

BALICE HERTLING

GALERIE

Morgan Courtois
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Galerie Balice Hertling
47 rue Ramponeau
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In Morgan Courtois' exhibition a sleeping figure (*Dormant*) and a dancer (*Daph*), both approximately life size, shimmer in space. Despite the divergence between sleeping and dancing, these two figurative sculptures, absorbed in their actions, adopt two similar poses, the most obvious being the arm behind the head, as if the action were determined by a simple shift between the vertical and horizontal axes.

Sculpted in plaster, *Dormant* is placed on a synthetic fur blanket. The fur acts as a plinth, or as what the artist considers to be an apparatus: it defines the sculpture – like a dried plant specimen in a herbarium – without creating a privileged point of view and by giving the work a feeling of slight instability. *Dormant* is characterized by its wreath of laurel leaves, a remedy used by the Egyptians to cure headaches; by the few scars left behind by the de-moulding; by being stretched out on the ground beyond the limits of human anatomy; and above all by its hand which is out of proportion by comparison with the rest of its body.

The sculpture's pose recalls that of Mars in Piero di Cosimo's painting *Venus, Mars and Cupid* (1490, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin). In the painting Mars, god of war, is shown as a calm, sleeping figure, visibly exhausted not by his professional activity as a warrior, but by Venus's sexual appetite. Lying down he is depicted as totally vulnerable. And there is such a lack of movement in this figure that to amuse himself Piero di Cosimo has painted a fly on his ear.

Dormant, however, has no ears, so cannot hear or perhaps does not need ears to connect to its surroundings. We can see other abnormal details (for Daniel Arasse, though, it is the detail in itself which is abnormal), such as its feet which recall a sea creature, or even its hand. The hand does not lie on its side – signifying a state of alertness, as if the exhaustion induced by Venus was actually an illusion. With its post-human anatomy, *Dormant* is both the Mars of myth and legend and a man from Mars.

In its right hand, *Daph* carries a gardening lamp which, despite its blinding light, creates clearly outlined shadows, and bathes the gallery and the other works in an unreal atmosphere. If *Daph*, made of plaster and covered in talc, allows us to see the rest of the exhibition more clearly, its genitals by contrast are covered by a pair of loincloth.

Modelled after the artist's body dimensions, *Ô Spring* is less a sarcophagus than an object that echoes anthropomorphic sculptures. Stained using a brew of plants and flowers that have a calming effect (such as hibiscus and camomile), this urn evokes Mars's sleep – and dreams. But not just that: on top of the sticky resin, the artist has thrown some birdseed. If the amphora were exhibited outdoors it would not only attract our attention but also that of birds wanting to peck at these seeds.

Imprints of oysters are visible in *Still Life XXI*. This plaster sculpture painted with black ink recalls a cliff that over the centuries has been shaped by the sea's current. Like other *Still Life* sculptures it is supported by an armature which is the supporting element used to reinforce a cast and conceal its structure. Ultimately the artist is interested in the tricks used in sculpture. Traditionally certain structural elements that are essential for a sculpture's stability are made to appear like an integral part of the composition, concealed under mimetic shapes that are often

organic (a tree trunk or branches). Courtois gives this element the same status as the object it supports.

The material and the living: these are the two ideas around which Courtois' sculptural work is articulated, blurring their opposition and encouraging us to radically rethink the disjunction between the history of sculpture and the natural sciences. Using the lost-clay technique, he works from bottom to top, progressing in layers, one *after* the other, one *on top of* the other. This process of unpredictable growth is related to the organic process, to an evolution that never stops adapting to the environment: open forms that can become sleeping figures or dancers. Through phenomena and natural processes such as humidity or perspiration, the artist gives visual form to the transition between the organic and the human, or between the inorganic and the living. Sometimes he experiments with blending them figuratively and conceptually, and like a living stone the sculpture mimics the process of mineralization, the activity of natural elements, the petrification of non-mineral bodies.

This is how Courtois' sculpture initiates an anti-classical history that remains to be written, a story of porosity which ranges from the artificial Mannerist grottos of the 15th century – architectural and sculptural complexes with their machines and hydraulic mechanisms – to the violent transgression of materials and techniques in post-Minimalist sculpture in the work of Lynda Benglis.

In *Stone. An Ecology of the Inhuman* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015) Jeffrey Jerome Cohen recently revisited the belief that stones are lifeless substances, the truest image of natural inertia that, on the contrary, demonstrates how full of life the mineral world actually is. Today, in the Anthropocene and the era of political ecology, geological time collides with the time of our daily existence, with our environment, with the time of artistic practice, and ultimately, with the time of sculpture.

Riccardo Venturi