

Robin Peck: The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether



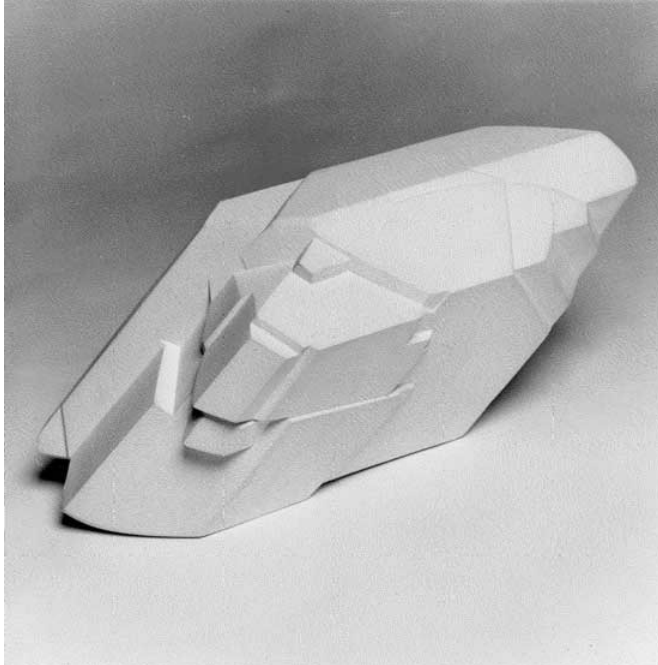
Robin Peck, *Crania* installation view, 2015, CANADA, New York

In an earlier blog posting, I wrote about the “school” of 1:1 sculpture as it had manifested itself in the work of some faculty and students at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax. Amongst the names was one artist whose work I didn’t discuss at any great length because in some ways it stood apart, despite having been extremely influential in the goings-on at the aesthetic hothouse that was the sculpture department of the period: Robin Peck.

Peck’s taught at universities right across Canada – literally from one ocean to another, with stops in-between – and is now on the faculty of Saint Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Needless to say, he’s exhibited his own work extensively since the mid-1970s. (While he maintains no website, his work can be viewed on Pinterest, as well on via his Facebook page.)

I first encountered him in the mid-1990s, while he was still teaching at NSCAD and in the midst of preparing for an exhibition. During this period he was working with crystalline forms – specifically, the crystal structure that comprises the mineral gypsum, widely used in the construction industry (drywall, anyone?), in farming, and of course in the sculptural realm as the main element of Plaster of Paris and as a carving medium in its own right.

Peck’s work was truly influential upon the 1:1 scale sculptors (damn, he taught an awful lot of them), but simultaneously stood apart in that he wasn’t committed in the same way they were to one overriding parameter of scale. A gypsum crystal, after all, is microscopic, and Peck’s work involved scaled sculptural iterations of its form, macroscopically evoking, revealing and exploring its geometric aesthetic.



Robin Peck, Gypsum Crstal II, 1994-1996, plaster for bronze, 29 x

It's a body of work that touched on and explored any number of possible aesthetic directions, while truly embracing none of them. Peck's earlier minimalist work – like Synthetic Monolith (1989), a solid rectangular block of plaster, all clean, sharp right-angles rigorously representative of the architectural volume of the exhibition venue in which it was shown – gave way to another kind of representation, and an encounter with one aspect of nature's underlying geometry. These are the bones of the world that Peck made manifest in his gypsum sculpture, expressions of what lay beneath the meat of appearance.

Okay, so maybe I'm laboring my metaphor. I'm trying to do two things, here: invoke the importance of Peck's evolving work, and lead up to what he's currently sculpturally engaged with and in. Bones and meat are, I think,

metaphorically apt images, because they can lead up to the head. I mean that literally, for the body of work in which Peck is currently engaged comes under the collective title of Crania.



Sculpture (Crania #61) Upper section, circumferential materials: Sandstone, plaster, aluminum, steels, plaster and burlap, porcelain clay, steel, plaster... Lower section, non-circumferential materials: quartz, steel, Plexiglas, rubber, steel, hydrocal, plaster... shellac and carnauba wax. 14 x 15 x 13 in. 55 lb.

We're into a kind of minimalism again, but one that is undermined by a form of aesthetic subliminalism (stay with me, here). "Crania" of course pluralistically denotes skulls, and that's what these sculptures are.

Well, sort of. Peck's are variable shapes, mostly closest to half-domes, really (though some extend upwards as something vaguely expressive of perhaps a head atop a spine). Mark-making is powerfully evident on their surface; Peck's crania are not blandly neutral and smooth sculptural domes, but unique and individual pieces, scored, incised, rough and uneven – rather like the human equivalent, perhaps?

We still come up short with that yardstick I've laid down, however; many of Peck's crania

(and they are sequentially numbered, coming in at over 100 so far) have seemingly little relationship with and to human anatomy. Crania 30 (2015), for instance, is rather more bluntly conical than anything else, its base flared out in a decidedly un-skull-like way, more mountainous than anatomical, really.



Crania 30, 2015, materials circumferential from dual centers: a. petrified dinosaur bone, oil-based clay, aluminum... b. cork, aluminum, iron...plaster, reactive bronze paint, patina, carnauba wax. Size: 7.5 x 6 x 9 in. Weight: 14 lb. Signature on bottom. Collection: James Carl, Toronto, Canada (photo: James Carl)

But we're still at the level of appearance, here, and so much more is in aesthetic play. Substance matters – matter matters – not necessarily in opposition to form, but undercutting any tendency to see and treat these pieces at a strictly superficial level. Interiority is central; Peck's crania contain. Crania 21 (2014-14), for example, is an early piece from the series (and one less visually comparative to a skull). Peck description of the piece goes thusly: "materials circumferential from the center: birch wood, glass and plaster, aluminum, hydrocal, shellac, wax." That's the work's layered insides, the meat inside a proverbial shell. Matter.

The unseen within clearly factors into a consideration of the piece, and while it makes no obvious visual reference to the human skull, the aspect and importance and meaningfulness of the work as a container most certainly links it indelibly to that which the human skull harbours: the brain.

The aforementioned Crania 20 has two material cores, likening, of course, to our brain's twin hemispheres (or our bicamerality, if you prefer), based upon a petrified dinosaur bone on the one hand, and a soft piece of cork on the other. And Crania 61 (2016), a fairly massive fifty pounds of heft, is a piece that, at its center, is comprised of rock (sandstone, to be more specific) surmounted by layers of plaster, aluminum, steel burlap, clay, more steel

and plaster, the exterior surface finally finished with a burnishing of shellac. (And that's just the uppermost aspect of the piece, for its lower, base-like aspect – a brain stem? – independently comprises layers of plaster, steel, rubber, and Plexiglas wrapped around a heart of quartz.)

So here amidst Robin Peck's crania, we are at both an expression of and response to the central mystery of the human condition – a consideration of mind, if you will, the "heads of the town up to the aether" I suggested back at the start (a title that I shamelessly borrowed from the late great poet Jack Spicer) – and a kind of aesthetic negation of the serene, unaffected flatness that is the hallmark of the minimalism that Peck came out of.

And I'll posit this wild suggestion: maybe, just maybe, we're even confronting a response to the expressive passion of, say, a Rodin. Peck's Crania 102 (2017), a work in progress, comprises a sculptural form with two distinct lobes conjoined into a whole. Rodin's *The Kiss* comes immediately to mind, the heads of the lovers, their twoness cohering as one, Rodin's representation and figuration subsumed and re-configured by Peck, sculptural abstraction wrought as a kind of gesture. Rodin wrestled his intertwined figures from marble, Peck has inserted a piece of basalt – volcanic rock – as the beating heart of his work.

Rodin? Really? Well, I dunno, maybe. A bit of a stretch, perhaps, but these things happen when you think of matter not as inert but as a process, and you're trying to match the speed of sculpture.

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