

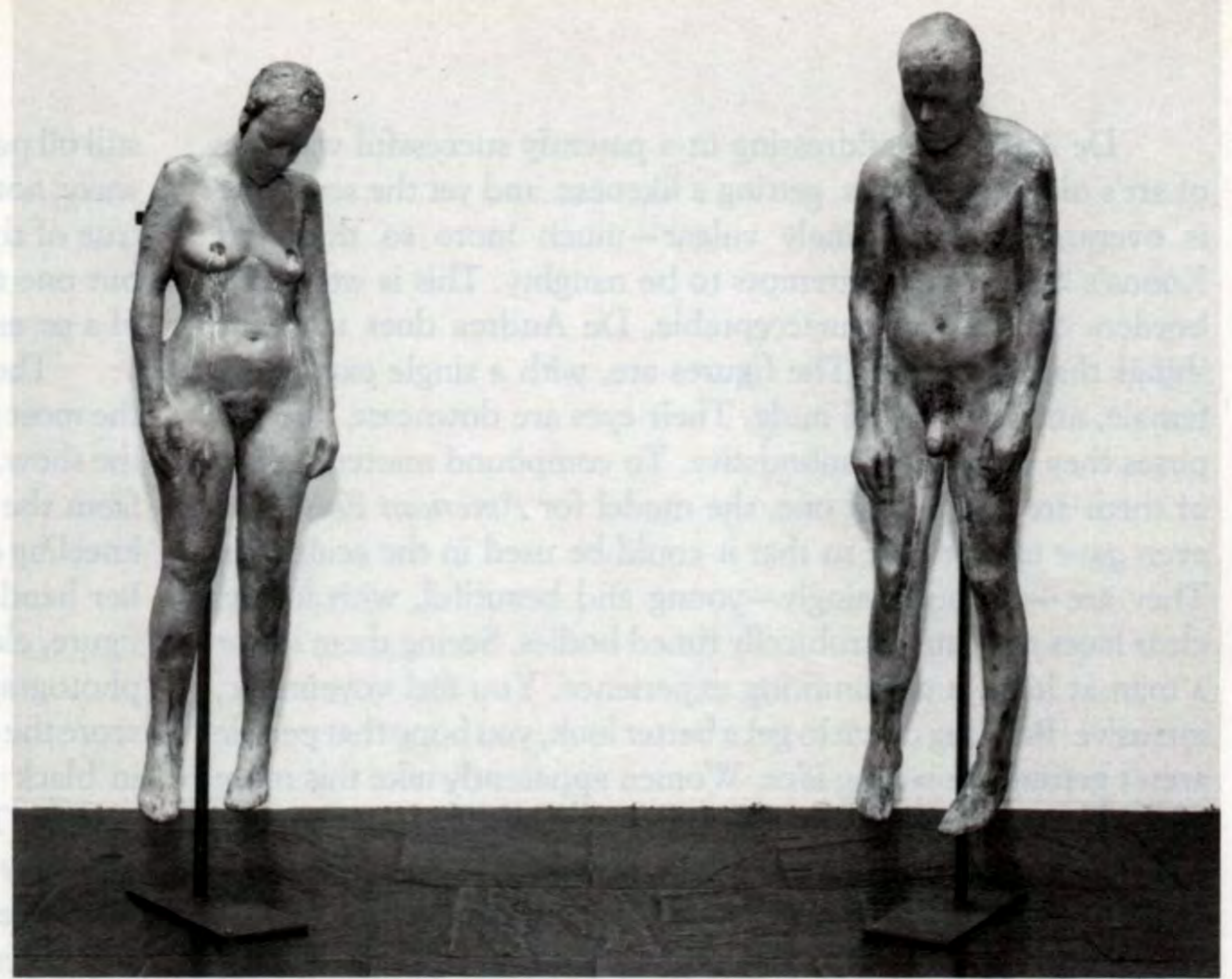
# Real Dead

Richard Kalina





**This memorial sculpture is too strange, too agitated, too necrophilic to rest easily on a university lawn.**



Kiki Smith, *Untitled*, 1990, Beeswax with pigment on metal armatures, 60" x 24" x 14" each figure. Collection Whitney Museum of American Art.

In eastern Serbia, the newly moneyed peasants, beneficiaries of economic reform, but without any serious investment opportunities, have begun sinking their cash into upgraded cemetery arrangements. A plain grave, especially for a young person, is considered unseemly, cloddishly Communist. Much more elegant, much more caring (and safer, since neglecting the dead tends to make them angry and vengeful) is the mini-chalet with a comfortable living room, a television, a VCR, a refrigerator, and of course a well-stocked liquor cabinet. The deceased can then entertain properly, and when the family is gone, catch up on his viewing while having a small schnapps or two.

There is, needless to say, something grotesque about this conjunction of the modern, alienated world of late-capitalist consumption and the bedrock animistic mind. But the place where they meet, an arena that both enshrines and denies death, is a place where art seems naturally to operate. We don't have to travel to remote corners of Eastern Europe to be similarly amused and distressed. Looking around the galleries and museums today it is hard to avoid the complicated dance of seduction and repulsion that artists are trying, consciously or unconsciously, to engage us in. We sense a higher vulgarity at work here, not the easy vulgarity of the reproduction of the artifacts of popular culture, but a more devious one, one involved with mimesis, with the production of resemblance.

It is common enough, and very acceptable, for an artist to appropriate resemblance. If you want something to look real, go out and get a real object. This is historically legitimate and entirely comfortable. But to craft something that appears to be real is highly suspect, and when the resemblance is very close, doubly so. Disturbing things begin to happen. By radically compressing the distance between the model and the work of art, that distance becomes more highly charged, more impossible to penetrate. The notion of transition, of manageable increment, comes undone. We are confronted with abruptness, with boundaries that cannot be crossed no matter what, or how strong, our desires may be.

We are in the presence of a sort of death, an elementary binary situation: on or off, dead or alive. The essential unresolvability of the situation, its incongruity, can only be bridged by what is, for a sophisticated viewer, an inappropriate art response. We feel uncomfortable and manipulated.

The denial of death—estheticized, fetishized, eroticized—is given classic form in Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Pygmalion and Galatea*. In it, the sculptor Pygmalion kisses his statue of Galatea, and in doing so, brings her to life. Of particular interest in this painting is the modeling of light, color, and form. Galatea is flesh on the top and marble below, the two areas seamlessly joined yet rendered separate by the the body's torsion, its extreme *contrapposto*. The ability to create the proper finish, to lay in smoothly flowing transitions was an important aspect of the nineteenth-century academic painter's craft. The social implications of this sort of modeling—the evocation of order, management, and predictability—are clear, just as the Impressionists' perceived inability to model properly, their harsh and jarring transitions, seemed at the time to reflect the discontinuity and disturbance that the modern world so unpleasantly offered up. Gérôme's virtuoso effort is an attempt—coy, perverse, and compulsive—to resolve a paradox that cannot be resolved. The imposition of power and will in such a situation can only turn in on itself and become that which it disclaims: it is not life that is embraced, but death, frustration, and sterility.

A recent exhibition of sculpture by John De Andrea put these concerns in a new light. The sculptures are cast from life and painted with obsessive attention to the nuances of skin tone. The skill involved is astounding, and, more than ever, the sculptures seem alive. They are so convincing that a friend told me that recently she hesitated going into a group exhibition that had a De Andrea sculpture in it because she thought there was a performance piece in progress and she didn't have the time to see it through.



De Andrea is addressing in a patently successful way one of art's oldest problems, getting a likeness, and yet the sculpture is overwhelmingly, chillingly vulgar—much more so than Jeff Koons's ham-handed attempts to be naughty. This is work that borders on the truly unacceptable. De Andrea does so many things that are *wrong*. The figures are, with a single exception, female, and they are all nude. Their eyes are downcast, and the poses they assume are submissive. To compound matters, many of them are Asian, and one, the model for *American Polynesia*, even gave up her hair so that it could be used in the sculpture. They are—not surprisingly—young and beautiful, with lovely, clear faces and taut, aerobically tuned bodies. Seeing them is, for a man at least, a discomfiting experience. You feel voyeuristic, intrusive. Bending down to get a better look, you hope that people aren't getting the wrong idea. Women apparently take this more in stride. Many visitors to the show were middle-aged women, and according to the gallery staff, the standard comment was, "Look at that body. That was me before I had children."

Although not explicitly sexual, these sculptures carry a strong erotic charge. The frustration that hangs around them is palpable. They are sexy and dead, completely closed off to contact. Large photos put up during the exhibition show the sculptor at work, animating his figures, so to speak—playing Pygmalion, but without the payoff. There is more than a slight whiff of death about this work. The skin tones, lovingly painted as they are, are

Paul Thek, *Warrior's Leg*, 1966–67, Wax, metal, Plexiglas, 26½" × 14½" × 8½".  
Courtesy Brooke Alexander.



still oil paint stroked onto an inert plastic surface. They have that waxy, not-quite-right look of the embalmer's art. This is especially true of the bust of *Theresa*, a piece no doubt classical in intent, but one that feels horribly like a Joel-Peter Witkin photograph of a severed head.

The funerary reference is made explicit in *American Icon*, the most tasteless and in many ways the most interesting piece in the show. A long roll of white photographer's paper is suspended from the ceiling. A half dozen or so yards are pulled out and, kneeling on it, photo-session style, is a grief-stricken woman with her hands in the air. Before her, lying on his stomach is a male figure, clearly dead. We recognize the reference. It is the famous photograph taken during the shootings at Kent State. To underscore the connection to photography, the sculpture is done entirely in black and white. This is both emotionally and perceptually jarring. The artist's desire to classicize and distance—to be asexually intellectual—comes up against his equally strong desire to be direct, involving, and sexual, and the results are truly bizarre.

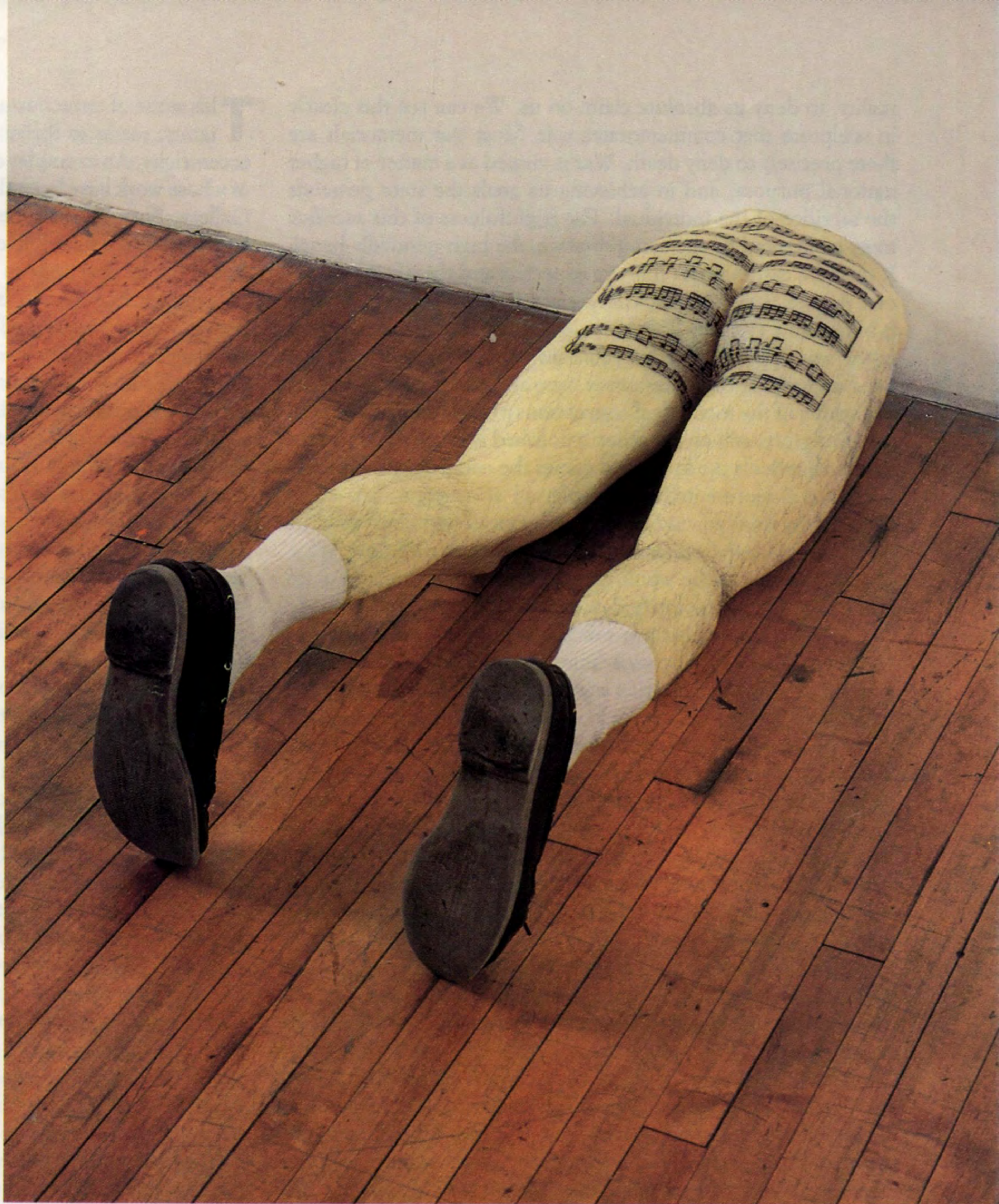
It is worth comparing this sculpture with another dealing with the same subject, George Segal's *In Memory of May 4, 1970—Kent State: Abraham and Isaac*. The Segal sculpture employs a range of distancing devices that keeps it well within the bounds of art. Rather than showing us anything of what actually happened that day, Segal has chosen to universalize his subject by using a readily comprehensible pose and a Biblical story, the sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham. By moving from the particular to the general he is able to create a recognizable image, but one with a weak enough charge so that the sculpture can invoke faith, duty, submission, violence, and redemption without seeming overburdened.

Segal, like De Andrea, casts from life, but Segal's rough plaster surface, apparent even when the sculpture is cast in bronze, blurs and deemphasizes the individual features, and gives his subjects the dignity of the Common Man. They are *images* of people, not simulations—which is all well and good, but of course it's the simulated that we find interesting nowadays. The Segal work is solemn and moving—in command of itself—and it is no wonder that after being rejected by Kent State it has found a suitable institutional setting, at Princeton University. (The President of Kent State, in turning the sculpture down, suggested—one would hope in all innocence—another sculptural grouping, a nude girl putting a flower down a soldier's rifle barrel.) But what of the De Andrea? This is a memorial sculpture that is incapable of creating a clearly defined distance between the event and its representation. It is too strange, too agitated, altogether too necrophilic to ever rest easily on a university lawn.

**R**esting, but resting uneasily, seems to be the trademark of Robert Gober. The static symmetry and repetition inherent in bathroom fixtures, tombstones, wallpaper, dresses, and candles is always undermined by disturbing psychological content, by the implication of something missing, by the absent figure—by death. The candle sprouts hair at its base, becoming a penis ready for burning, the dress is stiffened but empty, the wallpaper depicts a lynching. In an untitled work of 1990, shown at this year's Whitney Biennial, the bottom half of a man's recumbent torso, its nakedness and submission emphasized by the shoes and socks



**An object that looks too much like an object in the real world hampers the power of the symbolic, crowds it out.**



Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1990, Wax, cotton, wood, leather, human hair, 9" x 16½" x 45". Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.

it is wearing, is positioned so that it appears as if the figure has had its chest and head pushed through the wall, that it has disappeared into some other realm. The realism of the figure, pale, waxy, and moribund, each hair carefully implanted, is not denied, but is in fact made more insistent by the musical score inscribed into its upper thighs and buttocks. The music—no piece in particular, just generalized notation—is gratuitously elegiac, a coolly passionate scrim that allows us a clear read through to the unresisting, acquiescent body.

In Gober's *Untitled Leg*, a human body is again put through a disappearing (or maybe reappearing) act. This time, emerging from the wall is a single leg, from the knee down. The only flesh we see is a small strip between the sock and the pants leg, but that is enough to convince us. This is a sculpture that vividly

brings to mind the horror of dismemberment, and that horror is made all the more distressing by the accurate observation and carefully controlled pathos—the untied lace, the cheap sock, the serviceable shoe. We sense here a fascination not just with the body, but with that dead (yet bravely functional) appendage to the body, the prosthetic device. Gober is a blackly funny artist, a Kienholz without the corn, but the humor of this sculpture only underscores its seriousness, its understanding of loss. We know that which is dead is gone. It can be approximated—by memory, by desire, by art—but no matter how hard we try, it can never be retrieved.

Death, although universal, is also horribly specific. *One* doesn't die, *you* die. The artistic urge to generalize, to use the allegorical and symbolic in place of the personal, is to deny death's



reality, to deny its absolute claim on us. We can see this clearly in sculpture that commemorates war. Most war memorials are there precisely to deny death. War is viewed as a matter of higher national purpose, and in achieving its goals the state demands the sacrifice of the individual. The frightfulness of this sacrifice must be masked by the commonplace, the high-mindedly banal. It must be cast in terms that are expected and therefore innocuous. A work that transcends the usual run of military monuments is Maya Lin's *Vietnam War Memorial*. What makes it so powerful is the way it upsets our expectations. The *Memorial* is on one hand an abstract configuration of mass and plane, a sophisticated reworking of the theoretical conventions of site-specific and minimal sculpture, and on the other, a polished and inscribed surface that both reflects the living and names the country's dead in that war—not a representative example, an abstraction, but all of them. Many small towns have a war memorial, inscribed with the names of the local dead, names that the townspeople know. What Lin did was to cast the whole country as a small town, and to do it in a way that is absolutely devoid of sentimentality.

Another monument to war that operates in a forceful and unexpected way is Augustus Saint-Gaudens's *Sherman Monument* of 1903. This equestrian statue, located at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street in New York, occupies as prime and visible a piece of Manhattan space as one could hope for, and yet, dark and weathered, it was for years virtually unnoticeable. It looked the way art of that sort was supposed to look, and it was relegated, like the wars of the past, to peripheral recognition, to a nodding acquaintance. Recently, however, the Art Commission of the City of New York undertook to restore it to its original state, to make it more real. They had it gold-leafed. This has not been a popular decision. The restraint and propriety that the sculpture had before is gone. The statue is no longer invisible, and we can see it for what it is. It is brash and importuning, a disturbing blend of the symbolic and the specific, a beautifully wrought example of Victorian vulgarity and strangeness.

In it, an allegorical figure of Victory is paired with a very real William Tecumseh Sherman. Wearing a simple field uniform, Sherman looks battered, determined, and old. When this statue was sculpted the Civil War was not much further back than the Vietnam War is for us now. Its veterans were aging, but the memories were still fresh and painful. There is a pine branch under the horse's left rear foot. A contemporary audience would see it for what it was, not some generalized ode to the fallen, but a clear reference to Sherman's bloody march through Georgia to the sea.

This work was Saint-Gaudens's last major commission, finished a few years before he died, and it is hard not to view it as a comment on death. It is a memorial to a war and also to a specific person, a man who was interesting and complicated, yet an extremely effective and brutal agent of destruction. There is glittery defiance and subtle resignation in the sculpture, a sense of simultaneously leading and being led. The new gold leaf does its job. It telescopes history and forces the sculpture back into our view. It presents us with a surface that appears to our late-twentieth-century eyes at odds with the form it covers. It feels disjunctive, out of place, and yet we cannot help being attracted to it.

This sense of attraction and repulsion, this fundamental uncertainty, seems to thrive on the margins; it seems to call forth eccentricity. An exemplar of quirkiness was Paul Thek, selections of whose work have been shown recently at the Brooke Alexander Gallery. Born in 1933, he came to artistic maturity during the counter-culture sixties, lived on and off in Europe for many years, and died in obscurity in New York in 1988. His talent was recognized, but he was by all accounts an extremely difficult person, and he never had the career that his ability warranted. Although his later work mostly centered around highly idiosyncratic large-scale installations, Thek is best known in this country for the sculptures he did in the mid-sixties. These pieces, which he called *Technological Reliquaries*, were obsessively realistic wax renderings of bloody chunks of flesh, enclosed in pristine, custom-made Plexiglas boxes.

Thek always had a strong ceremonial and religious streak, and it manifested itself clearly in this series. By referring to the sculptures as reliquaries—as containers for the relics (usually body parts) of dead saints—he emphasized their lifelessness and their incompleteness, while at the same time invoking the miraculous, the desire to be reborn, to be made whole. Thek also shared the political sensibilities and experiences of the age. The assassinations and the Vietnam War were all there on television—fear and revulsion encased in the glowing box planted in every American living room. In *Warrior's Leg* (1966–67), done at the height of the war, Thek sculpted with utter realism and neoclassical restraint the bare, lightly armored leg of a gladiator. The leg however has been severed and its top is red and frothy with gore. Its placement inside a clear vitrine gives it a distance, a quasi-scientific detachment (both literal and figurative) that only adds to the fascination and repugnance. The moment of dismemberment, of loss, is preserved forever. It is permanent, and yet because of its freshness the injury seems to be waiting to be undone, for time to be reversed.

Another work from this period that is of particular interest is *Meat Piece with Warhol Brillo Box*, a 1965 collaboration with Andy Warhol. For the piece, Thek took a Warhol *Brillo Box*, opened it up, inserted one of his raw sections of flesh, and glassed it over, leaving a small breathing tube as a connection to the outside. The Warhol and the Thek seem perfectly matched. The *Brillo Boxes* were (like Johns's *Ale Cans*) fabrications, not ready-mades. Both the Thek and the Warhol are extremely accurate representations of reality, and their conjunction sets up a strange reverberation—a pairing of the industrial and the personal, the pure and the sullied, the clean and the unclean, the affectless and the overwrought. The piece also underscores the terror and the fear of death that is implicit in so much of Warhol's work. We can see that underneath the vacuous *Marilyns*, pouty *Elvises*, and colorful *Electric Chairs*, there is not just blankness. There is something else—something threatening and grotesque, something monstrous.

Thek's preoccupation with death and dismemberment came to full fruition in a work from 1967, *The Tomb—Death of a Hippie*. Shown at the Stable Gallery and at the Whitney Museum's 1967 exhibition, *Human Concern/Personal Torment*, the piece is Thek's first major installation. Inside an eight-foot-high pink mastaba (a reference both to early temples and to the Min-



imalist sculpture of the day) lay a full-sized wax effigy of the artist surrounded by an assortment of ceremonial paraphernalia. The figure was dressed in a pink suit and wore a long Dynel™ wig. His tongue was extended in an equivocal sexual gesture, and the fingers of his right hand were cut off. The dead hippie is on one hand a portrait of the artist as a mutilated, ineffectual, entirely marginal character—someone truly lost to the world, and on the other as an expectant, eroticized candidate for rebirth. The pink mastaba with its single, open door could be read as a womb as easily as a tomb, and the gear circling the figure recalls ancient burial rites with their explicit promise of regeneration and resurrection.

Resurrection would at first glance have little to do with the two impaled wax figures, one male, the other female, that Kiki Smith showed at the 1991 Whitney Biennial. Bruised, naked, and stained with what looks like breast milk and semen, they seem to be the nameless, universal victims of police-state brutality, two more figures fresh from the morgue. And yet there is, thanks to the clarity of the casting process, a specificity, a tenderness to them that calls to mind the passion of the Crucifixion. They are dead, but for how long? Smith is not only reluctant to have them function as clear-cut political symbols, but she seems equally disinclined to have them remain corpses. Their sexuality is too evident, their death has a feeling not just of simple cessation but of debilitating desire, of post-coital *tristesse* in extremis.

**H**ow hard it is to leave the dead alone. Attachments once made resist breaking, and we are all subject to the belief that if we want something badly enough, if we really try for it, our wishes will be granted. This is evident in popular entertainment, in the spate of life-after-death movies that have appeared in recent years. Our world is too bright and shiny, too full of wonderful, sexy things to have people leave it for good. Especially before their time. The grave-houses of Serbia are built mainly for those who have died young, who have not yet had their fill of VCRs and compact discs. War memorials commemorate those snatched out of life fifty years too soon. And then there is AIDS—thousands gone every year, Paul Thek among them, and it seems inconceivable that it can't be stopped. How deep must the wish go for it all to be reversed, for our lost friends to be found, for the dead

to come back to rightful life.

Art is transformation. Artists take dead materials, things that relate only to themselves—bags of plaster, cakes of wax, tubes of paint—and turn them into something coherent, rational, interdependent, something that in its organization, if not in its outward form, mimics life. This transformative power does not come without reservations. Just as *Frankenstein* reflected the ambivalence of the nineteenth century toward the power of science to imitate life, so too has this century felt ambivalence toward the imitative power of art. The way we live in the world is worthy of being documented, but to craft extreme resemblance is to appropriate the photographer's mechanical world, to deny life. Duchamp's readymades are powerful precisely because of this transgression. Duchamp uses the essential methods of a photographer. He selects and frames objects from the undifferentiated world; he chooses rather than makes. Time has burnished the readymades, their snug place in art history has closed our eyes to their cold vulgarity. These are dysfunctional things, dead items, little corpses.

An object that looks too much like an object in the real world hampers the power of the symbolic, crowds it out. The symbolic needs room to maneuver, it needs a series of graded increments, moving clearly, humanistically, from the specific to the general. The overly mimetic object radically contracts the distance between the depicted and the depiction; it confronts us with its muteness, its essential otherness. This in no way prevents it from being a vehicle of desire. Its closeness to reality only reinforces our wish to possess what we do not have, what we cannot get. We live in a profoundly secular age, an age without the comforting reassurance that there is something past the grave. We know this, consciously or unconsciously, and yet our desire to cheat and deny death, to array the power of the symbolic, the power of art, against it, is as strong as ever. To encounter a work of art that is unable to do this, and yet whose needs are so intense, is to be made deeply uncomfortable. To call art like this crass, easy, or in poor form misses the point. We are being shown something that at a very basic level we don't want to see. Bad taste just comes along for the ride. □

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**George Segal, *In Memory of May 4, 1970*  
—Kent State: Abraham and Isaac,  
1978, Bronze, 7' × 9' × 8½'. John B.  
Putnam, Jr. Memorial Collection,  
Princeton University. Courtesy: Sidney  
Janis Gallery.**