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Trans-Formations

Il Catnevale, Eric Daudelin, Observatoire 4, Montreal.
September - October 12, 1996

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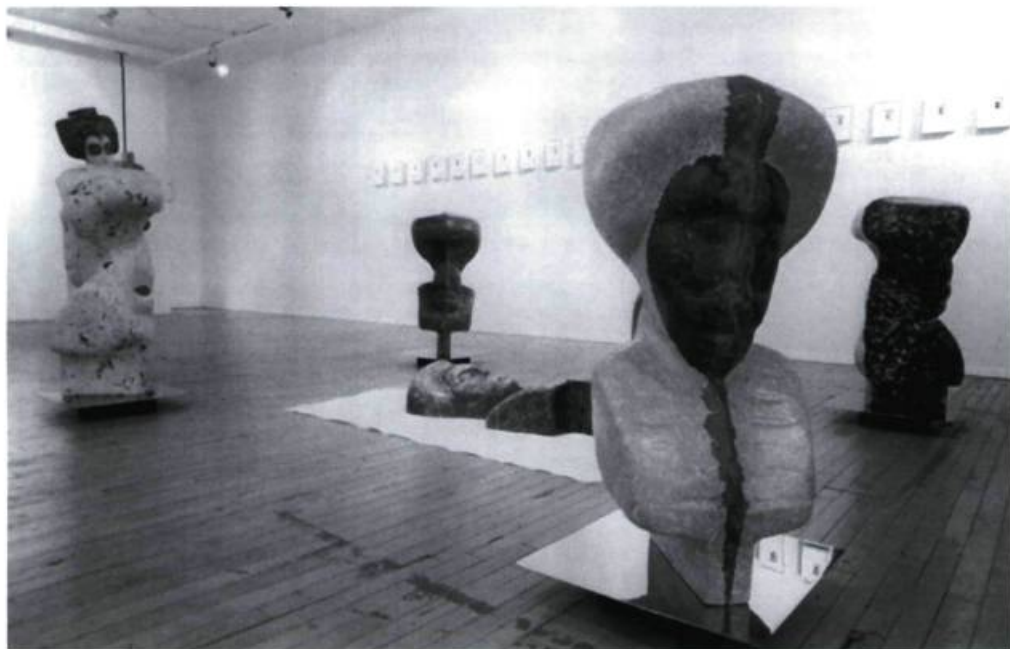
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MONTREAL TRANS-FORMATIONS

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Eric Daudelin, Il carnevale, africain, 1996.

The two hundred and fifty-three heads sculpted by Montreal artist Eric Daudelin are turned toward the eternal mystery of the mask and seem to reminisce on the role of its opaqueness, which is to reveal rather than conceal. A number of these heads are of large proportions and are made from newspapers in *papier maché*, then glazed, sometimes with a touch of colour. Male on one side and female on the other, they appear like three-dimensional spirals which draw the sign of infinity. Some of the pieces are placed on square mirrors which create the illusion of the endlessness of the spiral. Moreover, the meticulous interplay of black and white of the newsprint, alludes to the ying-yang sign.

The layering of the newspapers with which the artist creates contrasts and nuances, positives and negatives, not only refers to sculpture and painting, but also replicates the photographic process. Daudelin, whose main medium is photography, says that this work is only "flirting with the third dimension". At first glance, the heads could easily be mistaken for stone sculptures resembling ancient monuments (Canarian or Cycladic heads) as the surfaces mimic different kinds of granite and marble, opal and mosaic, alabaster and ebony. The words that seem to be imprinted on them signify the timelessness of culture, and the heads take on the role of guardians.

Entirely covering the heads, the words which swing and curve like gusts of wind and sound waves form multiple undecipherable rebuses. They invoke the voices of the past and echo a ritual, the carnival dances and songs, the metamorphosis of black and white, of light and dark. A veritable cultural panoply, some of the heads are analogous to Asian and Oceanic masks, others to Greek and African ones. At the same time they recall Greek and Roman busts, and Mesopotamian and Egyptian sculpture.

Five pieces in the centre of the gallery space are installed so as to form a Greek cross: one single male bust is placed lying in the middle, flanked by four standing male-female sculptures. This arrangement conjures an Egyptian tomb, the four figures referring to the Ushabtis, guardians of the tomb and servants of the deceased in his afterlife. Moreover, the way in which the whole exhibition is composed alludes to Greek theater. The large pieces represent the main actors, and the series of separate miniature male and female heads made of tinted plaster, framed and lined up on the wall, play the role of the chorus.

The idea for this project was conceived in 1987 while the artist was traveling in Italy. In Viareggio, he was fascinated by the colossal papier maché statues made for the town carnival. In the same town, he was struck by the mystery of the small hooks attached to the walls of build-



Eric Daudelin, *Il carnevale, africain*, 1996.

dings to support shutters. They are male on one side, while the windows are open, usually during the day, and female, on the other, at night. Daudelin photographed them, produced two moulds which are the exact copies of the original objects and reproduced them in the series of miniature busts entitled U (for uomo) and D (for donna). He removed them from their context, eliminated their functional role and accentuated their engagement in a plane of universal principles. Within the sculptural act, the artist cites the inherent possibilities of the photographic process of capturing an object and reproducing it in limitless prints. In the series the authenticity of the originals is preserved and enriched: Daudelin's U's and D's have the same playful appearance and magical qualities of the *genii* of the house (just like words are the *genii* of culture), of spirited physical signs marking a sacred territory.

The project took seven years of work to complete. While the artist was making the moulds, assembling and layering the paper, time became both concept and matter embedded in the process of creation and materialized in the objects which emerged. These impressions lead to the important realization that the notion of craftsmanship builds itself into the perennial and contemporary ritualistic aspects of artmaking.

At the end of our conversation Daudelin pointed to one of the big heads and said: "This was my last one", then he sighed and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand as if to remove sweat. I looked at this head which was very different from the others because it was not double male/female but only male. Suddenly, I saw its strangest characteristic: on the black and white mosaic background a patch of bluish colouring came forth; it covered the forehead and faded away on the right cheek. In that instant I became aware of the fact that the bluish motif mirrored

the artist's gesture and that it represented a moment frozen in time.

The attempt to represent the experience of cultural traces links *Il Carnevale* to a previous Eric Daudelin exhibition called *The Memory of Stones* at the gallery Circa, in 1991. The works in the latter were inspired by a trip the artist made to Greece. Daudelin says that while he travels, he lets himself be immersed in the new culture and absorb the new impressions, the experience resulting in a cultural synthesis embodied in the artwork. In both exhibitions the artist transposes the qualities of stone on paper and renders movement through the modulation of repeated elements. Back in 1977 he created a series of photographs of doors mounted in a frieze in which the rhythmic repetition, the interest for architectural elements and their anthropomorphism reveal the artistic preoccupations he explores further in *Il Carnevale*.

Daudelin's sculptures represent photography and also a commentary about photography. At the same time, the artist distances himself from the obsession for newness and for the ephemeral. Evoking magical forces forgotten long ago, this work does not claim to be fashionable, for it embodies a longing for permanence in an era of transience. Daudelin does not shy away from an overt veneration of tradition as a source of inspiration, and of craft as an essential element of art. Without having to provoke, shock or deny, the pieces affect those who see them. He quotes Federico Fellini to illustrate the purpose of his project: "Non voglio dimostrare niente, voglio mostrare."^{*}

ROSSITZA DASKALOVA

* N.D.L.R.: "I don't want to give any demonstration, I just want to show something."