

Interval

The conditional monuments of David Robinson

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The conditional monuments of David Robinson

BRUCE VAN SLYKE



David Robinson, *Interval*, 2001. Detail. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Upon encountering the beast, one confronts a seemingly endless series of allegorical shifts: the mythical centaur, with uncharacteristic complacency, supports an equestrian, who sits astride his incredible mount with equally incredible slack insouciance. This complex set of relationships is soon overtaken by another, for the attitudes of the two figures are not merely equivalent — they are exact replications of one another. One is left to wonder not only who is leading whom, but to what end?

This equestrian monument deftly shakes the genre loose from its assumptions, making the horse and rider equal partners in an unfamiliar enterprise. It is an uncanny thing, familiar but made strange, that tugs one both backward to the Ur-world of a collective unconscious, and forward toward an ungraspable future. As the title *Interval* implies, this would-be monument commemorates a gap, some richly encoded pause of understanding. It alludes to something invisible or left back, though not necessarily empty, and it is this space surrounding the work that we must imagine if we are to come to terms with the piece itself.

Can history continue? Does culture still exist? Despite their unwieldiness, these questions stubbornly arise to form the cumulus of doubt that has invariably arched over the early diminutive sculptures of David Robinson. With the production of the large scale *Interval* Robinson has explicitly pressed the point by combining mythic association with monumental intention. Now

any contemplation of his work must penetrate this cultural/historical overcast, find some purchase on these questions, or skirt the significance to be found there.

Both myth and monument are unlikely grist for contemporary sculptural practice, embedded as they are in historical time. To resurrect the forms wholesale and without irony, as Robinson apparently does, is both extreme and extremely unlikely to succeed, and the unreasonableness of this proposition suggests some fundamental change in our attitude toward history since the heyday of allegorical sculptural representation. In the past century we have come to experience history as yet another resource available for exploitation, no longer as the envelope that contains our self-awareness and sheaths a culture that stretches backward and forward through time. History has become commercialized. It is now far more practical to us as a malleable and reactive material than as a rigid, though permeable, shell. If Robinson's past figures have struggled to maintain their position outside this protective structure, *Interval* is ideally and disquietingly suited to the new-found terrain.

Robinson plays upon our current ahistorical sensibility by engaging in a historically grounded traditional form — representational modelling — to allegorically express our alienation from any culturally defined past and future. Precisely because they are nearly forgotten, the conventions he challenges draw our attention to the corrosive relationship we now keep with the past, and with the idea of culture that is stretched by it and us. In resurrecting the form outside

of its extinct cultural milieu, Robinson has exploited its new availability to speak historically and, coincidentally, in opposition to globally culture-consuming capital.

Resurrecting the convention in the starkest light, Robinson's *Interval* makes use of the artisan's ability to create unique objects to address the defining aspect of the postindustrial work-a-day world: reproducibility. Reproducibility of text, sound, image, object and now life has multiplied and diluted the cultural contexts surrounding any given concept, freeing us, to some extent, from our bonds with history itself. World-culture, or "consumed culture" is rendering the social landscape an uncanny place, fit for narcissism and nihilism but little else. Is this the apocalypse our society so avidly conjures up to haunt our horizon? This theoretical day of judgement looms incessantly, and Robinson seems to suggest that we consider our options, if any, to escape its hypnotic pull.

In order to read the allegory represented by *Interval*, the viewer must adopt a stance within history, a position that would have seemed perfectly natural some few hundred years ago or in an imagined non-industrial culture, but one that is increasingly unpopular if not untenable in the globalized world. It seems we are safely within the capitalist regulated field of professional artistic activity only when we take a critical stance toward a specific history, whatever history, a stance that comes to locate itself outside history itself in the whatever-moment of discontinuity. The right to institutional critique is increasingly emptied of potency, standing the activists

among us on the high ground. Left or right as political terms are obviously and importantly moot within this discussion, as are race and religion, all rendered inert by the value of novelty. In this situation, the germane question is no longer "Whose history is it?" but "Can (this) history continue?"

The objective of Robinson's work is clearly not the glorification of a single past, but an ennobling of the human ability to maintain a past at all, one that is at once both cautionary and inspiring. His sculptures bear the marks of the progressive assault on cultural belief systems, but they equally acknowledge the flawed rationale of their forebears. The skeletal miniatures of *Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones* and *Unsolicited Proposal for a Public Monument* readily admit the disaster that befell them. Have they been forsaken in the desert or rightfully ignored in some urban plaza? Meanwhile, the sightless/seeing eyes of the centaur/rider superimpose their double vision upon all equestrian monuments that precede them. Given the chance, will the rider ever resolve the relationship with his mount, let alone his foe? Has he the chance? These works all speak from within the historical continuum, discredited as it is, with directness apt to measure the easily earned ironic distance we may now claim as a right under capitalism.

No matter what scale or situation, whether in public or private hands, these sculptures ask, impracticably, to be considered as monuments, for our dubious ability to maintain history is the condition upon which the works' monumentality is based, not their size or site. It is a quality that would be assumed within the logic of the monument, but its

Gabrièle Fontana, *Lame de fond*

ROSSITZA DASKALOVA

questioned existence in these works becomes part of their content of as well. They make do, humbled, bordering on irrelevance, unable to properly inhabit information-plenty, story-less time. Robinson's output to date has rarely faltered in its attempt to portray the contingency of subjectivity that is equally the task of many if not most contemporary artists. It is his insistence on historical continuity, on bracketing rupture, which puts him at odds with much current practice. His stance, it would seem, is as radical as it is conservative.

As in a myth, Robinson's sculptures appear to face long odds and a precarious fate. Inherently public sculpture in a privatized age, physical markers in an uncanny landscape, these misbegotten creatures of myth and history will succeed only through their ability to endure, drawing our attention to our own practical relationships with both our past and this present moment of discontinuity. We will never fully know these spectral and nomadic allegories, nor would we if they found legitimate sites upon which to claim the status of monuments proper. Their content attaches itself to this moment that stands both within and without history, the interval between ourselves and our cultural past. ■

Suite à une longue période de Recherche et de création en atelier, loin du regard de l'autre, l'artiste, pour ce projet récent, pousse plus loin l'exploration d'un nouveau matériau. Fontana, qui avait travaillé auparavant avec la terre cuite et ensuite avec la terre crue et séchée, explore l'univers du plâtre comme lieu de transplantation à l'intérieur duquel elle insuffle la sensation d'un premier contact et d'une véritable renaissance. « ... je tente d'accueillir la rupture et la perte, dit l'artiste. D'une certaine façon, je provoque ce que je redoute le plus. Face à cette situation, je cherche des solutions. Je compose avec mes peurs. »

Fontana explore ici la matière jusqu'à ses racines. Les deux matériaux essentiels sont la terre, qui nous ramène à la nature et à l'organique, et le plâtre, que l'on associe plutôt à des manifestations culturelles. Le plâtre sert habituellement à des travaux de maçonnerie. Dans l'œuvre de Fontana, il se présente comme un sol culturel immaculé, s'entrelace avec la terre noire et, de là, naît un jeu amoureux et singulier entre *Éros* et *Thanatos*. Deux matériaux hétérogènes dans un rapport fluctuant : soit que la terre émerge des profondeurs du plâtre, soit qu'elle s'enfonce en lui, soit qu'elle prenne le dessous en formant des plis lourds, épais, soit encore qu'elle le ronge ou se glisse et se dissipe sur ses surfaces. Un matériau laisse ses empreintes sur l'autre. Ils se transforment mutuellement, prennent une nouvelle identité et deviennent un tout dans l'ensemble de l'œuvre.

La mise en espace dans la galerie crée des tensions complexes sur des axes verticaux et horizontaux, et rend leur élasticité palpable. Plusieurs compositions, réunissant des fragments de diffé-



rentes formes et factures, sont posées sur le sol. Amas de neige fondante, vestiges du passé, matérialisations de structures spirituelles, croissances de la terre ou morceaux extirpés du mur, les composantes anticipent un mouvement qui n'est possible que dans le désir et l'imaginaire, révèlent une possible envolée dans des directions opposées de décollement et d'atterrissage qui se produisent en même temps et ne peuvent exister que dans l'œuvre.

« Le plâtre permet l'abstraction, note l'artiste. Je ne le rattache pas à une époque ou à un lieu particulier. Sa blancheur agit dans mon travail comme le vide de l'espace ou de la page blanche. Il s'offre, vierge, sans traces ni inscriptions, pas d'histoire. Le blanc est matière. Il "supporte" ce qui survient et accentue par son éclat l'importance de ce qui lui arrive, la rencontre avec une autre matière. Le blanc est lieu. »

Gabrièle Fontana compose et crée l'espace dans la matière. Le mouvement dans l'œuvre trahit les gestes posés dans le processus de création et rend l'expression transparente. À travers cette transparence, le spectateur

peut voir, vivre la création en y participant avec sa propre expérience. L'artiste sculpte sans pétrir le matériau. Elle laisse le plâtre s'écouler jusqu'au point où la décision d'arrêter cet écoulement s'impose. À ce moment, l'intervention est incisive, elle produit des formes droites et angulaires avec la surface lisse. Alternant le mouvement spontané, qui découle des pulsions provenant du matériau lui-même dans son état liquide, et le mouvement contrôlé par la main de l'artiste, Fontana capte la puissance de l'instant qui demeure vivante dans l'œuvre. Alors que le plâtre sèche vite, craque et s'effrite, elle laisse les empreintes de ces différents états se révéler.

L'artiste montre la plasticité du plâtre sous un angle qui éclaire en même temps la fragilité et la capacité de résistance du matériau, ainsi que sa douceur et sa dureté, sa fluidité, sa fixité et sa fébrilité. La rondeur de certaines formes est accentuée par l'angularité d'autres ; les surfaces poreuses et feuilletées rendent plus évidentes celles qui sont imperméables et polies. La force et la provocation se transforment

Gabrièle Fontana, *Lame de fond*, 2000. Détail : *Noyaux*. Plâtre, traces de terre noire, huile. Chaque élément : 47 x 35 cm. Photo : Richard-Max Tremblay.