

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

PHILADELPHIA

Robert Taplin at Gallery Joe

Robert Taplin's generally small-scale bronzes depict the human figure, presented with few exceptions in attitudes that rehearse moments of social intercourse, some of them extreme. The modeling of the figures, most no taller than a hand, is fluid and straightforward, with the emphasis placed on the hang of the flesh rather than any idealized bulge of muscle.

My first reaction was that here was a Leon Golub making miniature bronzes. Several of the works deal with institutionalized cruelty, implied or explicit: an African-American suspect being handcuffed by a cop while another policeman waits nearby; a frontal tableau including a soldier, a frightened child and a prostitute stumbling on her platform shoes.

Other works reveal a more overtly political interest. In 1990 a crowd is shown toppling a Leninlike statue (itself only 6 inches high). The larger (approx. 4-foot-high), slyly iconic work called *Chinese General* shows a near-life-size bust of the titular figure resting on a bronze pillow on the seat of a bronze chair. The leader, one feels, has been cut down to size.

For me, the small scale had a distancing effect. Some works, such as *The Child was Saved*, which shows a crazed man holding a small child out an apartment window, seem lifted from the tabloids, whether print or television. Seeing the scenes fleshed out in three dimensions does make us, the image consumers, look more carefully. But

the smallness also seems a formal equivalent of the distancing flatness of a photo or video image. At this size, faces are reduced to footnotes, and bodies to telegraphic stances.

Two works here carry a more visionary import, with the visionary elements placed, cannily, in the purview of one of the figures represented. In *Great Blazing Shoulders Buddha Appearing to My Wife*, a blandly beneficent Buddha stands on the woman's supine body, serpentlike flames issuing from his torso. Stranger than this is *Blind Man*, which shows a red-tinged protuberance growing from the subject's forehead, a sort of hypertrophied third eye, which, one imagines, compensates for the dysfunction of the other two. These works may stand as a

bridge from Taplin's earlier, more surreal and openly symbolic figurative sculpture.

This energetic body of work seems to be struggling to tune its stance toward symbolism, allegory and ambiguity. Works such as 1990 appear to be as forthrightly about what they represent as the modeling is about the human forms. The symbolism of the arrest tableau, titled *Serve*, seems reducible to a fairly explicit comment on injustice.

It's the works like *Soldier*, *Child*, *Whore* which strike the note I think Taplin is aiming for. Here each figure, like a hieroglyph, stands for something and is also, simply and humanly, itself. Together the hieroglyphs form a phrase which is not to be quickly decoded.

—Miriam Seidel



Robert Taplin: *Great Blazing Shoulders Buddha Appearing to My Wife*, 1993, bronze, 12 by 6 by 8 inches; at Gallery Joe.