INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

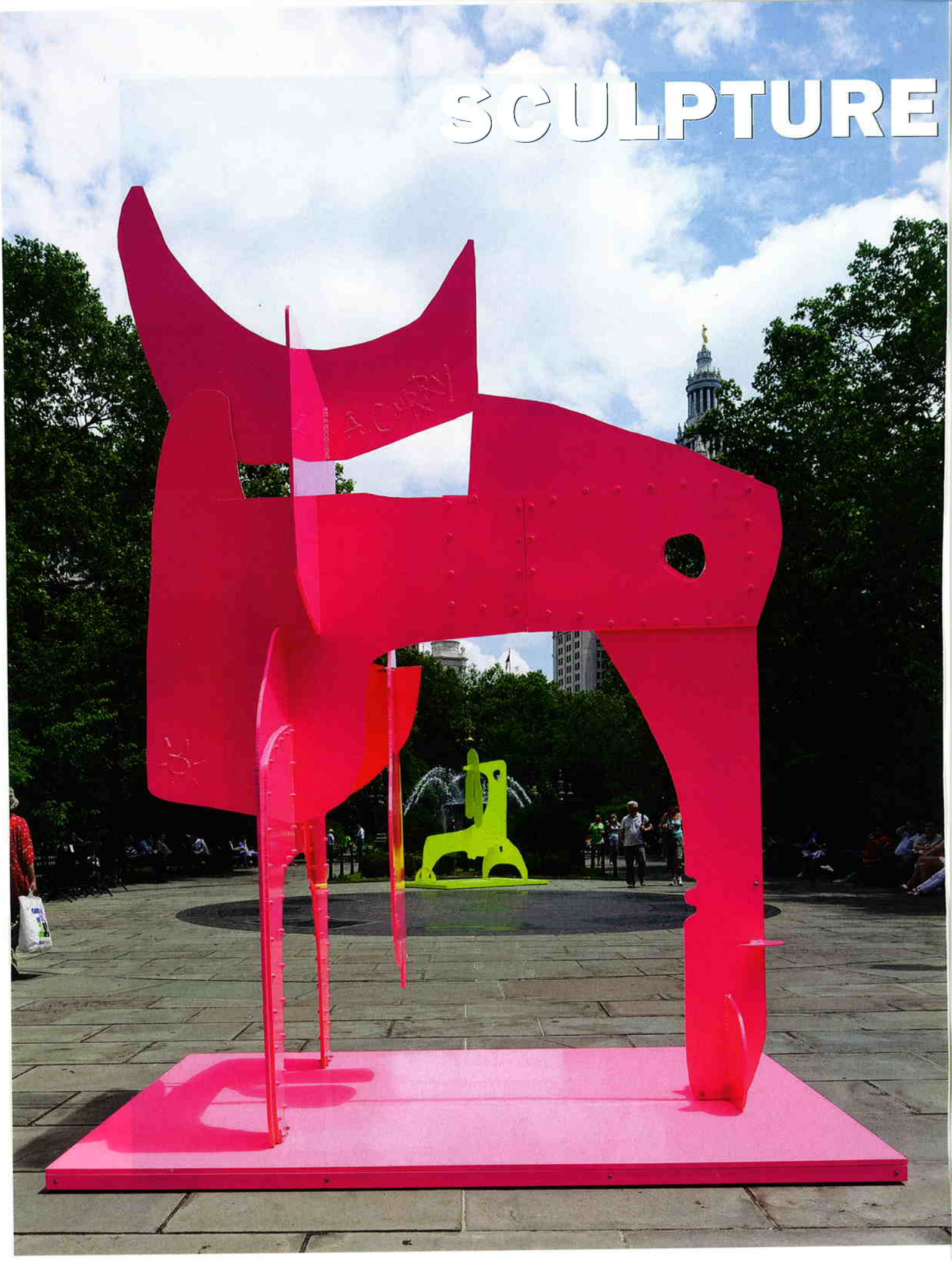
# Art in America

## Focus Sculpture

ROXY PAINE
HENRY MOORE
ORLY GENGER
CALDER & CO.
plus
BRODY CONDON

OCTOBER'10 $9.00

# SCULPTURE



# IN A CONTRACTED FIELD

An exhibition of recent large-scale outdoor pieces by six young artists in New York's City Hall Park sparks an inquiry into the role of the figure in contemporary art and the function of public sculpture today.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

IN *PASSAGES IN MODERN SCULPTURE* (1977), a book that traced the dissolution of traditional three-dimensional composition from Rodin's *Gates of Hell* to Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, Rosalind Krauss noted that modern sculpture tended toward the expression of process and flux. Whereas "we normally think of the self as a subjectivity with special access to its own conscious states," Krauss further observed, sculpture of the 20th century increasingly demonstrated that "meaning, instead of preceding experience, occurs within experience."[1] Two years later, she published the more widely influential "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," an essay in which she elaborated her ideas on what she now termed "postmodern" sculpture. Having turned away from the "idealist space" of mid-20th-century three-dimensional art, she wrote, artists were now mapping out various coordinates on an expanded field that she detailed in a geometric diagram marked by landscape, architecture and, a little mysteriously, their opposites ("not-landscape," "not-architecture").[2]

It seemed a point of no return. And indeed, in the decades that followed, sculpture was characterized by exponentially increasing diffuseness. Public sculpture in particular spread laterally and underground, and reflected the processes of its own creation. It assimilated itself to architecture and design, on the one hand, and was often ephemeral and even immaterial on the other, extending to performance and body art. Electronic media entered the field of public art, which also not infrequently took the form of political activism or social service. Each of these approaches is still actively pursued; for all their diversity, the positions they occupy could be called entrenched.

Enter, banners flying, a proudly traditional band of figurative sculptors, happily staking their portions of idealist space. They are represented in force by "Statuesque," an outdoor exhibition (through Dec. 3) curated by Nicholas Baume, director of the Public Art Fund, for New York's City Hall Park. Surely chosen in a spirit of gleeful contrarianism, the title invokes not only the classicizing term "statuary" (as in equestrian, commemorative and so on), but is also a euphemism for big and curvy (as in, say, John Currin). The artists are Pawel Althamer, Huma Bhabha, Aaron Curry, Thomas Houseago, Matthew Monahan and Rebecca Warren. All were born in the 1960s or '70s. Their points of reference include Matisse, Calder, Giacometti, Picabia and, above all, Picasso. Duchamp's influence is nowhere to be seen; neither is that of Robert Morris, Krauss's standard bearer, nor any of his peers or successors. Much of the work is cast in bronze (there is also welded and cast aluminum). It is all figurative, though the figures are variably abstracted. It tends to decline subtlety.

THREE OF THE PARTICIPANTS—Curry, Houseago and Monahan—are exact coevals (born in 1972) and friends who have, more or less explicitly, pledged to work by hand and to eschew found objects. Among them, the Texas-born Curry is the show's most conspicuous presence, with three big, exceedingly bright sculptures (all 2010) made of torqued and welded cut-out sheets of aluminum powder-coated in candy-dot colors. The hot pink *Horned Head Trip (reclining)*, an almost laughably Picassoid bull with two banderillas in its side, greets the visitor near one of the park's entrances. Guarding another is *Big Pink*, a more reductive beast with a big chest and huge dangling testicles, its horned head turned to face *Yellow Bird Boy*, which looks something like a tern-headed dog. The bull's balls reappear in *Yellow Bird Boy* as big floppy ears, dangling from the animal's snout, or beak.

Houseago is likewise represented by three sculptures. *Untitled (Lumpy Figure)*, 2009, is a striding man cast in bronze from what looks to have been an armature covered in ropy coils of clay. Its single, Cyclopean eye is a gaping hole in a massive, slightly downcast head, which is shadowed by a shieldlike form that enforces a martial feeling also evoked by its gunmetal-gray patina. The rust-colored *Untitled (Red Man)*, 2008—at 13 feet tall, the show's largest work—is a looming, broad-shouldered

Opposite, view of Aaron Curry's *Big Pink* (foreground) and *Yellow Bird Boy* (background), both 2010, powder-coated aluminum. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

All photos this article James Ewing, courtesy Public Art Fund.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Statuesque," at City Hall Park, New York, through Dec. 3.

figure with Roman-senator hair that falls in a short fringe over a broad, shallow forehead. Flimsy-looking legs terminate in big, cloddy feet: it's not easy getting such a top-heavy hulk to stand up. Lastly, Houseago presents *Untitled (Sprawling Octopus Man)*, 2009, a cast-bronze variation on the monstrous squatting *Baby* (2009-10), a hectically mixed-medium sculpture included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial.

Monahan's single contribution, the cast-bronze *Nation Builder* (2010), suggests, like Houseago's *Lumpy Figure*, a striding centurion, though Monahan's warrior is cut off at its knees and set atop two stacked, faceted columns. An armored breastplate, various vaguely futurist accessories and a massive, pylon-shaped weapon resting on his shoulder help place *Nation Builder* somewhere between the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean and a first-person-shooter video game.

Houseago grew up in northern England, in working-class Leeds, whose hard-drinking, prone-to-violence, thoroughly philistine culture he described with relish in a public lecture, one of a series by "Statuesque" artists held at the New School this past spring. Among the influences Houseago cited were Darth Vader, African Fang masks, William Blake, Donatello, Michelangelo, Brancusi, Giacometti, Henry Moore ("I hated him for a long time but now think he's brilliant"), Joseph Beuys, Thomas Schütte and Picasso. Studying in the

1990s with Stanley Brouwn and Jan Dibbets at De Ateliers in Amsterdam (Monahan was a student there, too), Houseago expected, he said, to read Lyotard; instead, the class took a field trip to Berlin to see the Pergamon altarpiece. He was impressed; nonetheless, he claimed to like the idea of "monuments with no reason, monuments to nothing," and said he'd be happy to fashion a "magic, utopic world." Monahan, a native of California (where both artists now live, as does Curry), also delivered a lecture; his reference points were much the same, although, somewhat more cautiously than Houseago, he ventured that the exhibition's title "suggests we can sneak back" to a tradition of monumental statuary which may not really be accessible; he acknowledged that the attempt involves "living history backwards."

ALTHAMER, WHO LIVES AND WORKS in his native Warsaw, is a rather more mercurial artist; in addition to sculpture, he has created performances, films and public actions, some of them community-based. His contribution to "Statuesque," made in collaboration with the Nowolipie Group (established in Poland in 2004 and comprising disabled adults to whom Althamer has been teaching ceramics), is the somewhat inscrutable *Sylwia* (2010). A supine female figure with a face that is a mask of conventional modeling, its arms are held overhead, the better to reveal prominent breasts—one is cast from a big plastic bottle (no forswearing found objects for Althamer) whose cap is the nipple. Sprouting from a lavish spread of tangled hair are little nascent humanoids, snaky and unformed. As indicated by the title (like the name Sylvia, it derives from the Latin word for forest), this sculpture seems meant to evoke verdant fecundity. But like the small patch of carefully tended grass on which the figure lies, and like the shiny cast aluminum of which it is made, *Sylwia*'s woodland character seems rather strenuously constructed, an effort surely meant to show.

In this company, Bhabha's *The Orientalist* (2007)—titled after Edward Said's landmark book, *Orientalism*—presides like a Fury, ghoulish and aghast. A skeletal, hollow-chested seated figure fashioned from various humble materials including chicken wire and Styrofoam packing (Bhabha, too, has declined the nothing-recycled oath) and cast in bronze, *The Orientalist* struggles to maintain some composure. Flaps of flesh, modeled in clay, peel from its thighs and lift like a windblown cape from its shoulder blades. Hands clenching a rough-hewn chair's arms, it faces, with quixotic defiance, City Hall Park's centerpiece, a massive Gilded Age fountain (designed by Jacob Wrey Mould in 1871) that has three tiers and four spraying jets as well as illuminated gaslamps at each corner. The fountain, of course, wins the stare-down, making Bhabha's work seem psychologically flimsy—

Above, Matthew Monahan: *Nation Builder*, 2010, bronze, 107 by 62 by 27 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

Opposite, Thomas Houseago: *Untitled (Sprawling Octopus Man)*, 2009, bronze, 101 by 84 by 60 inches. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York.

more camp than tragic. That doesn't seem to have been her intention. Like Houseago and Monahan, Bhabha (who was born and raised in Pakistan, and now lives in Poughkeepsie) traced her work, in a lecture, to a host of sources, not one of them distinguished for irony. They included Tarkovsky and Beuys; African art and Angkor Wat; Rodin, Giacometti and, inevitably, Picasso.

Wisely (or luckily) situated outside of the park proper is British sculptor Warren's singularly amorphous sculpture, arguably the most successful of the bunch. Perched atop a large pedestal, it is a lumpy, big-footed, small-headed, utterly unprepossessing but nonetheless compelling figure most notably distinguished by two thin, outstretched arms balancing a crushing burden. Other bulky, roundish forms could be a breast, a stomach, a buttock, an offering. Cast in bronze and finished with a glitzy but deliberately imperfect gold patina that reveals bits of white and strongly resembles the surfaces of the unfired painted clay in which Warren often works, this piece is called *Large Concretised Monument to the Twentieth Century* (2007). The references implicit in the title are not specified, but Tate Britain, which bestowed a Turner Prize on Warren in 2006, helpfully compares her, in a statement on its website, to Degas, Rodin and, naturally, Picasso.

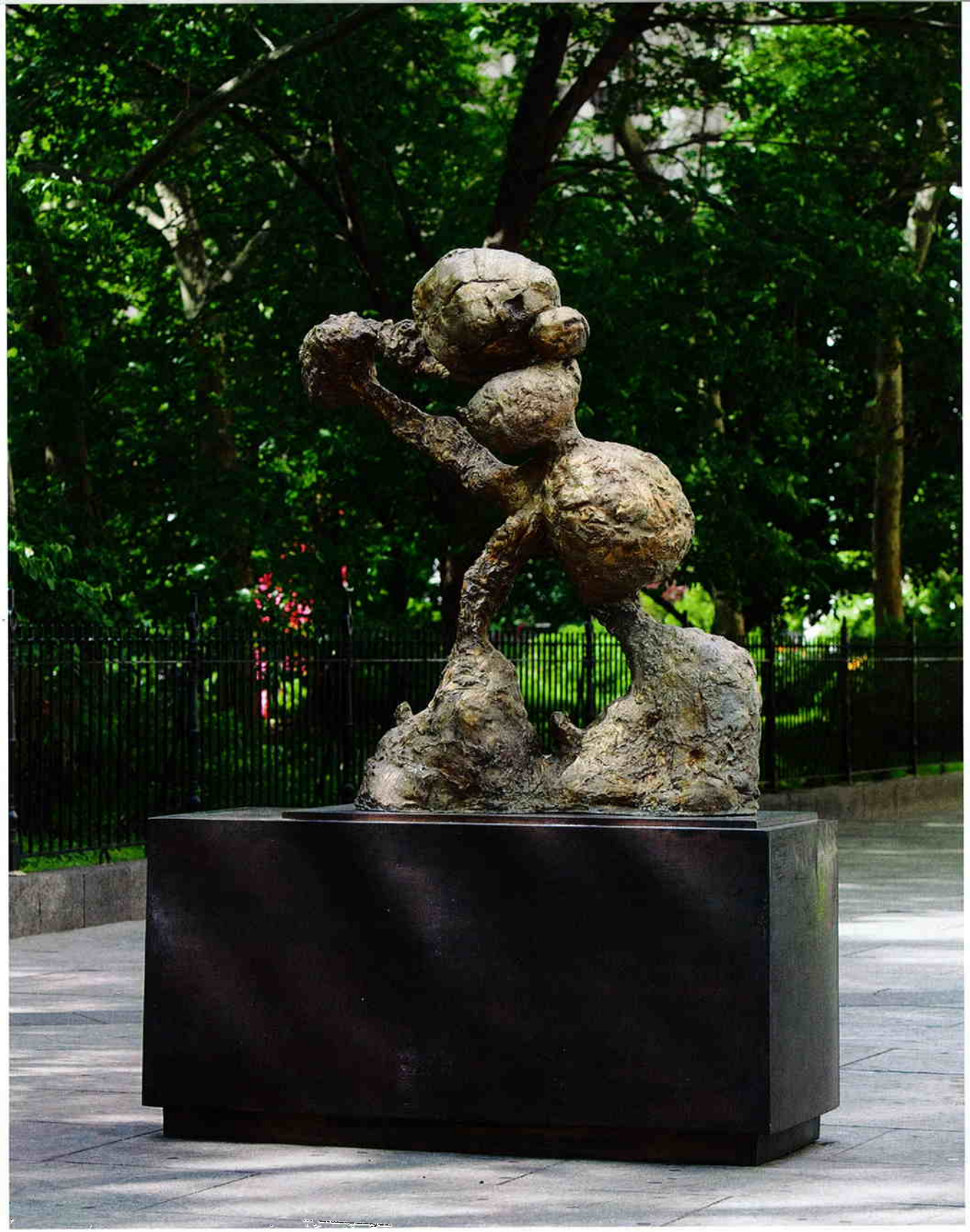
RATHER CLOSELY INSTALLED in a small park dotted with actual commemorative statuary—Nathan Hale, Horace Greeley—"Statuesque" has a certain carnivalesque energy, and a dash of boosterism (the galleries that represent these artists, identified in labels, are mostly blue chip; the works here, unlike much public art, are eminently saleable). But the exhibition's most salient feature is historicism of a kind not seen since the 1980s. While many newly minted postmodern artists were, 25 years ago, busy deconstructing the mechanisms of power as instituted in visual culture (a job to which public art proved particularly well suited), others were channeling German and Italian painting of the 1920s and '30s and the ancient sources on which it drew. Historicist artists of the '80s called themselves postmodernists, too; some critics fumed at the travesty. Benjamin Buchloh railed against the perceived neo-fascism of the Neo-Expressionists (and the interwar Return to Order in European painting that it recalled for him).[3] Douglas Crimp condemned Picasso and all he stood for—and all who stood for him. (For instance, he lashed out at Elizabeth Murray, Bruce Boice and others benighted enough to participate in an *Art in America* roundup of responses to the 1980 Picasso fest at MoMA.)[4]

That was then. Critics don't fume much about theoretical distinctions any more, and Picasso's preeminence—thank you, Larry Gagosian—seems to have been definitively restored. The only one of Krauss's judgments that the "Statuesque" sculptors appear to have sustained is that commitment to subjectivity, as an entity "with special access to its own conscious states," is too silly to even argue about. Where meaning is concerned, good old postmodernism prevails here: significations are fluid and evanescent; they escape the control of individual authors. Some participants seem to flaunt this, notably Curry, Houseago and Monahan. And some, touchingly, resist it, Bhabha in particular. But the net impression this work creates is that all emotions can be traded on an open market; all experiences are equal.

It's possible that this show was meant as a rebuke to "Unmonumental," the New Museum's 2007 quasi-celebration of antiheroic, assemblage-based art. Or in response to Antony Gormley's installations; "Event Horizon," on view this past spring and summer in New York City, scattered dozens of life casts of the artist in Madison Square Park and Midtown. In a booklet accompanying that project, Gormley writes, "The field of the installation has no defining boundary. The sculptures act as spatial acupuncture. They enter in and out of visibility." It is a description of the sculptural field expanded *ad astra*. Perhaps seeing diminishing returns out there, the sculptors in "Statuesque" seem to have looked through the other end of the telescope. ○

**1** Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York, Viking Press, 1977; 7th reprinting, Cambridge, Mass., and London, MIT Press, 1989, pp. 26-27. **2** Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8, Spring 1979, reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 1986, pp. 276-90. **3** "The question for us now is to what extent the rediscovery and recapitulation of these modes of figurative representation . . . cynically generate a cultural climate of authoritarianism." Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. by Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut and David Solkin, Halifax, the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983, p. 82. **4** Douglas Crimp, "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject," *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, MIT Press, 1993, pp. 69-70 (orig. published in *Parachute* 22, Spring 1981). For the roundup see "Picasso: A Symposium," *Art in America*, December 1980, pp. 9-19, 185-87.

**NANCY PRINCENTHAL** is a writer based in New York.



Above, Rebecca Warren: *Large Concretised Monument to the Twentieth Century*, 2007, bronze, figure 70⅞ by 74¾ by 27½ inches, pedestal 39¾ by 77¾ by 31⅜ inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, and Maureen Paley, London.

Opposite top, Huma Bhabha: *The Orientalist*, 2007, bronze, 70 by 41 by 33 inches. Courtesy Salon 94, New York.

Opposite bottom, Pawel Althamer and the Nowolipie Group: *Sylwia*, 2010, aluminum, 36 by 126 by 48 inches. Courtesy Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw, and neugerriemschneider, Berlin.