



Living Color

The bodies on display in the Met Breuer's sculpture show.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body," at the Met Breuer, is a mind-blowing show in good and, while not bad, pestiferous ways: hypercharged with sensation and glutted with instruction. I am torn between praising it as visionary (and also a great deal of fun, what with entertainments including a voluble animatronic savant) and reporting it as a mugging to the taste police. I guess I'll do both. A hundred and twenty-seven almost exclusively European and American renditions of human bodies, from very old to recent and from masterpieces to curios, elaborate the thesis that colored figurative sculpture has been unjustly bastardized ever since the Renaissance canonized a mistake made during its excited revival of antiquity. The whiteness of surviving Greek and Roman marbles, their original polychromy lost, became *de rigueur* for Western three-dimensional figuration in subsequent centuries.

Painted sculpture, which had been

common in medieval churches, dwindled to the margins of vulgar use, such as in carnivals and religious processions, and decorative embellishment, as with ceramic figurines. The error was widely recognized by the eighteenth century, but the rule of chaste monochrome persisted well into modern times, even as modernism suppressed figurative imagery. (In the nineteen-sixties, the critic Clement Greenberg, acting as the executor of the estate of David Smith, removed paint from some of the great sculptor's abstract works, thinking thereby to improve them—a scandal germane to the present occasion, though not cited.) Why?

Lord knows the show's curators, led by the Met's Sheena Wagstaff and Luke Syson, go into that question, with edifying wall texts and erudite catalogue essays. The answer may come down to a resilient compound, in elite culture, of Platonic idealism and run-of-the-mill snobbery. Color—apart from its proper sphere in painting—was deemed philo-

sophically base and socially uncouth. But the show's blizzard of ideas drifts in so many directions, variously philosophical and political and historical, that it doesn't come down much of anywhere.

To contemplate the displayed works is to fight off regarding them as discursive illustrations. (On my first visit to "Like Life," I was politely redirected by a press officer from my commenced ramble to the prescribed sequence—which, on my second visit, I made a point of viewing in reverse.) You may disagree, relishing an effect, at once scholarly and populist, like that of a TED talk. Anyhow, go see. The show is a cornucopia with something, or many things, for everyone. As a curatorial phenomenon, it may well establish a model for attendance-hungry museums, never mind ingrate aesthetes like me.

Seven thematic sections, or chapters, segment "Like Life." Each incorporates both old and new works to address some issue, per the Met's press release, of "gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion over seven hundred years." For the record, the sections are titled "The Presumption of White," "Likeness," "Desire for Life," "Proxy Figures," "Layered Realities," "Figuring Flesh," and "Between Life and Art." I lack both the space and the heart to paraphrase the respective analyses, which for the most part are cogent but feel really on target only for lesser works, which derive their content more from the collective bias of their times and places than from the individual character of their makers. Good art is irreducible to attitudes, and great art demolishes them.

Those distinctions come hard in the show, which does maintain fairly lofty standards of quality but logically needn't. "Likeness" could smoothly extend its embrace to Madame Tussauds, and "Desire for Life" and "Between Life and Art" might comfortably confer at any of the crowd-pleasing commercial exhibitions of flayed and plasticized actual corpses, often in action poses, that have travelled the world in recent years. Hints toward the latter include the remarkably grisly "Anatomical Venus"—an anonymous Italian creation, from 1780-85, of a lovely damsel laid wide open from throat to crotch—and the "'Auto-Icon' of Jeremy Bentham" (1832). On a chair, the realistic figure—wax-faced, jauntily clothed, sporting a cane—contains the British

"Housewife," from 1969-70, is one of Duane Hanson's hyperrealistic tableaux.

utilitarian philosopher's skeleton. (Benjamin had willed his seated burial for reasons that included not wanting to be absent from meetings at University College London, which has lent it to the show.)

Great works on hand—by which I mean ones that, like them or not, lastingly transcend the types of their form and style—range from an anonymous German's "Nellingen Crucifix" (1430-35) and Donatello's "Bust of Niccolò da Uzzano" (from the fourteen-thirties) to Jeff Koons's "Michael Jackson and Bubbles" (1988) and Charles Ray's "Aluminum Girl" (2003). You won't forget the deep wound in the side of the crucifix's emaciated Jesus, emitting gore and surrounded by a blue bruise. The artist left God's share in mortal agony as little to the imagination as wood and paint could communicate. Nor is it easy to shake off the canny glitz of Koons's porcelain singer and monkey. The Met curators have staged a visual coup by pairing it with a fabulous Meissen porcelain figure group, "The Judgment of Paris" (circa 1762), but the kinship is shallow. Outrageous luxury is only one element in Koons's masterly fusion of Pop content and minimalist aesthetics, which prophesied and still authorizes the cultural aplomb of our reconstituted, remorselessly ongoing gilded age.

My favorites are the Donatello and the Ray. The former may have been based on a death mask of its eponymous Florentine politician, but no livelier material object exists. Life-size, the subject turns his head upward on his sinewy neck with a hooded gaze that seems mildly interested, slightly supercilious, and ripe with a thought that is an instant short of being spoken. I imagine him seated and attending to someone, standing, whose measure he has taken. The colors of the face, which feel irradiated by the light that falls on it, are so unusual in Donatello's known body of work that some have questioned the attribution. But we would know, and revere, the name of anyone else so accomplished; and Donatello was notably unconstrained by stylistic consistency.

I had an admittedly crazy sense, when encountering the white-painted life-size nude "Aluminum Girl," that it both stands apart from and is equivalent in significance to the whole rest of the show. That's a magic that the Los Angeles artist Ray,

now sixty-five years old, brings to figurative sculpture: investing deadpan realism with an aura of timeless form. Any subject will do for him—the representation of a collision-wrecked car is among his major works—but bodies hone his point. I take this to involve a profound understanding of Greek classicism as the obsolescence-proof and unbetterable compromise of observed realities and dreamed ideals. The girl's whiteness, at once a color and a refusal of color, isn't just a quality. It's an intended subject fortuitously anticipating that of the show, one to be considered along with the subtly generalized features of her face and body—machined from a solid block of metal, in a process that took Ray years to complete. She stands, as we do, flat on the floor, but feels as remote as the moon. Rather than a kind of art, the work strikes me as art defined, not a whit less nor more than art can be.

"Like Life" is beautifully installed, I should report, and its selections breathe connoisseurship, albeit of a committee-negotiated sort. The works convince as probably the best of what could be obtained in categories of statue, relief, tableau, funerary figure, reliquary, portrait, altered mannequin, lay figure (a jointed wooden model used by an artist), decorative element, doll, and the odd avant-gardist conceptual whatsit, deployed in combinations to substantiate themes and traditions. The effect is rather forensic—creations as symptoms, in service to knowledge more than to experience. But you could be like me and sift the contents to curate your own show. Mine prominently includes, alongside the pieces I've already mentioned, works by Edgar Degas ("Like Life" might justly be picketed were it lacking "The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer," modelled circa 1880 and cast in 1922), Augustus Saint-Gaudens (poignant busts in white marble and in pigmented wax, made in the mid-eighteen-nineties to memorialize the deceased young wife of a patron), Auguste Rodin (the uncanny glass "Mask of Hanako," depicting the face of a Japanese actress, from 1911), and Duane Hanson (from 1969-70 and 1984, hyperrealistic tableaux, starring a frowsy working-class housewife and a weary housepainter, that curiously become ever more affecting as their period looks recede in time). Now, your turn. ♦