

“thinarm,” 1994, by Peter Shelton Spotlight Paper by Martin Spector, 2019



ARTIST’S BACKGROUND

Peter Shelton, an American sculptor born in 1951 in Troy, Ohio, is known for his abstract depictions that incorporate human anatomy and architecture.

- **EDUCATION:** As a child Shelton wanted to be a doctor. By the fifth grade he knew all the bones and muscles in the body and their functions. He started out as a pre-med student. After studying sociology, anthropology and theater, he received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Fine Art from Pomona College in Claremont, California in 1973.

A number of Shelton’s undergraduate teachers had recommended against his going to graduate school which they perceived as overly academic and unnecessary to a career as an artist. Shelton returned to his hometown in Ohio to attend Hobart Brothers School of Welding. He liked the idea of learning a trade that could allow him financial independence. His affinity for working with metals may have had genetic roots, he said, as the earliest ancestors on both sides of his family worked in metal as armor-makers, blacksmiths and building iron suspension bridges.

Subsequent to completing his trade certification at Hobart Brothers, Shelton worked as a welder in Ohio and Michigan. Determined to pursue a career as an artist, he chose to move to Los Angeles rather than New York City. New York City to him “was a self-sustaining cultural mosh-pit” in which there was “only one game of poker being played at any one time.” Describing the artistic climate as he came of age in the 1960’s, Shelton notes “When I started out Minimalism was

dominant but I found it unsatisfactory. It had gotten to a point where there was not room for me in it; there were too many artists making boxes.”¹

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The West Coast represented something quite different. He said there was no one “looking over your shoulder telling you what you could or could not do.”² Artists working in and around Los Angeles found expression that contributed to a hybridized scene centered loosely around space, light and perception

- **ART MOVEMENT:** Shelton’s work is often considered in the category of Post-Minimalism, identified as a reaction to the popular and dominant movement of Minimalism in the 1960’s. Post-Minimalist artists might work with everyday identifiable objects but incorporated hand-made and human content into their art. This is in contrast to the machine-made works of Minimalism. Post-Minimalists were among the first to work with synthetic materials such as fiberglass, latex, plastic and resin composites. These artworks are characterized by an emphasis on the use of chance methods and concepts over the finished object. Shelton said that working on the human form was just not being done at the time, so he defiantly decided he wanted to do just that.
- **INFLUENCES:** Shelton said “I always wanted to make an object inbetween sculpture, with its individually distinct identity, and architecture...where the sense of being separate from you is not so clear. Henry Moore’s idea was to be on that threshold between figurative sculpture and architecture.” Shelton continues, “One of the things about being in the California scene, artists like Bruce Nauman, James Turrell and Robert Irwin (with their environmental installations) could make an easy slide back and forth between architecture, sculpture and theater.”³ This is where Peter Shelton wanted to be.

Other influences include the clarity of minimalist sculptures of the 1970s, classic Japanese architecture and the totemic aspect of objects from Native American cultures. His early and continuing interest in human anatomy has had a profound effect upon his artworks.

- **MEDIUM:** **thinarm** is made of bronze. Shelton uses a wide variety of materials in his many artworks that include bronze and other metals, fiberglass, resin composites, wood, ceramic, glass, water and paint.
- **ARTIST’S IMPACT ON THE ART WORLD:** Peter Shelton has exhibited extensively, both in the United States and internationally. He has had more than fifty five solo exhibitions and has participated in more than one hundred twenty group shows.
- **TECHNIQUE, METHODOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY:**

“Art is only art when human experience is at the heart of it.”⁴ Peter Shelton

It was in the mid-to-late 1970s that Peter Shelton began to formulate the principles that would define his pursuits as a sculptor: to create art that would engage in terms of the human body and spatial presence. Since the late 1970s, Shelton has created works of art that are primarily about the body. He conceives his sculptures as objects with which to

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interact. Shelton has suggested that his use of the human body is, first and foremost, intended to trigger the viewer’s awareness of his or her own body in relation to other bodies and objects in the world. Shelton conceives of his works not as benign objects in space that simply depict something, but rather as sculptures in sort of a “verb sense” that interact unmediated with the viewer. Sculpture has an interior life, and how lively it can be is of concern to Shelton. The organic body, and the intersection between the body and mind in comprehending experience, has been Shelton’s concern from the start. He challenges the way we are conditioned to perceive ourselves as bound, defined and contained in our bodies.

He has said “If the reference to the body is too literal, you have a very hard time conveying anything beyond good technique. You can’t control metaphor in art. People come with their associations, that is part of what art does, but I want the association to come through direct experience, not obvious storytelling.”⁵

ANALYSIS OF THE ARTWORK

With his cast bronze sculpture **thinarm**, created in 1994, Peter Shelton gives us a human figure with fantastically long (and thin) arms reaching outward. **thinarm** deftly blurs the line between figuration and abstraction, between an interest in sculptural materials and an interest in organic form. His work has a strong presence and exerts an undeniable force on the experience of the viewer – a force that is not only visual but quite physical as well. We are invited to get up next to it, walk around it, to feel its life, to feel drawn into it. We are asked to compare it to ourselves.

The skin and surface are a very important part of the experience. We might compare it to the texture of our own skin. We notice there are scratches and hatch-marks covering it. Is this skin or might it be a nightshirt covering the body? Shelton has said his works can be about containment. Skin contains us and gives us definition, as would a nightshirt.

The male/female body of this sculpture is contained but the figure’s pose can feel like it is in movement. Is it a “reach out and touch” moment of encompassing comfort or is it an alienating and disturbing image?

There are no hands on the end of the arms. The arms are open-ended. Does this invite us to imagine the arms stretch out to infinity? There is no head. The figure is hollow. Might the open-ended arms and where the head is expected be treated as passageways through the body?

We also have expectations about size. For an instant, like Alice in Wonderland, our physical frame of reference is radically altered or even jeopardized. The disparity between the constantly changing relationship between one's own body and external forces is what makes Shelton's work both challenging and enigmatic. Shelton pieces often make us smile which showcases the sense of humor in many of his artworks.

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Looking at his work, it is not surprising Shelton keeps notebooks of his dreams and fantasies. “The dreams for me establish the tone (of my work).”⁶ This has added a Surrealist quality to his artworks. Unlike classic Surrealism, which sought to jar viewers out of their complacency by juxtaposing seemingly unrelated images, Shelton's user-friendly version presents multiple realities that flow, melt and morph. His sculptures can feel intimate despite their monumental sizes.

The use of all lowercase letters in most of his titles are not typos but done deliberately. Using all lowercase letters further asserts that the titles, as much as the works, are improper nouns.

COMPARING TO OTHER ARTWORKS IN THE MUSEUM

There are other artworks that compare to Shelton's oversized works. These also challenge our sense of scale and present a sense of humor. They include:

- **Yoshitomo Nara**, Japanese, born 1959, **Your Dog, 2002**, Fiberglass
- **Robert Therrien**, American, born 1947, **No Title (stacked plates, butter), 2007**, Plastic

PROMISED GIFT

thinarm is a promised gift to the museum from Donna and Cargill MacMillan, Jr.

HOW TO TOUR THIS ARTWORK

Peter Shelton's artworks are all at once sculptural, anatomical, architectural and theatrical and have a curious effect on our perception.

Viewers are invited to walk around **thinarm** and observe it from all angles.

- What was your first reaction to this artwork? Why do you think you had that reaction?
 - How does this artwork make you feel physically?
 - Do you want to outstretch your own arms to see what it feels like or at least imagine how that might feel?
 - Do the arms stretch out to infinity?
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- How does the “skin” compare to your own?
- Is the figure showing skin or is it wearing a nightshirt?
- How does the artist use proportion in this sculpture?
- Why do you think the figure has no hands or head?
- Is there significance to the figure appearing to be female?
- What do you think the artist might be saying?
- Is this a “reach out and touch moment” of encompassing comfort or is it an alienating and disturbing image?

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OTHER ARTWORKS BY PETER SHELTON

Another Peter Shelton sculpture that is part of the Palm Springs Art Museum collection is **littlesister**, 1999. Once again, expectations about size are challenged. We are presented with a phantasmagoric form that challenges our perceptions of size. We might have a visceral reaction to a creature of this scale. Shelton imagined this creature to represent a monster child in a Christening dress. This artwork is representative of Shelton’s interest in dreams as well as showcasing his sense of humor. The sculptural skin and bones are of fiberglass and resin paste over a structural network of lead strips. This creates a visually delicate surface that is reminiscent of Japanese shoji screens. The scale might also remind us of Native American totem poles.



godspipes, 1989, is a virtual catalog of body-related forms, both internal and external, whole and fragmented: limbs, torsos, vertebrae, the vascular system joints, organs, shoulders and more. Structurally and materially it is similar to **littlesister**. Think of **godspipes** as sculptural passageways as seen in some of his other works. This large installation is sculptural, anatomical, architectural and theatrical.

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