

Temporal Vertigo

“It was precisely that feeling of temporal vertigo or of time annihilated that is provoked by holding in one’s hands objects that still speak in muffled tones of their past that first aroused my curiosity...” Javier Marías

As with forgotten photos that fall from the pages of books we absentmindedly pull from the shelf, the flash of resemblance between a cousin and a long dead grandmother, or the resurgence of the libidinal powers of our adolescence coursing through the latest fashion, which quotes the clothing of 15 years ago, the past has a way of returning to us. And when it returns in this unexpected way it does so with a force that threatens to undo the continuum of time. One of the terms for this experience is temporal vertigo, the result of which is the erasure of the coordinates of time that are anxiously maintained by instrumental reason to narrate official histories and to expedite the commerce that underwrites those histories. In Nicolas G. Miller’s recent sculptural works this disorienting encounter with the past figures with exceptional density.

Take the example of fashion as named above. It is well known, for instance, that the designers of fashionable garments work citationally. The more commercially prolific ones quote systematically: they rely upon fashion forecasters who enlist algorithms to predict the coming fashion by calculating the cyclical return of previous fashions. The broad shoulders of 1949 might align by secret affinity with the plaids of 1994 to produce a textured silhouette that will feel unmistakably contemporary in 2024. The very definition of “the contemporary” finds its condition of possibility in this vertiginous reference to non-contemporaneous eras that fashion folds into all its decisions. Giorgio Agamben writes on this experience of temporality,

“Contemporariness is a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.”

Miller takes the non-chronometric adherence to the contemporary moment, as evidenced by fashion, as the starting point of his work. The two statuettes the artist has sculpted for his exhibition at Castle have been sculpted in bronze. Their figures are frozen, mid stride, while promenading on the cat-walk of a fashion show. These figures walk not on generalized runways but on two specific (and now comparatively obscure) designers from the year 2000. The male figure wears Yohji Yamamoto, while

his female counterpart wears Hussein Chalayan. Approaching the figures to marvel at the impeccably sculpted details of their outfits quickly reveals to the viewer the fact that their bodies are not generic mannequins, not those typologies whom Agamben calls “sacrificial victims of a faceless god.” Rather, they are two stars of the silver-screen: Lupe Vélez and Everett Sloane. While their clothes are from the year 2000, their bodies (including their hair styles) are from the 1940s, and their form, the bronze statuette, from the 19th century. However, their combinatorial synthesis, made possible by the digital computer and the electronic resonance stylus, date from the period just after the first decade of the 21st century.

The way that the past lies in wait for a present that fashion or technology will reclaim reveals an alternate modality of history, one that becomes clearer once we dare to separate history from its fantasies of uni-directional progress or progressive doom. Vertigo, after all, is not limited to the individual experience of time, but haunts collective temporalities as well. Take for instance the history of bronze sculpture in which Miller participates. Though he exacts his precise morphologies of actors and clothing on the electronic interface of a stylus in software simulation of sculpting, his finished cast bronzes forge surreptitious links with precisely those moments in the history of sculpture that anticipated motion pictures, and, of course, the virtualities that have emerged from them. We might recall the proto-cinematic qualities of Rodin’s *The Burghers of Calais*, as one such link. As Jan Tumlir has recently noted,

“In some of Rodin’s sculptures—*The Burghers of Calais*, for instance—you have a number of figures that are locked into a composition, and if you walk around that composition, you can in a sense reanimate their poses as though they were parts of a single movement. All of those various figures can be seen as stages in the movement of a single figure. And this is what makes the work compelling from a formal perspective, what activates it.”

The example of Rodin also serves to remind us of the significance for Miller, as an artist who sculpts his own work rather than relying upon a battalion of assistants, the material importance of researching the bronze foundries of 19th century France. Clearly, this research into technique does not function as a return to traditional values—a fact attested to in the choice of his subjects and their modern adornment. His research led him first to the ateliers of Susse Frères, and then Arthur Goldscheider, and with them the attendant introduction into art history of the multiple and the copy—spacial sources of vertigo that correspond with the temporal vertigo described above. Moreover, his sculptures chart an even more specific history, one that is not merely concerned with the duplicate but of the virtual doubling of the human being. The moment that duplicates of the lifelike human figure became possible in inert material, as they did in the foundries of Paris of the of the nineteenth century, the desire seemed to immediately for to capture the figure through a process that technologically simulated the sculpting of the human person. As Patrick Crowley

has shown in his latest research, the attempt to virtualize the production of sculptural likeness, by means of the synthesis of captured photographic data, dates to the 1850s, in the studio of François Willème. Crowley writes,

“As early as 1859, Willème began to envision what he called “mechanical sculpture” that could deconstruct subjects into a set of constituent profiles or slices that could then be rejoined and synthesized to form a coherent whole. A subject would stand on a platform in a large rotunda, illuminated by a glass dome. An interconnected series of twenty-four cameras arranged along the perimeter of the room would then capture the subject from twenty-four different angles simultaneously. These images were developed as glass negatives that were then projected onto screens, making them easily scalable. Assistants would then trace the profiles of the subject on the screen using a pantograph equipped with a blade or stylus on the other end that would transfer the information into a block of clay that was rotated as the assistant worked on the subsequent profiles.”

The fact that this method of capturing three-dimensional likeness is today the dominant one in Hollywood Special Effects is no accident to Miller’s work. As a consequence of this old-new technology: the possibility that aging movie actors might be reanimated long after death. Such speculations feature in many overheard conversations around this city, Tinseltown, where his sculptures have been made and are currently on view.

Some objects, while devoid of the historical sophistication of Miller’s sculptures, still register these relations between anticipatory past and citational present on their surface. One of the consequences of looking carefully at Miller’s work is a heightened sensitivity to such objects. To name but one, an example that is closest to hand: The Screen Actors Guild Award statuette. It is cast in the same foundry in Los Angeles as Miller’s statuettes and given the fiction of age by the same patina painter. From behind its patinaed mask we await the stars of the future.

Jeffrey Stuker, 2022