

I chose as my “Close-Up-on-Art” topic Duane Hanson’s Old Couple on a Bench. Completed in 1995 in Florida in the year before his death, this work consisting of polychromed bronze and mixed media with accessories was edition 2 of 2 and was a gift to this museum.

Duane Hanson was born in Minnesota in 1926. After completing his Masters in Fine Arts at Cranbrook he worked as an artist in Minnesota and Atlanta and taught art for several years in Germany. In 1965 he took up residence in Florida and began making life sized sculptures, mostly of overt political and social content. In the 1970’s he began the work for which he would become famous, making life sized castings of seemingly ordinary, working class people. He decided what body type and pose he wanted for his piece, then sought out the model to cast, sometimes utilizing a friend or relative but normally using models unknown to him. Most of the sculptures were cast in fiberglass, polyester resin or polyvinyl acetate mixed with tinted oil paints and paraffin, producing a fleshlike flexible material. Others, like our piece, were cast in bronze. The pieces were painted with acrylics and oil paints, and had store-bought wigs or individual hairs. The clothing and accessories came from thrift stores or, sometimes, from the models themselves.

Hanson was on record arguing for a certain ambition behind his work. “I am not satisfied with the world. Not that I think you can change it, but I just want to express my feelings of dissatisfaction... I try to be honest about what I feel, and what others feel, and express it. If art can’t reflect life and tell us more about life, I don’t think it’s an art that will be very lasting and durable. In other words, decoration.” (Art in America, Nov-Dec 1972). “Realism is best suited to convey the frightening ideosyncracies of our time.” (Art News, Mar 1996). So can we presume that Hanson was trying to convey something frightening about our times through this sculpture? I think so. He has chosen to immortalize (turn to bronze) figures of a couple who we would never notice otherwise, who some would look away from, who never expected to be the object of anyone’s attention, who carry within their stature and their visages the remnants of a burdened life, and forced us to look at them and consider their lives by doing so. That’s why I chose to study it.

In terms of art movement or period, Hanson saw himself as fitting within the Realist or Verist group. An interesting argument can be made that Hanson should be seen within the Minimalist schema as well, with obvious roots in the Pop Art movement in celebrating the ordinary.

"The Verist Sculptors: 2 Interviews", Art in America, November-December 1972, p. 98-99.

Duane Hanson: Virtual Reality (Teacher Packet), PSDM, November 28, 2000

http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Duane_Hanson.aspx

"Is Duane Hanson the Phidias of Our Time", Kimmelman, Michael, The New York Times,
February 27, 1994

"Stilled Lives: The gravity of Duane Hanson's lumpen Americans", Peter Schjeldahl, New Yorker,
January 11, 1999, p. 90.

"The Verist Sculptors: 2 Interviews", Art in America, November-December 1972, p. 98-99.

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