

“Four Sculptors” Introductory essay by David Cohen

“Four Sculptors,” the 2005 Alumni Society Invitational, is a continuation of the ongoing, extended fortieth anniversary celebrations of the New York Studio School, which was founded in 1964. Earlier this year, guest curator Jennifer Sachs Samet organized a marathon, four-part exhibition, “The Continuous Mark,” which included over 100 faculty and graduates from different periods of the School; the sections corresponded, roughly, with the four decades of the School’s history.

“The Continuous Mark” influenced the decision by the Alumni Society not to stage an open-submission juried exhibition this year, but to invite me, the gallery director, to curate a medium-specific invitational instead. They generously agreed to my idea that I concentrate entirely on sculpture, and that, again like Ms. Samet’s exhibition, an artist be chosen from each of the School’s decades. Thus my selection of four sculptors: Geoffrey Heyworth, who had been a student in the early days of the School, and Chris Duncan, Sally Tittmann, and Karlis Rekevics, here, respectively, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Eric Gelber, who has written keen, perceptive essays on the artists based on personal interviews and close examination of past work, wryly pointed out to me that the title, Four Sculptors, echoes the seminal Harvard exhibition, Four Painters, curated by Michael Fried in the 1960s. Of course, there is no attempt in Four Sculptors to present a unified or timely aesthetic, as there was in Mr. Fried’s venture. It would be wrong to imagine there is a “Studio School” look or feel when it comes to sculpture (or any medium): the artists reflect the influences of different milieus and teachers, and of course each brings a strikingly original perspective to his or her sculpture.

Thinking about the works to be assembled, however, does make one aware of the Studio School’s strong commitment to sculpture and its specific values. This in a period when, even more than painting, the traditional processes of carving, modeling, and even the Twentieth Century addition of assembling seem to have been superseded in critical and institutional interpretation, by the sense that any kind of three-dimensional object qualifies as sculpture.

All four artists in this show are makers. There are contrasting degrees of investment in surface and expressivity, but it nonetheless matters in each case that the artist has grappled with specific materials to realize their sculpture. All four artists discover their work in its realization, rather than imposing an a priori notion of how a thing might look. Again, these are artists of markedly different sensibility, but common to them all is a sense of the medium as something to work through: materials are understood and exploited, but without any conceptual fetishizing, without their being precious in their own right.

I was determined to exclude works on paper from this show because I really wanted to make a visual statement about sculpture, but it must be acknowledged that drawing is vital to each artist’s conception of form. But theirs isn’t drawing as pre-conception, with

the resulting sculpture somehow being a three-dimensional realisation of an idea worked out previously in two dimensions. Instead, drawing is a preparation for the sculpture activity. All four artists engage with issues of inner space to a degree that is unusual in contemporary times, but makes sense of a training steeped in a modernist, experiential attitude towards drawing.

Some find it ironic that with its emphasis on drawing from the model the Studio School has produced so many fine abstract artists. Four Sculptors is a show of four such artists whose work deals directly with the body, not by depicting it but by exploring how a thing contains character, how a person negotiates space.

David Cohen

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