

DOUGLAS THIELSCHER: DREAM MATERIAL

By Peter Frank

Douglas Thielscher makes objects told by stories. That is to say, however much Thielscher may fashion his sculptures from marble and/or bronze (prime among other materials), the resulting concatenations do not so much retell parables and legends as point to them through metaphor and synecdoche – significantly, in no particular order of profundity, style, or culture.

Thielscher's structures, sometimes frightening, sometimes hilarious, normally odd, going in and out of narrative context, serve to give literal weight to apocryphal phenomena, but also serve to relieve three-dimensional imagery of its gravity – not only its physical gravity (or so it can appear) but, often, its moral gravity. Who am I, Thielscher muses, to recount the Bible or Dante's *Inferno* or even *The Wizard of Oz*? The original enactments, classics of language in the Western canon, are beyond "improvement." So Thielscher has taken his cues from the immortal texts to generate a whole improbable surrealist menagerie of distorted and decontextualized but recognizable, mundane and not-so-mundane things. In Thielscher's hands the world's stories are condensed to reveal the nightmares they cloak and the visual puns they brandish.

Like any raconteur or comedian, Thielscher depends crucially on timing. But in sculpture? How does an immobile figure respond to time, especially to the interactive – interreactive -- pacing of narrative? That static, obdurate *thing* cannot even adequately illustrate any given moment in the story, only generalize its central images into emblems. But, again, the allure of these improbable combinations and outgrowths, rather than any ability they might have to recount accounts, is their true psychological, social, and aesthetic strength in Thielscher's hands. These are votive objects conjured from real life that now insist on stretching the bounds of that "real life" to include the (voluntarily) imagined and the (involuntarily) dreamt.

Thielscher's unlikely confabulations erupt in and thus disrupt our sense of palpable reality. These sculpted fantasies do not simply pictorialize the peculiar, they actualize it physically. They pull an Alice-in-Wonderland, you might say: they should be funhouse mirrors, slipping us in and out of quotidian reality, like looking-glass portals to an alternate reality; but instead they pull us down a rabbit hole where form and meaning are put at odds with one another. Each object brims with symbolism, some obvious, some obscure; but the symbolic discourse that each object generates is erratic, contradictory, not so much open to interpretation as wound tight with reflections and cues that atomize the viewer's unitary grasp even as they encourage (and glancingly but continually reward) interpretive investigation.

Heightening the odd power Thielscher's sculptures have over us – the kind of curiosity-stoking draw that quickly turns casual observers into transfixed explorers of surface and shape – is the fact that his innate formal style is constantly subsumed into the overall composition. Most artists, in any medium, allow their "look" to assure their recognizability -- a sophisticated form of branding but also a key component of art-historical analysis. (In fact, most artists can hardly help the fact that their look is likely to define them. It's an integral part of artistic personality just generally.) Thielscher certainly displays earmarks of personal style, notably with the stylized

but veristic body parts and natural forms that serve as crucial elements in his otherwise diversely populated works. His tendency to bring compositional order out of multi-segmented chaos can also be recognized as a characteristic particular to Thielscher. But his is a more willful talent, in fact made necessary by the diversity of elements that comprise even the simplest of his sculptures. Balance can be taught, but Thielscher's is an innate response to tactical necessity, almost a choreographic reasoning that lands things in the right place(s) while still allowing them to retain energy -- poise as opposed to pause (much less pose).

Thielscher achieves this centered kinesis in his objects by building them so that all their components have equal associative potential. Whatever you see, whatever you find in one of these compound devices, will trigger some line of inquiry, whether to other factors at play in the sculpture itself or to thoughts in the viewer's own mind. The works trigger both interpretation and association; they allow us to identify their elements -- and their pairing of elements -- as stories we (think we) know and at the same time as new connotations, triggering the projection of contexts as much through surprise as through textual knowledge. The story, Thielscher demonstrates, is all of ours to elicit, and, to paraphrase Duchamp, each viewer completes the artwork each way.

The reference to Marcel Duchamp here is appropriate, given his pioneering work, conceptually and physically, with objects, and his mid-career association with the surrealists. He encouraged the group's preoccupation with three-dimensional forms -- including assemblages -- in the 1930s, for instance, a preoccupation which in many ways Thielscher keenly recapitulates in his own, arguably neo-surrealist work. Indeed, as Thielscher is concerned with storytelling and attendant metamorphosis, his work certainly descends from that of Jean Arp, Salvador Dali, Joan Miro, Yves Tanguy, and the like. Like his work, theirs (in two and three dimensions) bridges the distance between the picture and the object without closing it. They sought a kind of apparition, an uncanny occurrence of provocative form, as does he. More indebted to classical figure sculpture than the surrealists were, Thielscher nevertheless capitalizes most on the disconcerting surrealist conjunctions he effects in his structures; his academic mastery of classic form is a supporting skill in the context of his art, not its point.

Put simply, Douglas Thielscher makes objects by accruing ideas to one another and fashioning solid images in reference to those ideas. The images seem unstable, certainly in meaning but also in form; but their gyrations and inflections ultimately harmonize into a narrative flux. That this dynamic takes place in three dimensions, not just two, gives resonance to the relationships between elements without imposing a fixed translation. The viewer is free to dream something else -- but Thielscher has given them something to dream around.

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