

HYPERALLERGIC

It Is What It Isn't

BY JOHN YAU SEPTEMBER 27, 2015



Crown (2015), mixed media, 56 1/2 x 14 x 12 1/2 inches

It has been two years since Patrick Strzelec had his first exhibition of sculptures in New York in more than a decade. In my review of that show, I called attention to the fact that “no two sculptures look alike.” Full of insouciance and confidence, and further buoyed by his mastery of different processes and materials, Strzelec shares his aesthetic attitude with the great American ceramic artist, George Ohr, the self-proclaimed “Mad Potter of Biloxi.” Like Ohr, Strzelec wears his mastery of craft lightly, never announcing how much he knows, which practically makes him unique in today’s art world.

In his current exhibition at Garth Greenan Gallery (September 10–October 17, 2015), Strzelec continues to extend the possibilities inherent in the idea that sculpture need not become a signature form. By doing so, he further separates himself from his Minimalist forebears and the material unity of their discrete objects, as well as from his contemporaries and their buy-stuff-at-Home Depot approach. Strzelec also defies the view that deskilling is the only viable option for sculptors, bringing together welding, casting and woodworking together in a single work, such as “St. Peter” (2015), one of the many screwball pieces in this exhibition.

There are some wonderful slippages in the work. In “St. Peter,” a Styrofoam cooler has been cast in pale blue plastic, maintaining the shape of the original while establishing a noticeable difference. One leg of the cast aluminum support rests on a bronze cast of what appears to be a concrete block. The recast Styrofoam cooler, sitting on a small platform of a diagonal cast aluminum bar, suggests that “St. Peter” is an impractical though functional object. Here we might wonder about the relationship between pedestal and object, which Strzelec investigates in all of the sculptures in the exhibition. We might also expand our curiosity and consider all the different forms of presentation and limited function that are an intrinsic part of our lives, from shelving units to hat racks and sideboards. However, instead of repeating himself or offering variations on a theme, Strzelec keeps opening up the possibilities of stacking one thing on another.

In “Agnosia” (2015), a stack of pink Styrofoam blocks has been cast in aluminum and painted pink to mimic its source. A curving linear structure made of steel—Strzelec calls it a “C-shape,” which he has “doubled”—has been covered in epoxy putty, and then been cast in bronze, giving it a rough, knobby, inviting surface. There are also two thick white discs, a low wooden table, and a metal plate—shades of Carl Andre—on which the entire configuration of different objects rests. More than combining functional things and non-functional forms, “Agnosia” refashions them into an interdependence that seems to invest the entire sculpture with a purpose, but one that cannot be grasped.

In an interview with Jen Mergel included in the fully illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Strzelec states that “Agnosia is a state in which recognizable objects or sounds aren’t recognizable anymore.” Earlier in this informative interview, the artist makes what Mergel rightfully characterizes as a “generational retort” to Frank Stella and Minimalism when he states that his new work falls into the perceptual category of “it is what it isn’t.” Strzelec’s interest in the distance between sight and recognition parallels the writings of Oliver Sacks and Aleksandr Luria, both of whom studied how the brain works. In his recognition of the gaps and pressure points between seeing and knowing, recognizing and remembering, Strzelec touches upon one of the deepest anxieties of getting older, as well as the unnerving realization that the world keeps morphing into something we cannot fully comprehend.

Strzelec’s grasp of the gaps between seeing and knowing, and how they seem to widen as we age—the so-called “senior moment” that we are likely to experience at some point in our lives—permeates the work until it extends well beyond the domain of its formal mastery. He has transformed his deep knowledge of classical and modern sculpture—from Bernini to Giacometti and beyond—into material objects that speak to contemporary apprehensions, all while soothing us with an offbeat and zany humor.

In “Three Tiers” (2015) (not included in the exhibition)—which can be heard as three tears, the beginning of sorrow and grieving—Strzelec stacks three dark gray, rough-surfaced tables, diminishing in size, on top of each other, while a white plaster, meteor-like form, with pink silicone nipples protruding from its surface, rests mutely on top of them—an alien breast on a makeshift altar. A sexual current runs through this and other pieces, particularly “Bird” 2015, with its shiny white dildo-like form and a white form with holes on either end. These sculptures cannot be reduced to narrative, nor is it illuminating to read them psychologically. With their unlikely combination of nipples, phallic forms and holes, they stir up a wild range of associations that touches upon the domain of horror fiction, and such writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, Peter Straub and Laird Barron. They also share something with the work of Louise Bourgeois.

If Stella’s famous statement, “what you see is what you see” is about immediacy and directness, Strzelec’s rejoinder is about indirectness—an experience we don’t ordinarily associate with the visual arts, particularly sculpture. In this, Strzelec unexpectedly connects himself to the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé who said: “Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces.” Mallarmé’s dictum is apt to strike us as contrary to everything we know about sculpture, from modernist object to postmodernist installations, defying those who advance the aesthetic of truth to processes and materials. In contrast to his immediate antecedents, Strzelec harks back to Constantin Brancusi to employ multiple processes and materials in a single piece. Each item in the sculpture depends on the others within the configuration. Nothing is independent.

Like words in a sentence, the meaning that items attain is determined by the context in which they have been placed. While the framework in which Strzelec works is derived from modernist sculpture, and such formal issues such as the pedestal and the object, he has pushed this potentially stultifying constraint in an unlikely direction, exposing a host of commonplace assumptions. Within the context established by Strzelec’s sculptures, the possibilities of indirection have been achieved. Each item in his sculptures has a distinct identity. Their surfaces invite our touch, while their trompe l’oeil discrepancies remind us that knowledge depends upon physical and visual apprehension. Humor and disquiet overlap, becoming impossible to disentangle. A sense of nameless horror rises from the work, tempered by a sharply funny eye, inducing a faint vertigo in the viewer. And, as with all really interesting art, it is anti-ideological and inexhaustible, not something that can be trapped in familiar discourses. Following on the heels of his exhibition in 2013, this one marks his arrival as a strong presence in the scene.