

# Middle-Aged Gods and Giant Babies

BY CYNTHIA NADELMAN

**Sculptors are taking realism into other dimensions: the weird, the uncanny, and the monstrous. They are hyping the imperfections of the figure, chopping it up, painting it, and even putting clothes on it**

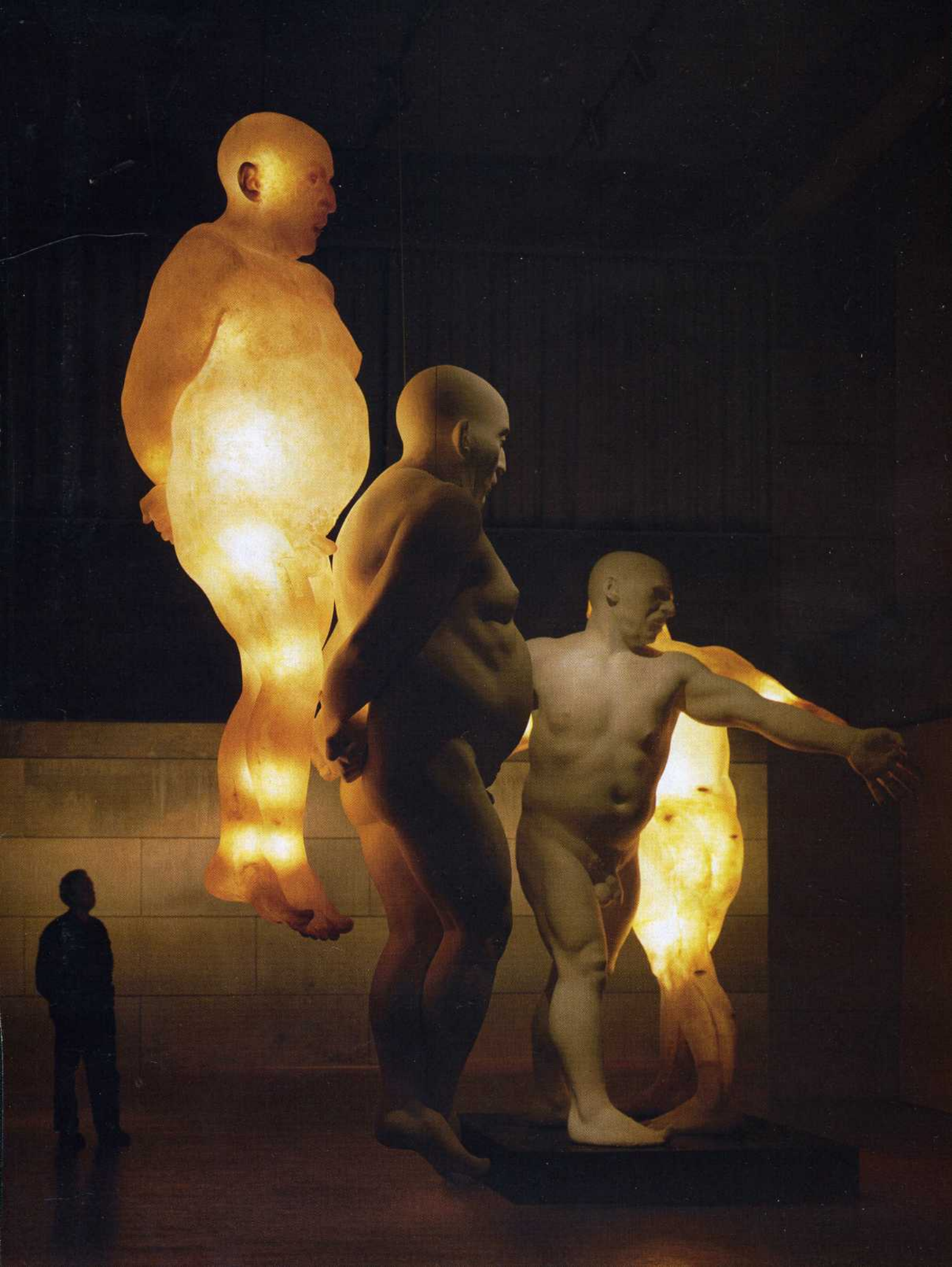
**H**anging from the ceiling and, in one case, standing on giant feet, five pairs of twin figures—all naked and bending or twisting middle-aged men of solid girth—went on display last January in the darkened space of Wesleyan University's Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery in Middletown, Connecticut. The work, by Robert Taplin, provided the gallery's illumination, with light emanating from inside the five fiberglass units (their twins were made of white plaster). Titled *The Five Outer Planets*, the figures (which were later seen at Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn and then at Yellow Bird Gallery in Newburgh, New York) represented not only the artist, whose body was the model, but also Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, arranged as in an orrery—by size and position in the solar system—and posed to suggest the Roman gods they embody. Taplin, a frequent writer on sculpture, had no figure training and started out as a constructivist using metals. Today he models his exclusively figural works in clay, then casts them in plaster, cement, bronze, or fiberglass, often painting them. This year he is teaching introductory sculpture at Yale.

Also last January, at Mary Boone in New York, British artist Marc Quinn showed "The Complete Marbles" to widespread interest. These white Carrara-hewn marbles depicting nude figures with missing limbs—either congenital or as a result of amputation—were based on body casts of the subjects. Quinn's works fit into his larger project of examining the external and internal makeup of the body and its parts. His next series involved bronze-cast cuts of meat, while an earlier work was a portrait of his own head made of his frozen blood. The marbles explored esthetic issues, playing with the way we have come to perceive antique sculpture and statuary. In our imaginations, we fill in visually for the "phantom limbs" of ancient works and see their lack of color—a far cry from their painted beginnings—as somehow the purest form of sculpture. As Quinn has put it, his works "appear to be fragments but are, of course, portraits of whole people."

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**Robert Taplin, Saturn (left pair) and Jupiter, from *The Five Outer Planets*, 2001-4, installed in Wesleyan University's Zilkha Gallery.**

JOHN GROO/EZRA AND CECILE ZILKHA GALLERY, WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY, MIDDLETOWN





Viewers may supply the "phantom limbs" of Marc Quinn's marble *Helen Smith*, 2000.



Patricia Cronin, *Memorial to a Marriage* (detail), 2000–2, marble installation at Woodlawn Cemetery.



Keith Edmier, *Farrah Fawcett* (detail), 2000, marble. Fawcett, in turn, portrayed Edmier in bronze.

What these exhibitions had in common was a new way of looking at real figures, or bodies; at issues of nakedness and nudity; the real and the ideal; in short, at life and art. As Taplin says of his own works, they "set classicism at war with anticlassicism." He refers to his figures as "middle-aged gods," adding, "my nudes are usually naked." These works all took as models uncelebrated, "imperfect" humans.

Artist Patricia Cronin made a marble tomb portrait of herself and her partner, artist Deborah Kass, lying together in bed and placed it at their eventual final resting place at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York. British artist Sean Henry, who will show at New York's Forum Gallery next fall, placed an oversize painted-bronze sculpture of a blue-jeaned man on an outdoor catafalque in London.

One of Quinn's marbles will go to the next level this spring, when a 15-foot enlargement of one of his subjects—the eight-months-pregnant Alison Lapper, who was born without arms and with abnormally short legs—is placed temporarily on the fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square, in a city-backed program siting contemporary art on the long-empty stone marker. Lapper, an artist herself, who is now the mother of a healthy boy, says, "It is so rare to see disability in everyday life—let alone naked, pregnant, and proud."

**I**n 2002 Keith Edmier made apologetic and clear-eyed contribution to New York's public statuary when he created *Emil Dobbelsstein* and

*Henry J. Drope*, 1944, a pair of three-quarter-life-size bronze statues depicting his two grandfathers in their World War II uniforms. Commissioned for the Public Art Fund's "In the Public Realm" series and included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial's outdoor segment, they were temporarily placed on granite pedestals at the 59th Street entrance to Central Park. Ordinary GIs, they stood at informal attention, each with his hands lightly clasped at the waist. They are sensitive evocations, standing metaphorically in the place where family history meets public history as well as art history. One of the grandfathers lived to old age; the other's history ended during the time depicted here; he committed suicide while in the army. In spite of their deliberate "child" size, Edmier, who once worked on special effects in Hollywood, says he was interested in the idea that the "pieces would be camouflaged, would blend into the history of that kind of memorial sculpture." (The artist's recent work, on view at Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York until the 22nd of this month, eschews the human figure for other forms of what Edmier calls the "actual," such as plant and marine life and lava.)

Edmier's earlier project was a collaboration with Farrah Fawcett, on whom he had had a fan's crush as a child. Intending only to sculpt the actress (who studied figure sculpting in college) in marble, he was pleased when she said she wanted to model him, in turn, for a bronze sculpture. Lynn Zelevansky, curator and head of the department of modern and contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, included the resulting works in the museum's "Contemporary Projects" series. As she puts it, Edmier "excavates his own life" for subjects, "mixing personal history and culture. The emotional content is very interesting." As for Fawcett, according to Zelevansky, "she could barely leave the thing alone."

Edmier's grandfathers' uniforms were sculpted, but in an early version the soldiers had actual wool uniforms. This use of real clothing, harking back to Degas's sculpture of a dancer with a cloth tutu, brings up the issue of verisimilitude in realist sculpture. When does realism include real clothing and genuine hair? When does it involve paint? And is it about verisimilitude at all? Edmier says he aims to have things "feel real." Eric Goulder, who showed unpainted bronze, marble, and cast-glass sculptures at Earl McGrath Gallery in Los Angeles in October, says simply, "It's sculpture," putting to rest notions of the copy. He is working on a 9-to-12-foot-high bronze sculpture of a standing, headless man. The man has a raised arm, and, as Goulder says, "The sculpture doesn't make sense sculpturally with a head." The head isn't even missed when one looks at the piece from certain directions. It could be behind the arm. Or below the shoulder. So much for reality.

"Being realist doesn't mean you copy real life," says sculptor Cynthia Eardley, but, she continues, "if it's a portrait, it needs color." About her recent series of smaller-than-life-size, painted-Hydrocal busts—composites of real people, which were shown in 2002 at Franklin Parrasch Gallery in New York—she says, "Each portrait is a synthesis of the personal and the general, an intimate archetype, in a way." Eardley has taught courses at the New York Academy of Art for some ten years, ranging from narrative sculpture to sculpting the *écorché*, or anatomical figure. She is invigorated by the subject of composition in sculpture, which she has also taught. "If you take compositions from the past and put them into a contemporary context, you get interesting results," she says.

Living and working near Ground Zero, like many artists, Eardley was profoundly affected by 9/11. One of her especially vivid busts, *Witness 1*, is a depiction of a young woman who might have worked at the World Trade Center, whose face registers shock and horror. She is painted blue, white, and yellow, the colors of the sky on the morning of 9/11. The sculpture takes the commonplace into another dimension.

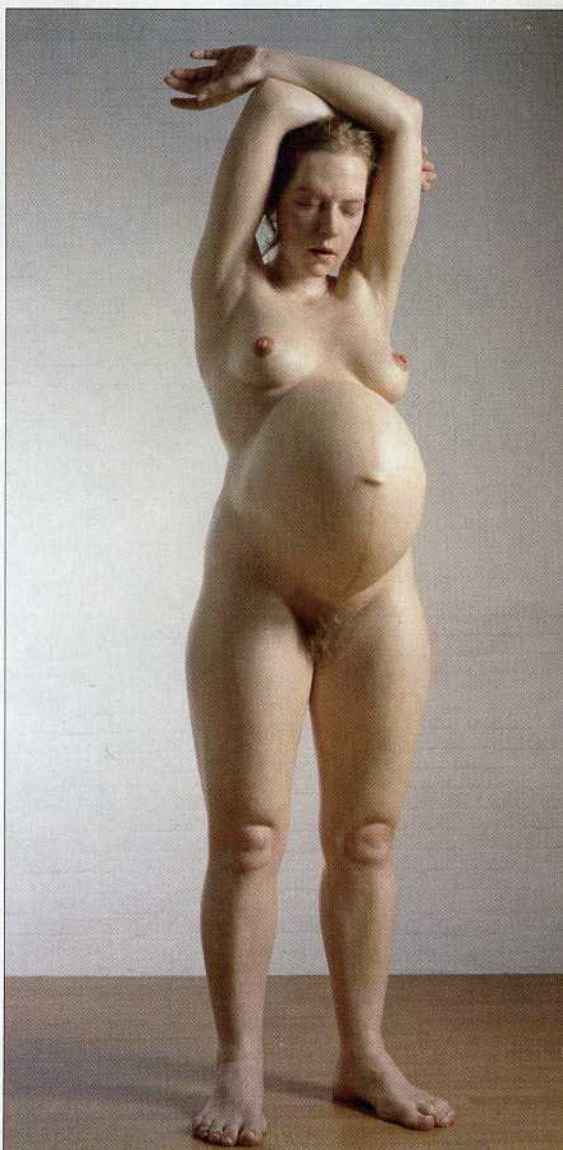
That dimension might be called "uncanny" or "monstrous," words that have recently surfaced in exhibitions touching on the subject of realism. Artist Mike Kelley curated an exhibition at the Tate Liverpool last spring titled "The Uncanny," in which he explored the phenomenon of polychrome sculpture with respect to Freud's elucidation of uncanniness as a terrifying feeling produced by a "hidden, familiar thing." In the case of realist sculpture, this feeling would turn on an object's ability to raise doubts about whether it is as alive as the thing it represents. Judy Fox and British artist Ron Mueck were among Kelley's inclusions, along with Quinn and Edmier. Mueck, like Edmier, has a background in special effects for movies. In Mueck's case, the results are hyperreal-looking bodies, from babies to his dead father—with or without real clothes or other real-life accoutrements—that are often over-large or undersize in scale, or in anatomically impossible positions. They subscribe to the stubble model, in which every hair is genuine rather than painted or ignored. In the catalogue produced for Mueck's spring 2003 exhibition at London's National Gallery, curator Susanna Greeves wrote: "Confronting a work by Ron Mueck is an uncanny experience (and locking up a dark gallery full of them, alone, a downright eerie one)."

Mueck and Quinn are among those who have brought wide visibility to figurative sculpture. Nina Levy, who shows at New York's Feigen Contemporary as well as at Metaphor

**Cynthia Eardley's**  
*Witness (2)*,  
2002–4,  
painted  
Hydrocal,  
was inspired  
by 9/11.



**Ron Mueck's**  
*Pregnant Woman*, 2002,  
mixed media,  
is more than  
eight feet tall.



Contemporary Art in Brooklyn, where her work can be seen this spring, says, "It's nice not to be horribly out of style." Levy, who has done work for New York's Madame Tussauds wax museum, brings mordant humor to the genre. Using her own head and body as models, she has created parallel series of works—sculpture on its own and photographs in which she incorporates her sculpture, forming often-alarming juxtapositions. For example, in one of her photographs she features her own face with a sculpture of her head emerging from the mouth. Curator Nick Capasso, of the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts, says Levy is "one of a group of contemporary sculptors to render patently unreal things palpable and thus emotionally and allegorically true."

Levy's sculpture *Greeter* is a life-size painted figure of herself with an outlandish, toothy smile, a comment on the "artist's opening" syndrome, when faces become locked into smiles. "It was a metaphor for social insecurity," she says. Her work, much of which has been placed outdoors—where her body might seem to be throwing its giant head off a roof, for instance—is modeled in clay, then cast in a material such as polyester resin and painted naturalistically with automotive paint. Levy aims for what she calls "interpretive" or "hyped realism."

**Nina Levy's son, Archer Billow, liked the clay model for her seven-foot-high *Big Baby*, 2003. Mature viewers were disconcerted by its size.**

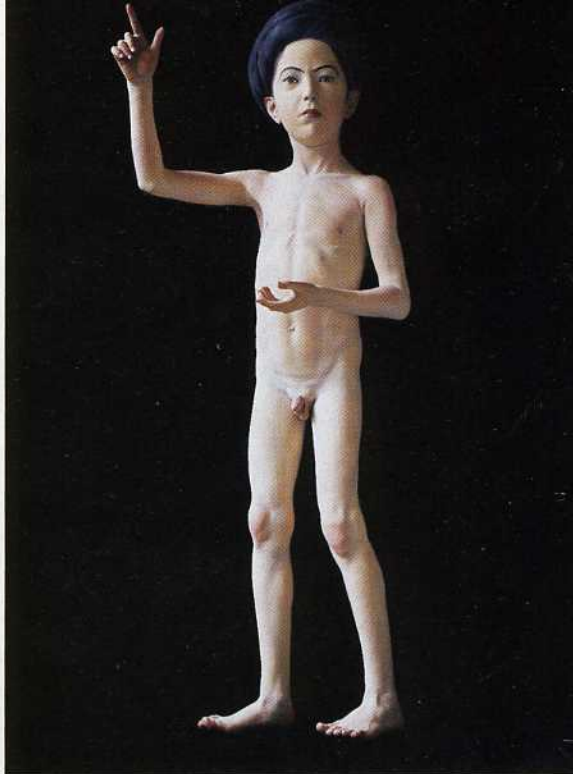
A group of her head portraits of art-world personalities, hanging at roughly head height—the way they would mingle at an art opening—will be featured at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in 2006, when the reopened museum inaugurates a series of exhibitions showcasing artists working in portraiture.

Sometimes realist sculpture elicits outrage or discomfort from viewers. When Levy installed a seven-foot-high baby outside the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, earlier this year, the local press reacted. Says Levy, deadpan, "They responded in a rather literal fashion."

Comments ranged from how cold the baby must have been during the winter, wearing only a diaper, to how the diaper seemed to need changing.

**W**hen Judy Fox, for whom babies have also been frequent subjects, worries about her work's becoming too realistic, she says, "I just jack up the contrivance." Trained at the graduate level as a conservator, she says that both the art history and the cross-cultural looking at art materials that were part of the training influence her approach. Fox models her first cast, by hand, in terra-cotta and then makes editions in Hydrocal or a similar material—all before meticulously painting them. Though she prefers sculpting to painting, she allows that the conservation training helped her learn to mix and match colors effectively. Focusing on the child versions of adult characters from myth, religion, and fairy tales ("I'm not really that interested in children," she protests), her work seems to be aging, as the sculptures progress from life-size toddlers to preteens. The occasional adult has appeared—ranging from a satyr eyeing her last installation of little girls to a show featuring a solo Krishna to an evolved, blond Venus of Willendorf, standing on her tiptoes, who will

**Judy Fox's *Ayatollah*, 2004, painted terra-cotta model. Fox is after mortal, not ideal, beauty.**



preside over Fox's next show of little boys at P-P-O-W in New York in February. The boys, each with an upraised arm, represent budding, generic power figures from different cultures.

Fox's exquisitely modeled and painted subjects are deliberate stereotypes. Viewing her work as a "cross between realism and idealism," Fox says, she aims for "visceral communication between the viewer and the piece." Gesture and pose come first, but she knows that—try as she might—she is doomed to misunderstand gestures from cultures other than her own. Fox draws her references from the well of art history, using real bodies as models. "People are attracted to flesh. The classical ideal is divine beauty. I'm going for mortal beauty," she says. She wants to prove wrong the attitude that prevailed as she was getting her art education, when "no one in contemporary art thought the figure could do anything profound."

Allowing for artists like Duane Hanson and John De Andrea; Robert Graham and Audrey Flack; Kiki Smith, John Ahearn, and Jeff Koons, who are frequently mentioned as precursors, the figure has been starved of respect until recent years. What seems more important than whether the figure is hand modeled or made from a body cast—an issue that will continue to be debated, especially as new methods of computer-aided reproduction become more common and affordable—is that the real is being taken seriously. From the traditionalist National Sculpture Society to the New York Academy of Art to the work of the more conceptually based Young British Artists and Whitney Biennial participants, one thread running through current realist sculpture seems to be the desire to enlarge the arena of acceptable subject matter. From nonideal body types—including the middle-aged and the elderly, as well as the disabled—to non-Western models, from celebrities to the societally marginalized and the socially insecure, the subjects seem endless. The methods, though varied, are more traditional, even more nostalgic, than the subject matter. This is news too. The impact may turn out to be of seismic significance, as the rumbling seems to be coming from deep within sculpture's core. ■