

MICHAEL REES

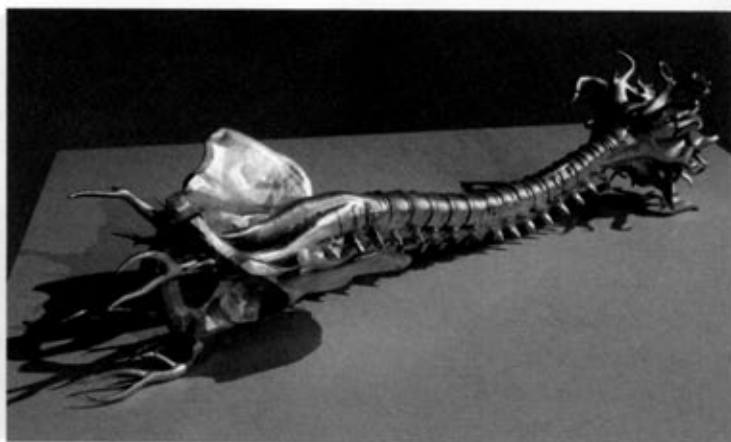
“MODEL BEHAVIOR”

by William V. Ganis

We have inherited “figurative” and “abstract” from mid-twentieth-century formalist discourse, especially as Clement Greenberg, among other critics, posited that artistic progress was a move toward abstraction and self-reference in any single (and isolated) medium. This argument works especially well when abstraction is grounded in the materiality of pigments and canvas, or bronze and patination. But photographic media have complicated the abstraction/realism dichotomy. We might recall the paradox of Aaron Siskind’s “abstract” photographs that show peeling paint or torn posters. Photography has to be an image of something; even at its most conceptual level, it captures conditions of light. As such, this medium renders everything an “image”—not exactly “abstract” or “figurative” but more a range of “unrecognizable” to “identifiable.”

Another thought neatly alters the well-worn figurative/abstract dichotomy. In his essay for the *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting* survey,¹ the critic Barry Schwabsky discusses a conceptual and linguistic level for art-making whereby today “a painting is not only about a painting but also the representation of an idea about painting” and “the painting is not there to represent the image; the image exists in order to represent the painting.”² These ideas are extended to sculpture whereby in addition to the baggage of history, “figuration” is a vehicle to give the viewer a foothold in order to reveal the sculptural approach and mediation—we must remember that sculpture, whether realistic or nonfigurative, is still always an abstraction.

Michael Rees’s October 2009 exhibition titled, “Model Behavior,” at the Deborah Colton Gallery in Houston, Texas, allows us to ponder, especially given the theme of this *Sculpture Review* issue, whether or not the opposing poles of “figurative” and “abstract” are still valid for sculptural criticism. Rees shows different concepts of abstraction beyond the widely understood notions of optical reduction and non-objectivity. Throughout his oeuvre, Rees employs



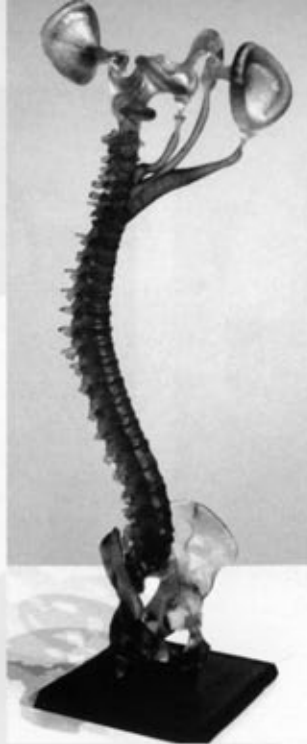
both visually recognizable and inchoate forms. While this show is centered on his cast-metal sculptures, Rees includes video, performance, and photography as reminders of his imaging sources.

The application of digital imaging to sculpture is a relatively recent phenomenon; and such image-making is a photographic extension, especially as many of the inputs (digital photos, flatbed scanning, and laser scanning) are photographic in nature. We might substitute the “model” from the exhibition’s title as a shorthand that describes how in digital environments, everything (whether geometries, texts, portraits, or biforms) is leveled into an image. I bring this up because Rees has used digital 3D modeling as a creative locus throughout the past decade. Even when he brings back the hand in these new pieces, Rees references forms that come from digital spaces and prototypes. For instance, the letters in these works are derived from a computer application he designed, the Sculptural User Interface (SUI). In short, based on user inputs, this program models text in a virtual 3D environment to make chains of characters and stereo images. As evidenced by their crude polygon artifact, the sculpted fingers and feet come from Rees’s digital animations that are first realized as digital prototypes and altered by the very physical casting and handwork.


Rees has been an innovator and advocate for artistic uses of digital imaging technologies as evidenced by the inclusion of his writings and art in Edward Shanken’s *Art and Electronic Media*,³ arguably the definitive text on digital technologies used in the service of art. Rees’s works from the last decade (and especially his *Putto* sculptures) have often been slick-surfaced and realized through digital modeling and computer-numeric-controlled and rapid-prototype sculpting. It is paradoxical that this artist also engaged in intensive, hands-on modeling processes to create distanced, machine-made looks. Materials such as LuminOre (sprayable metal), automobile paint, polycarbonate, and plastic foam heighten the viewer’s affective separation and the sense of robo-facture.

The exhibition “Model Behavior” includes a yellow-orange glass *Ajna Spine Series 2.22 cast* (1996–2009) made gorgeous through its translucency and color modulation. In this show, this object functions as a foil because of its chilly beauty and the “how did he do that?” astonishment educed by its intricacy. While Rees celebrates the possibilities brought about by such technologies, he is weary of the fetishization they can bring, especially in lieu of conceptual rigor. He also realizes that the artist’s hand is removed from much of the making process. In an interview from the exhibition catalog, Rees describes an important difference between the material and digital: “The virtual space in some way is uncommitted, un-doable. Multiple things can take place non-destructively. It can play out and be played endlessly. Authored endlessly. Physical space and its processes demand commitment.”⁴ The physical modeling and textural artifacts left by casting also engage the viewer’s body—one can relate to the hand’s organic marks and the surface and volumetric “imperfections.” Such surfaces resonate with bodily sensuality and allow the viewer to empathize with the process.

We might comprehend another level of abstraction as Rees incorporates human parts such as hands, feet, and fingers that he sees as synecdoches—extremities that stand in for the entire body. Pairings and oppositions, in works such as *Finger Flag* (2009), further such references by evoking the human body’s bilateral structure. This employment of parts to denote something larger is abstraction as a visual/verbal distillation. It matters little how optically realistic these body parts appear to the viewer. Rees gives a range of sculpted forms—some detailed, some summarized, some distorted—all of these parts denote the whole. The letters in these sculptures are markers of language itself; they are also physical manifestations of abstract signifiers. The letters do not amount to conventional legibility, but juxtaposed with the (implied) body, they connote speech, utterances. Rees’s typographical feat is to make the “S”s and



“Y”s connect or convey the toes, feet, and fingers as improbable linguistic torsos, an embodiment of language.

In the last decade, Rees has moved fluidly between abstraction and figuration, but also along axes of virtuality, reality, and physicality. Well into the twenty-first century, Rees’s complex imaging strategies remind us that even though this abstract/figuration dichotomy remains important within our common descriptive language, its binary structure is endemic to a historical and political situation from which we are now quite removed. Today, such poles read as formalist, critical laboratory conditions that artificially control for the robust possibilities of imaging, mediation, performance, and language. 

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NOTES:

1. Barry Schwabsky, introductory essay in *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting* (New York: Phaidon, 2002).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. Edward Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media* (New York: Phaidon, 2009).
4. Michael Rees and Thyrsa Goodeve, “Excerpts from a Conversation, August 2009” in *Model Behavior: Michael Rees, exhibition catalog* (Houston: Deborah Colton Gallery, 2009), p. 21.

Opposite page: Spine Tree by Michael Rees (2009), silver plated bronze, 4 inches high.

On this page, top: Ajna Spine Series 2.22 glass (1996–2009), cast glass, 20 inches high.

On this page, middle: Foot S Curve to Toe by Michael Rees (2009), detail, cast aluminum with aluminum tape, painted plinth, 33 inches high.

On this page, bottom: Tree Mirror Tree by Michael Rees (2008–2009), cast silver, 6 inches high.