

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Patrick Strzelec's Sculptures are in the Middle of an Improbable Thought

by John Yau July 28, 2013

1.

In drawing, a line need not become a contour or an image. In sculpture, this resistance to becoming is harder to pull off. For all their insistence on pure abstraction, Donald Judd makes boxes and Richard Serra makes steel fortresses. The problem is that this kind of sculpture smacks of signature shapes and branding, an efficient form of production.

It is a problem that Patrick Strzelec, who is having his first show at Gary Snyder Gallery (June 20–July 26, 2013), which is his first in New York in more than a decade, both addresses and exposes by having no two sculptures look alike. It is as if he is starting from the ground up each time — a metaphor reflected in a number of his works, which involve stacking. The other, equally important issue that Strzelec addresses in his work is a material one. He seems not to be attached to a particular material, making his work out of plaster, aluminum, epoxy, steel, ceramic, wood and/or copper.



*Block Head* (2013)

Strzelec is clearly comfortable and conversant with the history of modern sculpture, beginning with Brancusi and Giacometti, and including postwar American sculptors such as the ones I cited earlier. I also sense that he is aware of Al Taylor, whose work from the 1980s is only just now getting the attention it deserves, as well as other neglected and lesser known figures.

The other thing that I would advance about Strzelec's sculpture is his relationship to Pop Art. He is one of the few contemporary sculptors who is able to animate his essentially abstract work, as well as evoke the delightful wackiness and incipient violence of cartoons without directly quoting their lumpen heads, awkward figures and imaginary landscapes. In this he shares something with painters such as Nicholas Krushenick and Thomas Nozkowski. Like them, he has not succumbed to the temptation of mimicry and imitation.

2.

The seven sculptures in the Snyder exhibition are capable of stirring up all kinds of memories and associations if the viewer lets them. Like the person who everybody gravitates toward at the party because they are eager to hear the next enchanting story, Strzelec's sculptures grab your attention without grasping your lapels. Here, I think he got something from René Magritte, which is the ability to make the ordinary extraordinary and even mysterious.

In "Block Head" (2013), what looks like a combination Viking helmet, badly imitated Mickey Mouse ears, and Christopher Lloyd's gizmo in *Back to the Future*, has been mounted on a stand, which is placed on top of a wooden box (or pedestal).

The problem with this reading — which the viewer quickly realizes — is that the object and stand are made out of aluminum, part of which is smooth and part of which is rough, like a large ball of wet sand. Hardly a wearable hat. And the seemingly stable relationship of the object to the box is called into question when the viewer walks around it, discovering that one side is open and a thick, aluminum, wire-like line is spilling out of it, twisting around and around in a knot. Anybody who has ever taken the back off of machines of a certain vintage knows the nightmare that awaits them; how can I get it all these wires back inside?

In "Damned" (2013), which is made out of plaster, ceramic and wood, Strzelec stacks four objects of different shapes and sizes on top of each other. At the bottom is a low, four-legged wooden platform. Directly on top of the platform he has placed a dented plaster box with what looks like a detachable cover, reminding me of a Styrofoam cooler. On top of the cooler he has placed a blackish ceramic vase (was it something he found in a garage sale, or did he actually make it himself?). Finally, he stuck the bottom of a large plaster form into the vase's opening, with the rest rising into the air — part genie's cloud, part sack and part rock.

3.

Strzelec doesn't compose sculptures, but assembles them — one piece at a time — out of the various things he has made and gathered in his studio. You intuitively feel that he does a lot of experimenting before coming to a final decision. And yet — contrary to what you would expect, given this method — the works don't feel collaged together. Rather, like a dream, each follows an internal logic, but resists rational analysis and narrative. They can be zany without being strange.

In "Playin' the Ink" (2012), a blob, at once a head and a torso, sits on a green metal, three-legged industrial stand. A thick orange line (or unevenly surfaced wire) comes out of the head, like a long, meandering squirt of paint frozen in the air.

I am reminded of the filmmaker Jacques Tati's great character, the unflappable and intrepid Monsieur Hulot, who is eternally perplexed by devices that others take for granted. In "Playin' the Ink," the orange squiggle emerging from the side of the head-cum-torso evokes the confusion, terror and delight with which Hulot, in films like *Mon Oncle* (My Uncle) (1958), experiences the world and its modern contraptions. Like Hulot, viewers are apt to find themselves both smiling and scratching their heads, puzzled and enchanted by what is in front of them.

*Patrick Strzelec was at the Gary Snyder Gallery (529 West 20th Street, 10th Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) from June 20–July 26, 2013.*