

Elie Nadelman

20 March – 25 April, 2015

opening reception on Friday, 20 March, 7-9 pm

Galerie Buchholz is proud to announce the first solo exhibition of plaster and papier-mache sculptures, along with works on paper, by Elie Nadelman (1882 Warsaw – 1946 New York). This is the first solo exhibition of works by the artist in Germany since Nadelman's 1923 exhibition at Galerie Flechtheim in Berlin.

Excerpts from: Klaus Kertess, *"Child's Play: The Late Work of Elie Nadelman"*, Artforum International, March 1985, Volume XXIII No. 7, pp. 64-67:

"[...] The 1929 stock market crash brought an end not only to the breathless glamour Nadelman had helped to ritualize and had occasionally satirized but also to his own baronial bohemian lifestyle. The loss of his wife's fortune and the dwindling commissions and sales of his own work now ruled out the luxuries of marble, bronze, and highly skilled assistants. If Nadelman was not forced to join a soup line, he did have to sell his town house studio in Manhattan and withdraw to his Victorian manse and studio in Riverdale, where he set up a kiln and worked primarily in terra cotta. After 1930, he retired from the public art arena, refusing most requests to participate in group or solo exhibitions. In 1935, Nadelman was forced to begin selling his vast collection of European and American crafts and folk art and to give up his studio and kiln. (He had been a pioneer appreciator and collector of Americana.) From 1935 to his death in 1946, he worked out of a back room of his house and focused his hands primarily on the modeling of some 500 (maybe more) Plastolene figurines which were then cast in plaster from expertly made molds. Several hundred of these are now eerily laid out in rows on tables, in the room they were fashioned in. The dandy stripped nearly bare might have been upset by his losses, but he was not one to succumb to depression, capital or mental.

More than a response to his reduced means, Nadelman's plasters are a response to his lifelong preoccupation with Greek sculpture and the vastly varied panoply of popular arts and crafts, ranging from unique, highly crafted objects to mass-produced kitsch. Nadelman was an artist who rejected Modernism's alienation and specialization; retaining high respect for craft and the continued validity of Greek culture, he saw no schism between high and low art. When he visited Munich in 1904, he was simultaneously smitten with the dolls at the Bavarian National Museum and the Greek sculpture at the Glyptothek. His own collection included European and American dolls, as well as toys ranging from miniature paper cutouts to cast-iron banks.

The late work turned not to the Classical figures of the Temple of Aegina which had inspired the honed-down harmony and clarity of many of his early heads (ca. 1910) but to the more baroque flow of drapes and curves found in Hellenistic sculpture – specifically Tanagra figurines of the third century B.C. to the second century A.D. (first excavated in the 1870s). These figurines themselves are dolls of sorts, having served as inexpensive domestic ex-votes for the local populace. Besides gods and goddesses, they frequently portrayed dancers, acrobats, and females in intimate conversation- all subjects dear to Nadelman.

In an earlier quartet of terra cottas representing the "Four Seasons" (ca. 1912), Nadelman retained the svelte elongation and fluted drapes so typically Tanagran; but, in the late plasters, this elegance is increasingly converted into the large-beaded bulbousness frequently found in dolls (nor can cherubs be forgotten). As they move forward in time, from the '30s into the '40s, they move backward in age, from mute, mannerly maturity to agitated precocious puberty. The chronology of this progression/regression remains somewhat vague since Nadelman was prone to return to and re-do earlier work, and almost never dated (or titled) anything.

It was Nadelman's intention to cast his figurines in inexpensive editions; but this intention, perhaps too late, perhaps too early, was never realized. That he regarded the plasters as finished works in themselves is clear from the drawing with pencil and file that is frequently found on individual figures, as well as from the occasional use of varnish to change the surface. When Nadelman himself cast more than one figure from the same mold, changes were generally wrought upon each after being retrieved from casting. The master craftsman so fluent in the relative permanence of marble, bronze, and wood now exploited, almost exclusively, the flaky transience of plaster.

Plaster was hardly unfamiliar to Nadelman. Throughout most of his life, he made full-scale plaster models which became first the progenitors, then the ghosts of their replications in marble, wood, or bronze. Procedures had not been Nadelman's paramount concern; they, like the figures they constructed, were subjugated to the abstract harmonics of form and the articulation of volume. While Nadelman sought to unite the canter of gravity of his forms with that of their material, truth to materials and revelation of procedures no more obsessed him than they had the Greeks. As the Greeks saw fit to paint on marble, Nadelman was prone to paint on bronze or pencil on plaster. But now, when plaster was elevated from the material of the model to that of the end product, Nadelman increasingly exploited materials and procedures, pushing them toward greater visual reciprocity with volume, form, and image.

High polish and virtuoso finish had already given way to greater simplicity and directness of means in a series of near-life-size busts and full figures executed in papier-maché or plaster electrolyzed with a thin membrane of bronze ("galvano-plastiques", he named them) completed in the mid and late '20s. The buxom and bawdy ripeness of female circus performers and burlesque queens is transformed into pulsing pneumatic volumes with minimally articulated gestures and features congealing in the overall flow of contour. The surface of the galvano-plastiques is not suppressed in sleek smoothness but enlivened with cross-hatching file marks; the edges of the busts frequently reveal rough layers of plaster and bronze – a top-hatted man is even punningly denied the top plane of his hat. At once indebted to the drawings of Georges Seurat and to toyland, these works have an Olympian, placid amplitude which could be violated neither by the extreme inflation committed upon them, in marble, posthumously (at the New York State Theater in Lincoln Center), nor by the extreme miniaturization committed by Nadelman himself, in the 1930s, first in terra cotta, then later in plaster. In heights ranging from about 6 to 9 inches, the plasters recapitulate the plump volumes of their immediate predecessors as well as mixing and blending with the sleeker proportions and configurations of Tanagra ancestors – nor are the sculptures of Classical Greece and Michelangelo without their occasional proponents. With his customary discreet irony, Nadelman became the archeologist of himself.

Nadelman's self-excavation mocks and mimes the antiquity he sought so singlemindedly to validate. The figurines of the mid '30s are willed fragments that preempt and imitate the fracturing acts of time. Almost all the figures assume standing poses but none are self-supporting; occasionally devoid of a limb or two, blurry of feature, and all but naked in their whiteness, they imitate Greek paint-stripped marble fragments while revealing plaster's powdery brittleness. A number of figures have had their features totally erased by large diagonal file marks which invade the molded plaster's softness and give greater scale to the galvano-plastique's crosshatchings. While all the figures are emphatically female, the sleek volume of their erectness and the prominence given the heads, frequently topped with variants of Tanagra draped, peaked headgear, often give them phallic gestalt that mirrors art's androgyny – Venus and Priapus envelop and become each other.

Amorphous fragments that they are, each of these figurines is Visually whole and complex in form and content. The full volumes are never static or cumbersome but are lightened by gracefully tapered limbs and set in slow motion by the curves and twists that flow sinuously out of and into the central volume. The homogenous blur of near abstractness is counterpointed and enlivened by a shorthand of gesture and detail which gives each figure incisive personality and specificity. A flick of material is here a smile, there a coy leer. With only the slightest change of angle, a lightly raised arm bends from maternal welcome in one figure, to a dancer's self-absorption and propulsion in another, to flirtatious beckoning in yet another. The minute gestures of his fingers made visible in tiny pokes for eyes, the kneaded bundling of tightly curled hair, the pulling out and pinching of limbs and headgear all give the figures the real scale of the hand that drew their forms from the malleable Plastolene. Like most of Nadelman's work, these forms are given life and cohesiveness by the relatively shallow articulation of the surface which turns the form into a unified volumetric membrane. Deep modeling would emphasize the density of mass and impede the fluid clarity of contour and rhythm. The reduced rhythmic simplicity of the basic form propels each figurine into airborne monumentality to become a goddess of sleight of hand.

Many of the figurines take on the chubby proportion of dolls, and become beckoning baby bacchantes. The visible seams of the mold's closure and the features seemingly blurred in the flow of material into the mold blend Antique grace with the honest directness of many of the turn-of-the-century cast-iron toys and banks in Nadelman's own collection. [...] From around 1940 till Nadelman's death in 1946, the baby bacchantes shed most vestiges of antiquity to become increasingly contemporary and brazen, in pose and process. These delinquent dolls strut, pout, and posture in a world whose gods and goddesses now beam down from the heights of Hollywood. [...] Shirley Temple playing Mae West playing a ruin of a Tanagra figure, [...].

Nadelman was an icon-maker in an age of iconoclasm. He enveloped and ritualized the vapors of reverie with the sonorous rhythms of his volumes to form figurative receivers and transmitters of dreams. Dolls are mirrors that simultaneously reflect the daydreams of age and youth; in Nadelman's hands (and ours) they become ideal art surrogates. These dolls have a far less conclusive form than was generally Nadelman's want. Like the age they represent, these figurines, with their top-heavy plumpness and surface inconclusiveness, embody and reveal the trials and tribulations of the urge to form. The back of each is a rough pile of kneadings – a mass of matter which marks the beginning and which has only gradually and partially yielded to the fingers' push, pull, and pinch to emerge in a blur of face and torso flowing precariously stubby legs. The economy of gesture, both of the forming and the formed figure, effloresces out of incompleteness into figures of disarming individuality. They need only to be turned slightly to return to lumpenness. Like the starlets it seeks to embody, the plaster soaks up and responds to light. Suppressed features and profiles are flooded with expression and definition when turned into the light; they flicker in vagueness when forced to retreat into shade.[...]"

1909 Nadelman's first exhibition, at Galerie E. Druet, Paris. / 1910 the magazine Camera Work publishes a text by Nadelman. / 1911 exhibition at Wm. B. Paterson Gallery in London; Helena Rubinstein buys entire show. / 1914 moves to New York. / 1915 the magazine International Studio publishes first English language article on his art by Martin Birnbaum. / 1915 exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz' 291 Gallery in New York. / 1917 exhibition at Scott & Fowles, New York. / Friendship with Marcel Duchamp and the Stettheimer sisters, especially with Ettie Stettheimer. Nadelman is depicted in Florine Stettheimer's paintings "Picnic at Bedford Hills", 1918 and "Lake Placid", 1919. A sculpture by Nadelman can be seen in Florine Stettheimer's painting "Flowers with Aphrodite", c. 1915. Nadelman is also mentioned in Ettie Stettheimer's novel "Love Days" (1923). Nadelman buys the mansion Alderbrook, in Riverdale, outside of New York. / 1929 following the Wall Street crash, in which Nadelman loses most of his fortune, relocates permanently to Riverdale. / 1948 Lincoln Kirstein organizes the exhibition "The Sculpture of Elie Nadelman" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. / 1966 the sculptor H.C. Westermann (1922-1981) dedicates a sculpture to Nadelman, "Homage to American Art (Dedicated to Elie Nadelman)". / 1984 the photographer Peter Hujar (1934-1987) visits Alderbrook and photographs Nadelman's plaster sculptures in the garden surrounding the mansion.