RETHINKING GENDER AND IDENTITY

by Kathleen Desmond

Installation view, sculpture, and sculptural detail from Charles Smith II: Untitled Exhibition. Images courtesy of the artist.

People who were on 18th Street in Kansas City, Missouri, on the first Friday in June 2008 and who stuck their noses into Skinless Productions Gallery were likely drawn in, as I was, by the smell of grass and earth. I mow my own lawn and identified the smell immediately. The stage at the front of the gallery was covered in fresh sod, and three live nude models (two male, one female) were sitting with their backs to the audience behind three different windows hung from the ceiling. Artist Charles Smith II had set the physical and conceptual stage with this performance piece for his solo exhibition of mixed-media sculptural installations that incorporated painting, bronze casting, and human teeth.

Arthur Danto, art critic for The Nation and professor emeritus of philosophy at Columbia University in New York City, claims art "criticism in the present postaesthetic period is just what the cognitivist character of contemporary art calls for." In other words, viewers need all the help they can get in understanding (as another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, posts) art. We are no longer in the formalist period, when Clive Bell's "significant form" provided viewers and critics like Clement Greenberg with all the information they needed to value works of art based purely on form. The "cognitivist character" of postmodern art requires critics and viewers to "effort after meaning." Content is based on concepts of a global nature that are not always evident, even through careful looking and precise description. Danto and others, myself included, think the role of the art critic is to educate the public about visual art and why it matters — to provide an interpretation of the work, rather than a value judgment, as had been the case in the past. Toward that goal, critics talk to artists to learn what concepts they are working with in the execution of their art.

Having talked with and read about Smith, I learned his work focuses on issues of gender and identity. He studied contemporary feminist art criticism and accompanying feminist themes that challenge viewers' traditional models of gender and identity. Specifically, Smith focuses on changing masculinity and the struggle for self. His personal experience of growing up without a father and the transformative power of having a son of his own to raise strike a constant balance in his existence. He connects his own experiences of isolation and shared human connections. Smith creates an opportunity for dialogue through his sculptures, installations, and performances.

Gender and identity are expressed in Smith's work in a variety of ways. The distaste that he feels for popular masculinity is expressed through real, and seemingly fragile, impermanent materials (also a feminist characteristic). He incorporates symbolism that speaks to empathetic human pain, helplessness, and universal desire for understanding. Specific imagery, placement, and the exploitation of scale, style, and materials exemplify his concepts. Everything he creates provides a greater insight into a particular issue or provides resolution of personal distress. Much like first-wave feminist artists, Smith believes the love of labor and the obsessive quality that comes with repetition of a process to be a central truth.

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