



Too Much Art

Writings on Visual Culture by Mario Naves

Chris Duncan at Union College



Chris Duncan, *Salem* (2008), steel, 18'' x 14'' x 8''; courtesy the artist

It's hard to believe that artists used to get into fistfights over representation—that is to say, over whether a work of art was sufficiently abstract. In mid-twentieth century New York, especially, there were furious debates about the viability of figurative art, arguments fueled as much by copious amounts of liquor as by an impassioned belief in progress. Abstraction's most fervent advocates maintained that it led to art's ultimate stopping point. Upon encountering Willem de Kooning's slash-and-burn paintings of women, the art critic Clement Greenberg proclaimed,

“you can’t paint this way nowadays” – “this way” being the depiction of the human form.

The story is probably apocryphal, but the prohibitive opinion was — and, in some quarters, continues to be — the received wisdom. The thing is: Art is hugely mutable. Notwithstanding exigencies of context and the peculiarities of creative temperaments, art goes its own way; it takes on one guise or another with ferocious independence. Art doesn’t progress; it evolves. If it progressed, the cave paintings at Altamira would be as relevant to the twenty-first century as the eight-track tape. That they thrive as pinnacles of human achievement puts to bed the notion that we’re anywhere near reaching the culmination of this, that or the other subject, motif or artform.

These thoughts — about the role of representation and the reach of history, of how art gains strength and credence from an immersion in both — were brought to mind when looking at Chris Duncan’s sculptures and drawings. You can peg them, if you’d like. Duncan’s materials — scrapyard remnants and oddments of printed materials — place the work in the traditions of welded steel sculpture and collage. His process recalls the improvisatory aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism. You can trot out as influences Julio Gonzalez, David Smith, Richard Stankiewicz and, if the flitting cadences and scabbled marks of *Menhirs and Pineapples* (2009) are an indication, Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly. In each case, you’d be right. Duncan is an abstract artist working in Modernist idioms.

But that’s not to say Duncan spins the wheels of established canons or that he’s a purist. Labels sell Duncan short. Like any artist of wide-ranging ambition, serious intent and significant accomplishment, he knows that tradition is energized by how thoroughly it is honored and by how relentlessly it is questioned. What’s remarkable about Duncan’s work is that it simultaneously elides and welcomes a head-spinning array of associations.

Firlefan (2010), an ecstatic accumulation of what looks to be leftover plumbing supplies, has the declamatory presence of an African fetish figure and the uncompromising majesty of Easter Island's stone effigies. *Hard Bop* (2010) brings to mind the high drama and roiling torsion typical of Michelangelo. Like the Italian master, Duncan channels the art of antiquity, particularly that of Greece. Ignore at your own peril the heroic undercurrent and roughhewn sinew defining *For C.M.* (2010) or *Idle Idol* (2006); it's impossible. Elsewhere, Duncan evokes resources that are less noble though similarly energetic; in the works-on-paper, especially, he creates vortexes of rhythm as rambunctious as a prime Warner Brothers cartoon.

Given these comparisons, you might conclude that Duncan is a figurative artist dressed in abstract garb. All sculpture refers to the figure one way or another; the medium's emphasis on mass, volume and actual space guarantees a fairly direct analogue. Certainly, freestanding monoliths – a recurring characteristic of Duncan's art – serve as ready-made symbols for the human form. But Duncan's pieces, whether crafted from concrete, bronze or steel, do more than glance off the body; they personify it with uncanny specificity and unmistakable gusto. Duncan re-imagines the figure – and, given the peacock-like strut of *Tattoo* (2009), animal life – with a profound understanding of its intricacies and, more important, its vitality.

Duncan's art is peculiarly visceral in character. There's an abiding sense that *Hard Bop*, say, or *Salem*, with its lyrical unfurling of appendages, has been shaped from the inside out. Their growth and metamorphosis occur, as it were, right before our eyes. *For C.M.* is particularly unsettling in how this transformation has been rendered in slow motion. This "internal" quality is reinforced by the artist's unfettered use of materials. Duncan is unapologetic about letting the nuts-and-bolts of his work retain their integrity – and often they literally *are* nuts-and-bolts.

Part of the pleasure we derive from *Grand Canal* (2009) stems from its piecemeal construction and recycling of mechanical fittings. Duncan's ingenuity is, in this regard, inescapable, ingratiating and fun. But ingenuity has to serve a higher purpose. Art is nothing if it doesn't embrace life and this is where Duncan proves himself a sculptor of no small gifts. What's remarkable about *Grand Canal* is less its crafting – though that is essential, of course, to the work's realization – but the fact that it pirouettes. Here is a sculpture that *moves*. The visual arts are static only to the extent that an artist fails to animate his materials. Duncan brings to fruition this longstanding truth with consummate authority.

In important ways, then, each piece is a verb. Whether they do so with roughhewn calm (*Apsara*, 2008) or with supernatural menace (*Genie*, 2008), the sculptures assert themselves with palpable, if often understated, muscle. They flex, stretch, ascend, tilt and, in *Shaken Not Stirred* and *Scaffolding* (both 2009), storm with impatience. Living with a Duncan would, you feel, be a challenge – the things just don't sit still. Then again, that's the hallmark of significant art: A refusal to be cowed by permanence.

That's why arguments pitting representation against abstraction are moot, if not altogether pointless. Slipping out from under dogma, art insists on opening up possibilities we're unlikely to realize when left to our own devices. Suzanne Langer, a mid-twentieth century philosopher fascinated by aesthetics, posited that a work of art encompasses more than the artist knows. Duncan understands this essential paradox. He's attuned to prerogatives simultaneously of his own making and bigger than he can imagine. This goes some way in illuminating the invigorating nature of his unruly and magisterial art.

(c) 2010 Mario Naves

Essay for catalogue accompanying an exhibition of Chris Duncan's drawings and sculptures at Union College.