her head first licked by a flame and then increasingly torched. The fire's eerie work becomes almost physically palpable thanks to the insistent electronic soundtrack contributed by Muller's artist colleague in Ghent, Bart Stolle. When the flame goes out after about 11 minutes, the figure remains, its head charred black and smoking. Fire, the ultimate healer for Hippocrates, unleashes its ambivalent power here—as destructive as it is creative. Only after this partial burning does the rather sterile and expressionless 19th-century statue transform into a contemporary artwork of great complexity and

S023GM, 2014. Iron closet, magnetic burnt polyurethane heads, lab objects, liquids, and fan, 213 x 95 x 86 cm.

STUDIO SOTIE MULLER





Above left: *SH002W*, 2014. Magnetic burnt polyurethane heads and wood, 19 x 20.5 x 14 cm. Right: *SH002GW*, 2014. Magnetic burnt polyurethane heads, test tubes, wood, and liquid, 22 x 19 x 4 cm. Below: *SI003G5A*, 2014. Magnetic burnt polyurethane heads, glass objects, and liquid, 45 x 100 x 28 cm.



existential urgency. *Barbara* was created for an exhibition in a former coal mine in the Belgian city of Genk. She has now been placed permanently in a niche on the exterior of the former mine building. Coal mining was once the industrial heart of Genk. Between 1966 and 1987, however, all three of its mines were closed down, bringing social upheaval that is still felt today. In this context, St. Barbara, injured by the fire, regains her plausibility as the patron saint of coal miners.

In 2014, Muller commenced a new chapter in her work with the "Psychonomics" series. In these works, she detaches herself from her focus on the individual figure and elaborates on the installation and context-sensitive aspects of her work. The basic components of the "Psychonomics" include a set of about 70 heads, all in small formats though differing in size,

which she first modeled in plasticene and then, sometimes more than once, cast in polyurethane. More or less blackened with soot, partially damaged by fire, the heads seem like historic remains on which time has left its traces. For all their individuality, these heads are not portraits, but creations inspired in part by old photographs. Muller places them in highly varying arrangements, largely in combination with found antiquarian objects related to scientific and medicinal laboratories: scissors, scales, Bunsen burners, test tubes, glass flasks and vessels with and without fluids, and a cage-like wire cabinet. Many of the heads contain magnets, and they do what people do: they attract or repel one another. The tremendously succinct sculptural scenarios that result from this action immediately trigger a myriad of associations. For example, we see heads that strive toward each other but may never meet because of how they have been hung or because they are hindered by the dividing wall of a box. Or the opposite may happen. Some heads cannot escape each other: smaller heads hang firmly attached to larger ones, like materializations of indelible memories, obsessive fixations, or psychological dependencies.

STUDIO SOPHIE MULLER

The word "psychonomics" points to scientific research on the laws of the psyche and their application. The scales and measuring instruments, and above all the many scissors in the series, which either lie ready for use or stick to the heads magnetically, produce the disconcerting impression of dark experiments. Or are they metaphors for the condition of life itself, the ultimate experiment to which we are subjected? At once healing and injuring, they remind us that, from the moment we are cut from our umbilical cords, we are subject to all kinds of manipulations. The tubing through which the numerous heads of the large mobile installation *Nucleus* are connected to a complicated glass flask (whose original function Muller has not been able to determine) also makes us think of umbilical cords. It is an urgent image for the unfathomable basis of our individual, vulnerable existences. As mental sculptures, the "Psychonomics" impress, because Muller summons the courage to look without prejudice at the human psyche, without shying away from its fragilities or its abysses.

Peter Lodermeier is a writer based in Bonn, Germany.



STUDIO SOPHIE MULLER

Nucleus, 2014. Mixed media, lab objects, and magnetic burnt polyurethane heads, dimensions variable.