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Reinventing Venus and a Lying Puppet

A Review of the Jim Dine Show at the Nassau County Museum of Art

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3 VESSELS "Ex Voto" (2002) is among the Jim Dine works on view at the Nassau County Museum of Art. Credit Courtesy of The Pace Gallery, 2012 Jim Dine/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Emblems of mass culture and everyday life were divvied up rather quickly in the early days of Pop Art. Jasper Johns, more of a neo-Dada artist than a Pop artist, took the American flag, targets, maps and numbers. Andy Warhol opted for movie stars and other A-list celebrities. Roy Lichtenstein painted comics, and Claes Oldenbourg sculptured mass-produced food. Jim Dine, who was also involved in Happenings in the late 1950s, got greeting-card hearts, garden-shed tools, Pinocchio and, a bit later, the Venus de Milo.



A wood carving, “The Crying Sand,” from 2006. Credit Courtesy The Pace Gallery, 2012 Jim Dine/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A wood carving, “The Crying Sand,” from 2006. Credit Courtesy The Pace Gallery, 2012 Jim Dine/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York All these subjects from Mr. Dine’s career make an appearance in “Sculpture/Jim Dine/Pinocchio,” a selection of work, made mostly in the last decade, on view at the Nassau County Museum of Art. The show highlights, in particular, Mr. Dine’s sculptures and prints of Pinocchio, the protagonist in the 1883 children’s book by Carlo Collodi (the pen name of Carlo Lorenzini), which was later adapted, with significant alterations, into a 1940 animated film by Walt Disney Productions. The galleries devoted to Pinocchio — and particularly Mr. Dine’s prints — are the best in the exhibition. Much of the sculpture, however, is rather tepid.

Part of this is simply the legacy of Pop Art. Because while making paintings and sculptures based on banal objects and characters from the mass media was a radical move in the ’50s or ’60s, particularly after the brooding, existential gestures of Abstract Expressionist painting, Pop Art was quickly embraced and assimilated. Work like Mr. Dine’s, in which recognizable characters or objects are redrawn, with some of the gestures and drips of Abstract Expressionism preserved, now looks rather pedestrian and tame.

Pinocchio has appeared in Mr. Dine’s work since the ’60s. In theory, the subject is a rich one: a wood carver named Geppetto makes a puppet, out of a talking log, no less, and that puppet, Pinocchio, dreams of becoming a “real” boy. The only problem is that the puppet also has a knack for getting into trouble and telling lies, which makes his nose grow.

Pinocchio serves as a perfect allegory for illusionistic sculpture: a piece of wood that dreams of becoming a human being. But where Pinocchio’s bad behavior and notoriously extending proboscis have made him a prime subject for Paul McCarthy and other postmodern artists interested in, say, psychoanalysis, Mr. Dine’s Pinocchio is an insipid chap — more Disney, in general, than 19th-century Gothic children’s literature.

He grins impishly out of lithographs or woodcuts or gets translated rather literally into wood, as in “White Gloves, 4 Wheels” (2007), where the figure perches on a pallet outfitted with wheels and spattered with paint, his arms thrust outward. In “The Crying Sand” (2006), Pinocchio’s neutral coloring links him bluntly with his fictional wooden origins, while in another wooden piece, “Pinocchio at Night” (2004), the artist attempts to turn him into a darker character, literally, by coloring the sculpture with dark enamel paint.



“Primary Ladies” (2008), a work in bronze. Credit Courtesy of The Pace Gallery, 2012 Jim Dine/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

It should be noted that the prints made to accompany a 2006 translation of “Pinocchio,” which Mr. Dine illustrated, are more interesting. There are 36 hand-painted lithographs on view, along with layouts of the text; the book itself is for sale in the museum’s bookstore. Here, Mr. Dine’s images serve as expressive accompaniments to a translated version of the original text, in which Pinocchio fights off knife-wielding assassins, does prison time and gets eaten by a fish before making it to the promised land of boyhood. It is a reminder of why Collodi’s book became a classic of children’s literature.



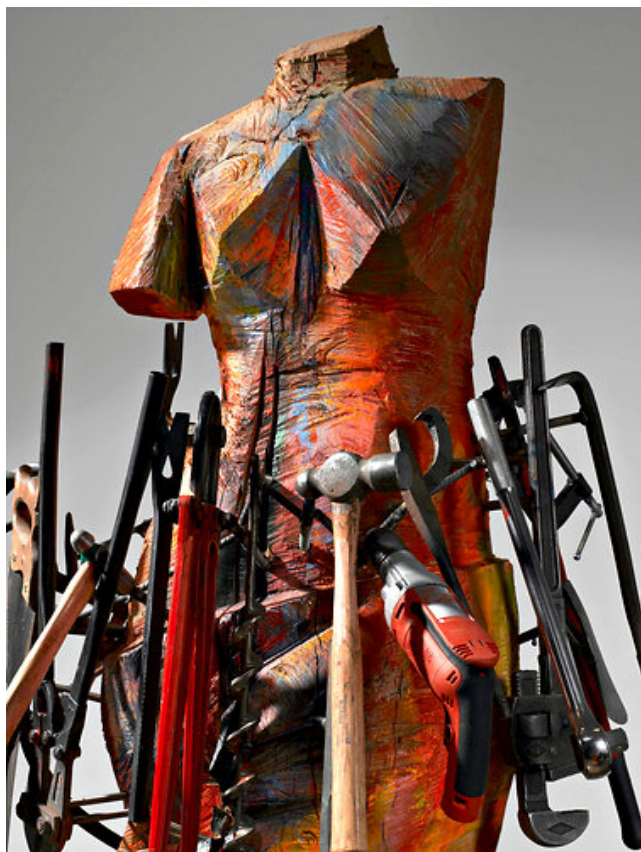
One of the dozens of lithographs on display, from 2006. Credit Courtesy of Pace Prints, 2012 Jim Dine/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Mr. Dine’s other recurring motifs — hearts, tools and Venuses — are scattered throughout the other galleries and the museum grounds. A trio of bronze hearts, or roughly similar-shaped objects, sits on the patio just outside the main gallery. One is shaped vaguely like a human heart; another, like a classic valentine heart; and the third, a bit like an ancient vessel. The title, “Ex Voto” (2002), refers to the devotional images and objects offered to deities, which have traditionally included, in some parts of the world, crucifixes with a bleeding heart at their center. Though the piece contains glimmers of the semiotic wordplay that Mr.

Johns engaged in with his neo-Dada works, “Ex Voto” feels like a facile latter-day version of the exercise.

There are sculptures that recreate the Venus de Milo in rough-hewn wood. One, “The Wind and Tools (A Glossary of Terms)” (2009), includes three Venuses, roughly painted, with rebar (steel reinforcing rods), saws, hammers and other tools attached like floating belts around their waists. “Primary Ladies” (2008) features three painted-bronze Venuses, while “The Garden of Eden” (2003) is a trellis-like armature studded with tools and miniature Venuses and slathered with colorful paint.

Throughout, you feel Mr. Dine’s sense of playfulness at work. (This is a very child-friendly show.) But there isn’t much to the work beyond this irreverence for traditional sources and attempts to make them new, except when his skillful drawings are accompanied, as in the prints upstairs, by text. Where the best Pop Art was a complex and nuanced response to the prospect of culture devolving into kitsch — that is, it was hard to tell whether artists were celebrating or critiquing the onslaught of mass production and media culture — Mr. Dine’s sculpture over the years has fallen largely into kitsch itself. It is an academicized version of something that was once rather avant-garde; it is also easily digestible.



Detail of “The Wind and Tools (A Glossary of Terms),” from 2009, of rebar and found objects on wood. Credit Courtesy of The Pace Gallery, 2012 Jim Dine/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Mr. Dine's recent work retains vestiges of what made Pop exciting: that is, the use of popular characters and everyday objects and motifs in painting and sculpture. By now, however, none of this is remarkable enough to be seen only in a museum. Though Mr. Dine's prints function rather well as book illustration, for the most part, his sculptures would not look out of place in a restaurant, airport or hotel room.

"Sculpture/Jim Dine/Pinocchio," Nassau County Museum of Art, 1 Museum Drive, Roslyn Harbor, through July 8. Information: nassaumuseum.org or (516) 484-9337.