

NICK RENSHAW

Nick Renshaw specializes in clay figures. Any given example may suggest a child in a Halloween costume based on a cartoon superhero, a masked pro wrestler à la Nacho Libre, an alien from outer space, a mummy, a participant in a sado-masochistic rite, or maybe just the kind of casually dressed person one walks right by in a mall. Most Renshaw figures rely on a basic form that seems pretty ordinary, and that is the way the artist wants it, because the roundedness and nondescript “friendly” and “unthreatening” shape makes them “easy to approach.” But Renshaw shows that along with subtle nuances of pose and gesture, the color and pattern of the glazing can make all the difference, and even turn friendliness into menace. Art, he says, is “about drawing feeling from someone,” and his art explores the whole spectrum of emotions.

Ceramic figural sculpture is an odd realm. There have been distinguished individual artists: Viola Frey, Stephen De Staebler, Akio Takamori. Yet it is hard to find general trends, groups, or movements. That may be because figural sculpture occupies such an unusual position in modern art. There have been standouts such as Giacometti and Henry Moore. But perhaps only Antony Gormley, with his archaic ur-men, seems at all close to Renshaw, unless we were to consider the Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer, with his futuristic, almost robotic figures and costume designs.

Renshaw has lived in the Netherlands for more than a decade. Though he never expected to stay that long, it seems clear he needed to establish some distance from England and especially the traditionalism of English ceramics, which he found constricting. Going to the Netherlands, like some time spent earlier at Alfred University in the United States, gave him a sense of independence and freedom, and helped him shift to a more sculptural, conceptual, and experimental approach. Renshaw has worked with video, and once made an installation that included large drawings as well as structures made from non-ceramic materials. A commission for a school in the Netherlands combined a large-scale outdoor sculpture, a set of small sculptures and artifacts in a wood case (recalling Mark Dion and other devotees of cabinets of curiosity), and a painting that utilized the non-ceramic skills Renshaw acquired in art school. Yet he is concentrating on his figures now, because he still sees unexplored possibilities. During his residency he made one sculpture pierced by bars, and cut another into horizontal slices, opening up an opportunity for what he described as “sketching with the figure.”

Renshaw insists upon the need to do something new, to “mix it up” and “unlimit” himself in relation to material and technique. He keeps a huge stack of pictures that he uses to remind himself of what might seem a collective memory of a particular period or trigger a personal memory from his own past. Looking at people in the photographs helps shape his sense of pose and gesture, the body language that is so important in his work. Renshaw does preparatory drawings, but always makes change part of the process, as when he uses a series of firings to redefine the character of a figure. For him, touch is of crucial importance in modeling the clay and controlling the glaze, key aspects of creating the surface qualities that help make a sculpture come alive. Clay, he says, “holds that moment,” the moment of creation.

When he arrived in Minneapolis, Renshaw made a list that included “graphic images,” “graffiti,” “humor, irony, contrast,” “use of photos,” “patterning,” and “stacked structures.” He has followed that informal program, and in the process demonstrated why for him the figure seems such a perfect vehicle for expressing, in his words, “everything I want to say.”

Deep Blue Suspension

2007

63 cm x 33 cm x 36 cm

stoneware