

Jason Rogenes, *Plug 3.1*, 1996, polystyrene, electrical component. (Photo Courtesy of POST, L.A.)

SCulpture and the LA aesthetic

By Charlene Roth

My work will use everything it can to communicate. It will use any trick; it'll do anything—absolutely anything—to communicate and to win the viewer over. Even the most unsophisticated people are not threatened by it; they aren't threatened that this is something they have no understanding of. They can look at it and they can participate with it. And also somebody who has been very highly educated in art and deals with more esoteric areas can also view it and find that the work is open as far as being something that wants to add more to our culture.

—Jeff Koons, *From Full Fatbom Five*

... meaning is to be found in the simultaneous separation and intactness of figure and ground, in the gestalt's operation as the concordance between absolute difference (figure versus ground) and complete simultaneity (no figure without ground) ...

—Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*

If there is an LA (or West Coast) aesthetic—a particular sensibility made visual which can be supported by a theory or explanation—then sculpture, as a genre, is in a unique position to employ that aesthetics' devices. Increasingly mutable boundaries are being established by a group of artists gathered under the mantle of this approach to art-making that welcomes exploration and use of aspects of every other art category without denying the resources of its own traditions. These sculptors are consumed by a quest to communicate. This quest is so intimately bound to the aesthetic that participants, in the interest of its resolution, could be characterized as *dedisciplinarian* pagans. It is a complex appellation but none the less high praise because these makers are not simply

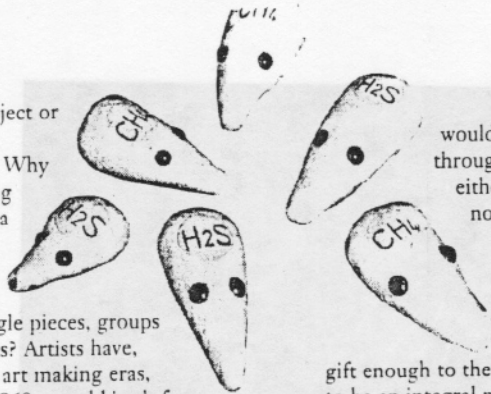
interdisciplinary and not iconoclastic. They, on the one hand, range freely; while on the other, rein themselves in because they are concerned with accessibility, forging an allegiance with their viewer. It is a shrewd decision, neither intuitive nor emotional, though intuition and emotion may play a part in their works, to take into consideration the entire spectrum of their potential audience. These makers may move willfully, in and out of discipline pigeonholes gathering what they need to fulfill the dictates of a work, yet purposefully suspend excessive self-indulgence (which can become the overriding issue in an artist's relationship with a work to the degree that it is the intent) to assure that a work is open to those with whom they hope to establish a bond—all possible viewers.

This radical (in the light of much art produced after the turn of the century and prior to 1945) repositioning of the artist in her/his relationship with a work can be seen, situated as we are at the end of the twentieth century, as a natural outgrowth, though a reversal of, a purist's script for high modernist art-making practice of that period. The avant-garde dictum: "movement at all cost," continues to be upheld, but it is less an elitist gallop to the forefront for a few. This is another kind of movement. It is horizontal, not vertical, and *inclusion* is a goal. These differences have shaped the devices that sculptors who are proponents of the LA aesthetic use. And though there is infinite variation between works, there seem to be two common components. There are kitsch elements and there is a reference to some traditional formal arrangement within the frame of each work. The choice of formal arrangement is not limited to place or time. It is trans-historical and cross-cultural. And as Greenberg suggests, the kitsch ... *changes according to style, but remains always the same, and may be*

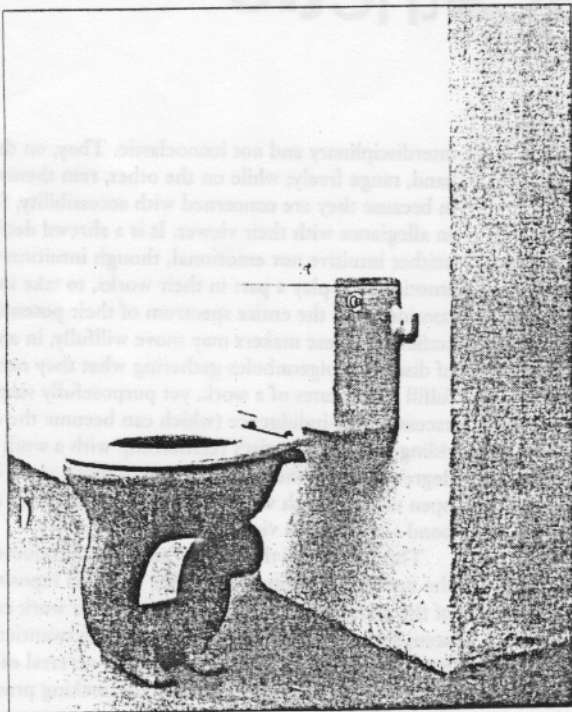
incorporated as image, object or metonymic material.

This raises a question. Why are these artists attempting to meld high (fine art via a recognizable and viable formal configuration) and low (popular culture or kitsch) elements in single pieces, groups of objects and installations? Artists have, sporadically during other art making eras, and resolutely since the 1960s, used kitsch for a variety of practical and conceptual reasons. But these current works differ because they simultaneously push to the forefront that which is common, albeit appealing, and that which depends (many would agree) on refinement, sophistication or education for recognition. It is beauty and the beast as a Siamese twin, although which is what depends on who is looking-listening. In other words, these works present an homogenous overlapping, a weave, of high and low devices. As a result this contemporary sculpture has the potential to be intriguing to *art smart* as well as *other* viewers. Jason Rogenes describing one of his Styrofoam sculptures says, "It is potential, down to the white blankness of it. It awaits the viewer's creative eye to make it what it might become." These works are constructed from dumpster derived trash and yet the throwaway material, bits and pieces of material that once cradled a precious commodity like a computer or television set during transport, is transported/transposed (glued) by Rogenes into a unit that employs space and light as facilely as any nineteenth century French terracotta.

Much postmodern theory suggests the viewer is privileged. It is the viewer who is responsible for making meaning if meaning is to be constructed or salvaged from experience of an artwork. The artist sets a piece in play but this gesture is unresolved without some meaningful experience on the part of another. Sculpture is in a unique position to court this act of fulfillment. It is the best of both worlds being, to use Rosalind Krauss's terminology, a full-blown example of *absolute difference and complete simultaneity*. Contemporary sculpture has the ability to act as frame, ground, or outside and surface, figure or inside in opposition or in concord with the other. This permits artists like Joep van Lieshout, a Dutch sculptor based in Rotterdam, whose work has a particular/particular affinity with the LA aesthetic, to present kitsch and traditional formal information in a format that allows the parts to merge or conflict. Lieshout's toilets are an example. The poignant fields of sensual color that are the surface either meld with and elevate the form or act in opposition to its low, mundane and utilitarian presence. It depends on the viewer—it all depends on the viewer.



Above: Michael Arata, detail of *Blond, Blue-Eyed Aryan Farts*, 1996, tape, paper and acrylic; below: Joep van Lieshout, *Toilet* 1994-95.



formal/kitsch, use these devices in an attempt to grease the path for every viewer. Ideally their work is positioned as a bridge across the communication gap and hopefully will engage others in whatever culturewide conversation, economic, social, political, etc., they consider essential to address. Sculptors who are proponents of the LA aesthetic *plan* their work to be, to quote Roland Barthes, *the tail of a text*.

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The decision to play to the viewer would have been disparaged by many early through mid-twentieth century artists who either operated within the romantic notion that they were in direct contact with some other worldly or celestial power and their function was to spew out the information to which they were privy, or believed the benefit of an exposure of self was

gift enough to the viewer. Viewers were not considered to be an integral part of this kind of art-making gesture—they were simply the lucky recipients of an experience, if they were able to access, on any level, the communication (perhaps view would be the better word) they encountered. Many contemporary sculptors seem to have revised this agenda. And revision has shaped the choice of devices that inform the LA aesthetic because the bottom line has new criteria. The foundation for these makers is a concern with social and political aspects of culture that may also include those of the world of fine art. They acknowledge a need to be critics in the sense that they are invested in establishing a discussion about some state of affairs. And they are willing to admit that discussions require participation from others. Self-expression is a starting

point for this group, but it is no longer the end game. The work of Michael Arata is another important example. His group of forms titled, *Blond, Blue-Eyed Aryan Farts*, are as elegant as Miró's quirky characters yet these sculptures, enlivened by their wobbly plastic eyes, are humorous, irreverent and accessible in the way of Jeff Koons's work. But, ultimately this work is the lead-in statement for a discussion of subjectivity in the late twentieth century. So, in conclusion, these three sculptors, and the many others who currently employ the tenets of LA aesthetics'

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