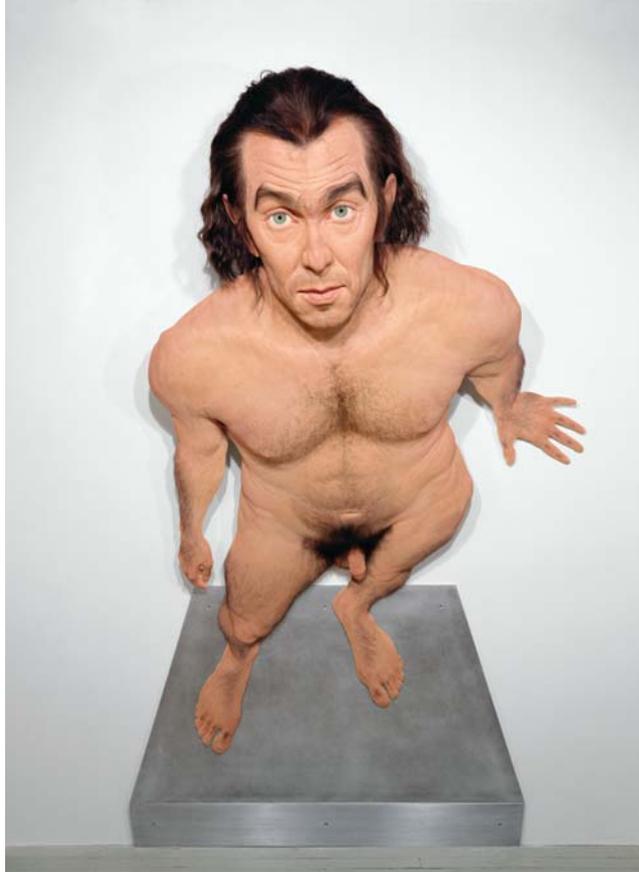


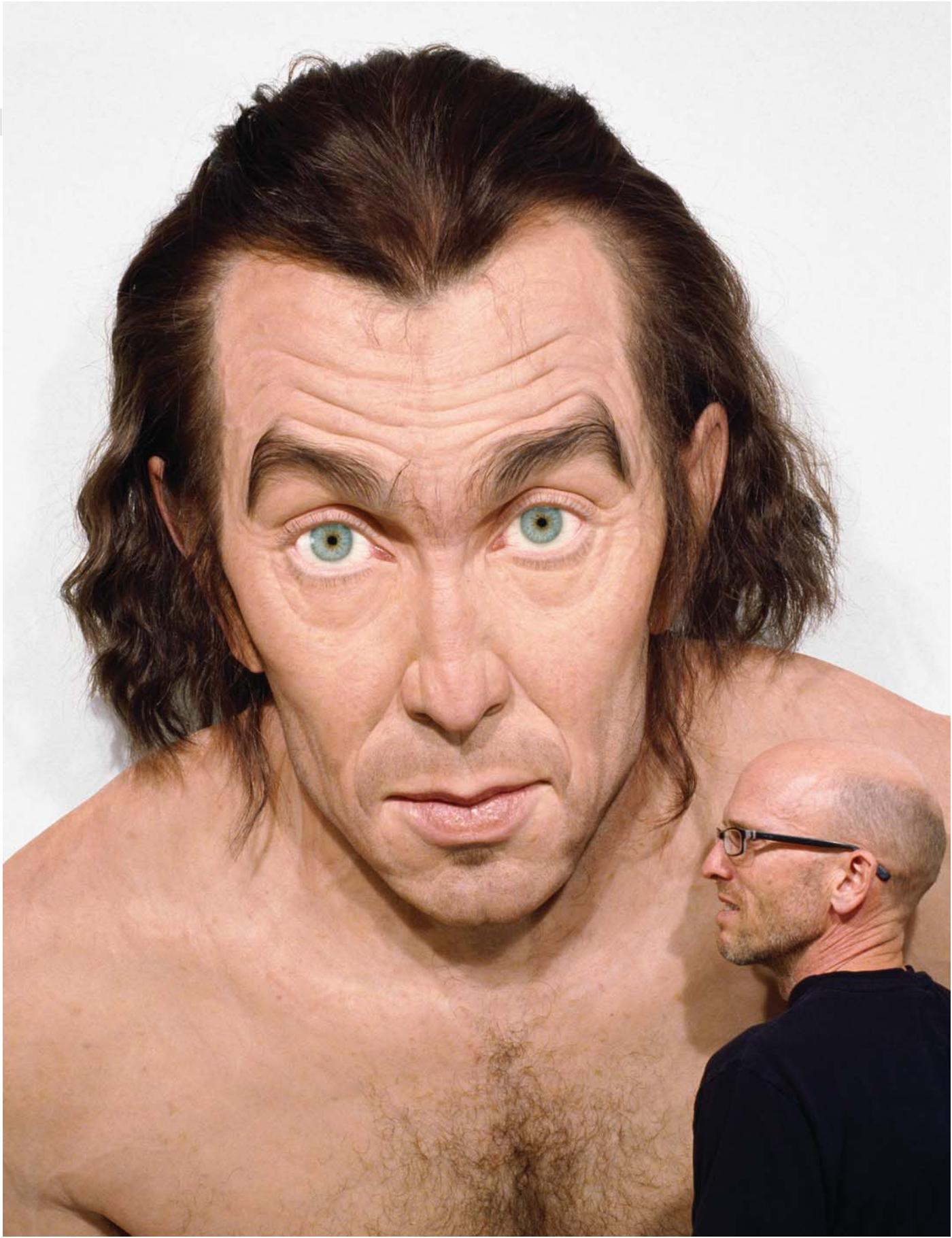
THE ARTFUL DOUBTER

EVAN PENNY & THE MAKING OF EXTRAORDINARY OBJECTS



ROBERT ENRIGHT AND MEEKA WALSH

The one thing about which Evan Penny is certain is that art is about uncertainty. He has a more elaborate description of this condition—he calls it the “doubtful process that looking really specifically is all about”—but at the core of his aesthetics is a recognition that all art making is characterized by its mere approximation to the real. Because of this contingency, he is insistent upon the fact that he is not a realist, since all such representations are subject to an “implicit artificiality.” As Penny himself puts it, “the underlying idea is that the real can’t be represented or symbolized, so what you’re left with is representation.”



preceding pages: *Aerial #2*, 2006, silicone, pigment, hair, aluminium, 269 x 152 x 33 cm. Photographs courtesy: Sperone Westwater, New York; Trépanier Baer, Calgary, and the artist.

More and more, he has exploited the artificiality of that art of representation; his “Stretches,” “Anamorphs” and the series called “No One - in Particular” all take as their departure the idea of the real. In this last series, he has made portraits of people who don’t actually exist; they are constructs produced through his lifelong looking at what things and people really do look like, and through his virtuoso ability to make a sculpture to which we can attach belief. What we believe, of course, is not their being as real individuals, but their existence as sculptural objects that suggest the possibility of being real.

Penny is always hovering on the cusp of this kind of intelligently questionable representation. When we say that something is realistic, we mean that it corresponds to the way things look and act in the domain of appearances. Penny plays with those expectations. What makes his sculptures so compelling, and so unsettling, is that their energy is in direct proportion to how far they depart from reality; their strangeness is measured in our appreciation of the distance between what we anticipate and what we get.

One of the effects of his production is that he is rehabilitating the idea of the monstrous. We tend to regard the monster as anything (or any figure) whose features deviate from the norm. As a rule, we associate these exaggerations—depending on how extreme they are—with the monstrous and they are variously unpleasant or frightening. But in Penny’s hands, these dramatic distortions assume qualities that are mesmerizing and even humorous. This is not to say that they can’t be unsettling (the word that comes up repeatedly in written and spoken reactions to his work is “repellent”) but that the intelligence of his drift towards the grotesque softens its hard edge. Looking at a Penny sculpture is often an exercise in frustration precisely because you can’t fix the figure being considered; the piece called *L. Faux: CMYK*, 2001-05, makes you think you’re on a bad trip or in the process of watching a human being morph into something otherworldly. The fine irony is that the piece is very much of this world; the letters in the title refer to the colour spectrum—cyan, magenta, yellow and black—from which commercially printed images are derived. *L. Faux* turns out to be less monstrous than just off-register. Similarly, *Madrieno, # 1*, 2005, makes the act of looking an experience that borders

on the vertiginous. You can never quite settle in to a clear-cut apprehension of the piece; instead, for as long as you look at it, you are engaged in a field of perceptions, all of which vibrate with confusing possibility.

Penny’s skill in articulating his figures and his equivalent ability to be articulate about what his art is doing is an irresistible combination, as the following interview makes abundantly clear. From his days as a young artist in Calgary, Alberta, he has asked himself, “How do you do figurative sculpture and make it relevant and contemporary when the terms are shifting constantly?” On the evidence of his extraordinary art, he seems to have found the answer to that vexing question.

Evan Penny was interviewed by Robert Enright and Meeke Walsh in his Toronto studio on April 8, 2006.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *What are your memories of South Africa before you came to Canada?*

EVAN PENNY: My father is a missionary doctor and I was born in a small missionary town in northern South Africa. We moved quite a bit from there to what was then the Belgian Congo and ended up in Zimbabwe, in Bulawayo, which is actually very close to where my father grew up. So my father is Zimbabwean by nationality and my mother is South African from Durban. My father’s was a medical mission but there was definitely a religious outreach attached to it. They were funded by missionary organizations, which was pretty much the norm. A lot of Third World outreach is done through religious organizations.

BC: *Were you raised in a strict religious home, and has that stayed with you?*

EP: Yes, and, to the second question, no.

BC: *Why did your family move to Canada?*

EP: It had to do with the church organization. My father went to Chicago in the late ’50s to upgrade his studies in tropical medicine and while he was in Chicago the opportunity came up to work in northern Canada. This was also at the time when Britain was preparing to give what was then Rhodesia its independence and I think my folks were very aware that both their boys would end up in the Service and there was a very high probability that one of us wouldn’t have made it through.

BC: Was Alberta a radical shift from what you were used to?

EP: I mostly grew up in cities—either Bulawayo or Durban—and I had only had a couple of encounters with small towns before Hay River, which was a small town. As kids, we loved it because it was an adventure, but it was particularly hard on my mother. My father always had a sense of being fulfilled by what was Third World medical outreach and so the harsher and the more remote it was, the happier he was. I think my mom was okay with that so long as it was inside a culture with which she was familiar, but the shock of being an immigrant and then moving to northern Canada was too much. There was not much up there. It was terrific but not if you were used to fresh food, for instance. So we moved to Edmonton within a couple of years.

BC: When did your aptitude for art making begin?

EP: Pretty early on and it was sculpture. But I don't think I had a strong sense of it. My mother tells the story that my art teacher in Zimbabwe—this would have been in grade two or three when I was making Plasticine animals—told her that I was a sculptor and should be encouraged. When we moved up north, there were no art classes to speak of, so they hired a tutor for me and my sister, who also went to art school. But it was caricature and drawing between the lines.

BC: So was the die cast and you knew you wanted to go to art school?

EP: Not at all. I basically had to go through the whole elimination process with the various professional options before I defaulted into art school. It was a descending list, starting with Doctor. I was pretty outdoorsy when I was a kid, too, so biology was on the list for a while. It stopped at Forest Ranger but my academic standing was such that I didn't even matriculate. What happened was that by grade 12 I had started taking art classes and I basically escaped school by hanging out in the art rooms. I was very lucky that there was a good art school instructor who had a sense of the possibility of being a professional artist and he really encouraged me.

BC: You studied at the Alberta College of Art and I know that Alberta was a place where Greenbergian formalism had made its presence felt. Were you having to react to that?

EP: At that time the dynamic was really Edmonton versus Calgary—and still is, I suppose—and they were very different cities. Formalism was much more evident in Edmonton, whereas it was resisted in Calgary. I think that's a function of the fact that Calgary had a much more mature art community. It was older, the art school had been there for a long time, and it was rooted in an early modernist, figurative landscape tradition. In Edmonton, Greenbergian formalism was connected to the university. It was a new community and basically they were filling a vacuum and they filled it with the radically new. There was a spillover. I don't think you could be an artist in Alberta through those years and not be aware of Greenbergian formalism. You had to have some kind of relationship to it and I certainly did. You simply had to work through it.

BC: In 1977, when Tony Caro saw your work at the Emma Lake Workshop, didn't he advise you to stick with figuration? I assume you were wanting to work as an assemblage sculptor?

EP: That's what I did in my final year at the college—steel, constructivist stuff. Caro's response was a big surprise. There is a bit of a contradiction here because Calgary was always supportive of figurative work; on the one side because it was a very conservative place but on the other because it was eclectic and valued difference and diversity. So there wasn't any stigmatization if you wanted to study figurative sculpture, but in general that wasn't the case. Nonetheless, there was still this crisis: how can you be a contemporary artist and a figurative sculptor? It was perceived as a contradiction in terms. So having the David Smith/Anthony Caro steel constructivist option was a necessary one to explore. But my first glimpse that it might be possible to pursue a figurative direction probably did come from Anthony Caro and I didn't expect to hear that. To see him operate was very dynamic. He's creative in his thinking and very gregarious in how he worked with ideas and with others, so I guess we shouldn't be so surprised. He was a prime beneficiary of the formalist genre but in lots of

The trick of illusion is withdrawal of information. You withdraw enough information until the eye can't make the distinction and then it's an illusion.

ways he was above it. What he did there with limited, lightweight stock was terrific. I still get a real kick when I see one of them.

BC: *Was it a difficult process to work through formalism?*

EP: It was a real crisis. What the encounter with Anthony Caro gave me was the courage to do it. Then it really became—and this has been an ongoing problem—how do you do it? I was essentially coming out of a sculpture program where we spent a lot of time with the model and it was relatively free of any thing other than this direct observational relationship to the model. I think that was my first insight into how to get around the baggage of history: it really had to do with the specificity of observation.

BC: *I get a sense that you were looking more at Rodin and Bernini than you were at Duane Hanson and John DeAndrea. Your natural tendency, because of your reliance on looking, would be to make the figure with clay rather than replicating it through a different methodology.*

EP: I have never thought of myself as a realist. Until recently, I've always been resistant to that. I accept it more now. I never felt I had a relationship to either Hanson or DeAndrea. Those connections were made because there was just so little out there. The connection was even less with Rodin, although, as of late, I feel it more, but for me it was with Cézanne and Giacometti. Those were the obvious ones, because the art was really about the uncertainty, that doubtful process that looking really specifically is all about. It's about the subjectivity of perception. Essentially, the harder you look, the more uncertain those relationships become. The paradox is that as you become more specific, the thing becomes harder and harder to represent, or to describe.

BC: *So Cézanne's close looking at the particular site of Mont Sainte-Victoire generates a perceptual epistemology of doubt?*

EP: And Giacometti takes it further. It's connected to the mechanics of perception and the fact that we see spatially in a very uncertain way. Our spatial perception is very vague and involved in constant flux, depending on light, colour and proximity. And the specificity of Cézanne's work is in not nailing what this looks like but in describing the three-way relationship between the object, the artist and the thing being made.

*(Fat) No One – In Particular
#7, Series 2, 2006, silicone,
pigment, hair, fabric,
aluminium, 110 x 93 x 19 cm.*





(Old) Stretch #1, 2006,
silicone, pigment, hair,
fabric, aluminium,
93 x 20 x 7 cm.

BC: So it's in that sense that you talk about the limited success of your pieces. It explains why you could never be happy with them, because the process of perception would never allow you to be. You're more critical of your work than is any critic I've read.

EP: It always does end up in a kind of failure because that process isn't about nailing something down, but in trying to keep the process open as long as possible. If you can build a framework that allows you to hold that process in suspension, then you can gather more information in relationship to that process, until eventually your framework collapses. That's a very disappointing moment: it's when the piece moves from having potential to not having potential. But it's fine because then you move on.

BC: Your work opens up all kinds of possibilities as you go along. You always seem to have momentum. Is that an inevitable consequence of the way you think about making art?

EP: To tell you the truth, I experience it as a series of collapses. Momentum and then collapse. It's almost like a roller coaster: you exhaust a certain process and you go into this inevitable decline; then you have to retool and reinvent in order to find another platform to work from. That was particularly the case with the middle period. With the intensely figurative work, the early work and the stuff I'm working on now, there has been more of a tendency for evolution; you just follow the mutations of the process. With the early work, each time you started a new figure, you started in a new place and it was really a progressive process. The new work shifts laterally a bit more but it still has some of the evolutionary features of the early work. But in the middle—from the monumental "Heads" to the "Skin Drawings," the early "Anamorphic" pieces and the "Body Form" pieces—all that work was really a project-to-project exercise. They were much more discrete and they were designed not to evolve. They had the kind of frameworks that you would work within and then move on.

BC: Did you know you were on to something with the figurative pieces in 1979 and '80?

EP: I did but I don't think I had confidence in it. Like a lot of young artists, I had great instincts and a huge necessity, and in combination those things drove the process. But it was subject to a lot of self-doubt that



wasn't always healthy. I think I convinced myself to let it go because I didn't have any confidence that it was breaking ground.

BC: *Did you choose the four-fifths scale because it forced people to recognize that the figures weren't cast?*

EP: It became part of the strategy as I was informed that's what I was doing. That's the way it really works, you start out naïvely and your impulses become your themes. There was also the pragmatics of not having a lot of money, not having a lot of time and not feeling I could take on a bigger project.

BC: *Then why not three-fifths scale?*

EP: Initially, it was a measurable scale. By the time I was doing the four-fifths-scale pieces, it was a clear idea. One of the early works was *Norma*, which was one of the only full-scale sculptures I did. At that moment I could afford to do a full-scale piece. It was really that simple. The thing about that early work was that it was coming out of art school practices and I didn't know what they were going to look like. Each time I did one, it was really quite different from what I imagined when I started. They were genuinely transformative; there was this leap-and-bounds quality to them. It's not until you see two or three of them that you get a sense of what's happening. But that took four years. So by the time I'd done the full-sized one of *Norma* and then a three-quarter-sized one of *Janet*, I had a frame of reference to start to imagine that idea. What came after that were the four-fifths-scale pieces where I realized that beneath a certain scale they just became small objects, and that beyond a certain scale there was this one-on-one relationship that brought them into a more direct relationship to life and to body-casting. So the four-fifths is about as large as you can go while being clearly underscaled.

BC: *Was Ali a special character for you?*

EP: It certainly became that. At the time I was just taking one step in front of the other. That piece really did deviate from the works that had preceded it. I wanted to divest my work of any historic associations by neutralizing the gesture. You could strip away the historic baggage and focus on this direct relationship to the model. With *Ali* I started pulling some of that stuff back in and, at the same time, it was the first piece I put hair on. Technically, I don't think it was successful in terms of going that extra step because as soon as you

put hair on, you're dramatically fine-tuning expectations. So it became a highly problematic piece because it was supercharged in terms of its historic baggage and because its technical faults exacerbated the problem. At the same time, it really pushed the observational process. The actual detail was so over-the-moon compared to what I had done until that point. So all these features naïvely came together. It turned into a very tough piece to contend with because it's like a lightning rod. It represents the best and worst of whatever you imagine representation to be.

BC: *Because it implicates the gaze and because of fetishization?*

EP: Yes. With the earlier work, my instincts were always to dissociate.

What I was trying to do was layer the information so that you got multiple reads. I think ultimately that happens but because it's so intense, the immediate relationship collapses any kind of critical distance. Wherever you're coming from is where that piece takes you. To be perfectly honest, *Ali* was responsible for my stopping doing the figures. It scared me that much. I was in territory I didn't understand and I thought I had control. I realized that representation is a very powerful thing in and of itself, and is very murky.

BC: *It's a kind of voodoo?*

EP: It is a kind of voodoo. Those are the words I use: either a lightning rod or voodoo because that's how that piece operates.

BC: *You used the phrase "critical distance," which has an interesting application to Ali, because she makes distance critical. When she's in a room, you can never get away from her.*

EP: You're just sucked right in. That piece really shocked me because it went places well beyond what I felt I had any relationship to. It horrified me, too, because it's harsh. Also, I've never given a piece more loving attention. It's a work that contains those sorts of extremes. I probably have it to thank for making me aware that what I was really about was representation. That's the subject and, by definition, representation is murky and full of grey. If it's not, then you're probably not doing a very good job and your work is not very interesting.

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facing page:
Female Anamorph
 #2, 2006, silicone,
 pigment, hair,
 aluminium, fabric,
 158 x 32 x 15 cm.

So I have more confidence in that in the new work. I have to accept that I'm implicated in one way or another. I have to be smart about what I'm doing and recognize that you don't have ultimate control. This is supercharged territory.

BC: *Was the middle phase a way of getting back confidence because you would know more about what you were doing in this realm of representation?*

EP: Yes. It was certainly about knowing more. I don't think the 1980s were a particularly favourable time to be doing that kind of figurative work but I also think one of the problems I had was that I was never really interested in realist narrative, or in telling stories with the figures. And that expectation was always there. I was interested in the relationship to representing something and in observation, so it was a way of distancing myself further from that narrative potential and of quite literally spreading out the implications of what figura-

tion was and trying to develop a different vocabulary for it.

BC: *So everything about the figures—from their posture to the clothing they wear—was a way of not building story around them?*

EP: That's right. And even now with the "No One - in Particulars" I'm flirting with that. I'm really uncomfortable with that series. I recognize that if you're going to do figurative sculpture, this is part of the expectation and part of that history. Even in avoiding it, you're talking about it. So with the new work, that relationship to those ideas, like portraiture, which I've never been interested in, either, are at play. But I'm talking about portraiture, I'm not just doing it. So the "Backs," the "No One - in Particulars" and the "Anamorphic Stretches" all represent different features of portraiture. They're kind of skirting portraiture but dealing with the dynamics of portraiture by creating another framework. In that sense I think the work is modernist; it's always working within frameworks that involve the fragment, or that are serial and diffuse. They're connected more

to a process like montage or collage than to a realist storytelling impulse.

BC: *Did you actually make Ali again?*

EP: I did. There were half a dozen Alis really; there's the editioned Alis, but then there were spinoffs where they were altered. Part of it was I was trying to recontextualize what I had just done and another part was recognizing that the problem with that kind of figuration was a tendency to take a single position in relation to it. I wanted layers, I wanted it to read in a way where you could be more confident that they were multi-faceted and so I would do pieces that moved in slightly different directions. That's where the groupings with the classical features came into play.

BC: *It certainly seemed to be an engagement with the tradition of figurative sculpture; when you place two figures that look that different, in terms of palette, one classical and one contemporary, then you invariably set up a dialogue that is about historicism?*

EP: Yes, and it's also about a progressive loss of confidence in that single image. So, on the one hand, I'm broadening the vocabulary and bringing to the work a more informed, nuanced and layered reading, but, at the same time, I'm second-guessing myself and my viewer by not having confidence in the work's ability to do that. So, with the male pieces, that idea became much clearer. It started with the realistic piece, which I made a mould of in order to make the initial realist image, and then from the mould the clay fragment remained that I remoulded and that turned into the torso piece. Then, from that clay fragment, I built the classical version, which I again remoulded. So it was about a more dynamic and creative relationship to the mould, as well, which becomes progressively a part of the work.

BC: *I'm struck by how often in this conversation you've mentioned the word "confidence," or its lack. Clearly, one of the driving forces for you is a constant sense of doubt?*

EP: Yes, and that plays out in its most positive sense in its relationship to the perceptual process, that kind of observational doubt, which really is about specificity. I guess it's connected to this idea that the more you know, the less you know.

BC: *And you can't have doubt if you don't look hard? If you look superficially, the world is an easy place to see?*

EP: Yes, the more specific you are in seeing things, the more uncertainty there is.

BC: *You shifted away from the female as a subject to the male. The male is not without associations but he's not implicated in sexuality in the same way.*

EP: It was a definite feature of having done the *Ali* piece. It became very clear to me that I had to be more rigorous about that. Maybe it was a way of feeling more comfortable and being a little less contentious. I'm not sure ultimately that it's a good thing but that's the way it's been since then.

BC: *I assume you work hard to get your pieces to look a certain way?*

EP: Yes. With the earlier work, it was more about a kind of abstraction. For me it was equivalent to looking at a Cézanne. The sense of space and atmosphere and the play of all the elements are just so right to your eye and yet they're multiple and faceted and complex and in a state of flux. The early work was never about illusion, whereas now that relationship to illusion is more evident. Again, for me this is highly problematic turf. But what it has in common is the necessity to maintain the convincing-ness of the image. It has to be so believable that despite all the features that are telling you this is not real, this is not believable, this is artifice, another part of you is still believing it, still with it, and is maintaining that dynamic. But you can't get there by avoiding the craft; you have to go right into the craft to do it.

BC: *The literary phrase for what you're asking is "the willing suspension of disbelief." You give over to the fiction, you know they're not real and yet you commit to that recognition. It's a crazy contradiction.*

EP: I think that's where this relationship between illusion and representation is maintained. The trick of illusion is withdrawal of information. You withdraw enough information until your eye can't make the distinction and then it's an illusion.

BC: *So less is more in this regard?*

EP: With illusion, yes. You take away all those features that tell you this is not real until you're simply left in the illusion. Whereas, the thing here is that you present all that simultaneously. That's why I like the idea of displaying the photographs and the sculptures together. You have all these relationships right up front; it's really



literal, but you're still in this dynamic. If you're just looking at the sculptures, all the features are totally artificial—the scale, the flatness, the truncation—and yet, as you move around them, they distort and flatten and you're still in the illusion. There's a part of you that is so engaged that you're with it.

BC: *There must be something about Spain and Canadian artists that combines to create epiphanic moments. Jeff Wall saw a number of paintings in the Museo del Prado and he wanted to capture their drama. When he saw the light boxes advertising various products, he realized he'd found the method. You also had a major conversion in Spain in 1998 where you came back with the conviction that you were going to inquire into the relationship between sculpture and photography.*

EP: That's true. I get most of my ideas when I'm travelling. I find that when my ideas are on the wane, I just need to get out there. That was the case when I saw a show in Barcelona called "Artificial Contemporary Figuration." It dealt with the idea of the implicit

artificiality of all representations of the real. I know that and I've always known that my interest is in the subjectivity of perception, but in this exhibition I saw that more clearly in relationship to the photograph. On the one wall there were large portraits by Thomas Ruff and on another wall were these busts by Stefan Hablutzel, a Swiss sculptor. That was the first work I'd ever seen of his. They were not dissimilar to my new work—essentially frontal, busts, no back of the head, slightly compressed and slightly caricature-like. They weren't highly illusionistic but they set up this dynamic between similarly scaled photographic and sculptural images of the face. And, not coincidentally, in-between them was a Thomas Demand photograph. The Ruffs are so compelling that you fall into them and you can't help but establish this rapport with whoever that anonymous, neutral character is. You're just filling in all the gaps, which is something I understand because it's what I do in my work. Despite the fact that the Hablutzels were caricatures, there was a moment of authenticity and it was because they occupied physical space. They were in my space, but then, as I approached them, they

became progressively unreal. They were simply too big for themselves and not mediated in my space. In that moment I turned back to the Ruffs, which, because they were flat and didn't have any of those problems, were utterly believable again. So I experienced this kind of flip-flop where their validating mechanisms counteracted each other, and I realized I was interested in the space between.

BC: *And Thomas Demand was in the middle. You have in common aspects of a methodology.*

EP: The only difference is that I'm not as rigorous in terms of scale; I show the photographs and I don't destroy the model. But in lots of ways, what I've been doing in the last few years is re-enacting that scene on my own terms. What I'm doing is situating these sculptures somewhere between the way we see each other in real time and space—this conversational space that we're super highly attuned to in terms of understanding ourselves and the other, and the photographic image of ourselves or the other. My sculptures aren't situated between sculpture and photography; they're situated between this conversational, perceptual real-time space and the way we imagine ourselves in a photograph. For me, that's what's interesting.

BC: *I want to talk a bit about how people react to the objects you place in this interstitial space. The word "repellent" comes up frequently.*

EP: Sure, because it's our bodies. These are highly realistic, believable representations of the body and we're very sensitive to any anomalies in how we appear. It's about mortality. They don't conform to a healthy physical normal space and so they evoke that anxiety.

BC: *Early on you talked about the body as "a field of interpretation." Is the field getting narrower; are you focussing more and more? You're not working the "back 40" anymore; you're working a smaller lot.*

EP: Yes, in the sense that I'm willing to commit to territory. With the "Skin Drawings" there was a recognition that meaning floods in to fill the void and it was a valid project to see how long you could suspend meaning. That's all they were; they were a recognition that skin is supercharged and that you can't even say the word without its being filled with associations. I back myself into new territories: the logic is an inverted one, based

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on where you've been and how you have to reposition yourself in relation to previous occupation. So, for instance, the "Skin Drawings" were a process where I was aware that the early figures were all about surface. It wasn't about anatomy; it was about direct observation of everything I could see on the surface, and having a way of describing the complexity of that surface. Skin is just so supercharged.

BC: *Motherwell talked about the painting being "the skin of the world." In a way, you're a kind of intimate formalist when you get to the "Skin Drawings."*

EP: I think I am a formalist bred to the bone. I can't avoid it. But to be figurative and a formalist is a contradiction in terms and so I always have that to fall back on.

BC: *The "Back" views seem to be more formal.*

EP: Exactly. For me they connect to Cézanne again and to the "Skin Drawings." Post-painterly abstraction was all about the edge, which is what you have on the "Back Drawings"—surface and edge.

BC: *Was it different doing a self-portrait or are you just material to use?*

EP: Maybe I get to play a bit more and there are certain levels of perversion I get to indulge.

BC: *You did say that the entire body is an erogenous zone and that you admire its polymorphous perversity.*

EP: I like that idea and how it applies to the observational process, too. Everything is worthy of consideration, everything is supercharged. You just pay attention to it.

BC: *It occurs to me that "No One - in Particular" is the first time in your work where you play the role of god. You actually make people who don't exist.*

EP: The photograph does the same thing, which is why in certain cultures it has been forbidden. The capturing of the soul.

BC: *Well, the creating of the soul, not just its containment.*

EP: Right. Realist sculpture does that, as well. But I don't know that I imagine it that way. For me, it's probably more connected to semiotics. There's the sign of somebody. It just makes transparent the point that we're the ones who layer on all that meaning.

BC: *When I first saw the figures in "No One - in Particular," I didn't know you had made them up. But there*

Anamorph (Homage to Chuck's "Phil") #1, 2006, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, 110 x 15 x 7".

was something odd about them. Do you sense they look different from your other work?

EP: There are two series and they're slightly different ideas. The first series was based on this idea of simultaneous sameness and difference. The first series is one sculpture that's sculpted from the next sculpture. It's one piece of clay, so they really are from each other. I finish an image and then I mould it and I resculpt it. So that triangle—the scale, the space, the width and the distance between eyes and mouth—remains constant. Then you have difference on a much more superficial level, on costume and more surface-oriented shifts. They do have this zombie-like quality to them. They really are empty and that is quite intentional. But in the second series, I'm moving closer to our expectations in relationship to portraiture and the positioning and the nuances of character. So they're much more developed and each one is a very different sculpture, modelled not from each other but from their own place. Do those pieces feel as if they're as strange? Probably not, because I'm really pulling in more of the standard relationships we have to images in portraiture. There's much more anecdotal information. Again, this is territory I'm not comfortable in, it's territory I've avoided, and maybe I'm giving myself permission because I'm doing these other things, too. I'll set that right beside a "Stretch," and even the "Stretch" implies something I wouldn't have done in the past, which is caricature. Caricature is a feature of portraiture; it's that broad rendering of a character in a single, all-defining description. There's this kind of simplification. So on the one hand the "Stretches" imply caricature but they're not caricatures at all. They're actually rendered through taking a photograph, compressing it in the computer, seeing what it looks like and making my adjustments based on that. There is a very rigorous underlying observational process. I think the work is always doing that. If I'm flirting with something on the one hand, I'm probably distancing from it on the other.

BC: Do you think of yourself as a painter, too?

EP: Not really. Until very recently, if there was colour on the surface, I would have thought of it as a patina. In the new work, I'm more of a colourist. Definitely, the work that goes on in the mould, which is where the layers of silicone are put in, is very painterly now. With the silicone, your range is so limited and you have

to get it right. It's very unforgiving and you have to be pretty conservative about what you do because you can't change anything once it comes out of the mould. If it's too red, it's too red; if there's a big blotch, you can't cover it up. It also has to be done in one sitting because it's curing as you go. So it's a one-shot deal. But because I did quite a few of the "No One - in Particulars," the repetition helped me get my chops up and develop the ability to do these more sophisticated ones now.

BC: You mentioned patina. When you do Blue Murray, he's a very different read from others in the series. How do you make the determination about what you do with colour and how do those colours change things in your own aesthetic sense?

EP: That goes back a long way. Initially, it was about distancing from a certain slice-of-life reading. The early works were quite grey, quite neutral—it wasn't intended to be morbid, it was really intended to distance. But you can't do one without the other because it's the body. I had this ambivalence towards the coloured ones, especially with the early pieces, because they were so architectural. They were really about building and observation and the multi-faceted nature of detail being a by-product of structure. It's like when cells divide; you end up with more detail. As soon as you put colour on the surface, the imposition pretty much destroys the complex integrity of that structure. I've never felt comfortable with that and always felt there was this huge loss as soon as I put on the colour. So *Blue Murray* was another conversation with myself around those concerns. Specifically, it was responding to this feeling, when confronted with one of my naturalistically or grey-coloured pieces, that there's too much surface detail, so anxiety sets in. The blue piece was about trying to invert that and instead of its being about surface, it was about space.

BC: L. Faux seems to be a piece that people either love or are bewildered by because it's off-register. In lots of ways, it is a deeply frustrating piece to look at.

EP: That piece is so specific, you can't see it. It's kind of an absurdist exercise. I never felt more like I was shooting myself in the foot than when I was doing that piece. For one thing, it was so difficult. I thought, I'm killing myself doing this. I probably made it very hard because it's actually a portrait of the realistic sculpture, which already has too much detail. This one is a

multiple exposure, so it's the three images side by side with all that detail repeating. But not really—no bit of information is actually repeated because that bit of new information is beside another bit of information, which makes a unique bit of information. So if you actually look at it, there is no repetition. It would probably have been much easier to start from direct observation of a real person. I ended up taking a huge amount of detail out at the end because it was so active. This was the one piece that took me very strange places. It actually took a friend of mine to come to the studio and force me to stop because in progressively taking detail out, I was destroying the piece.

BC: *What more would you have done?*

EP: I guess I was trying to make it more coherent. I had gone so far in one direction. Also, it was too monstrous and I was afraid I was creating another monster.

BC: *Scale-wise or perception-wise?*

EP: Image-wise. Just in terms of how you feel and experience something, which is what happened with the *Ali* piece. It was so full of stuff that it could become monstrous. I was afraid I was making another piece like that, but that's the problem of representing the body in any kind of hyper or distorted way: you are actually creating monsters.

BC: *Your father would have been proud; you are a doctor. You're just Dr. Frankenstein.*

EP: Exactly. I'm aware that in creating a distortion about the body, we're not tolerant of too much distortion because it's monstrous, or it's dangerous. So that piece was becoming monstrous and I was trying to find a relationship to it that I was comfortable with, which I've never found. The one I'm most comfortable with is the last one I did, the *CMYK* piece, where the three colours are separated. I think the coherence, simplicity and clarity are there because you can see the three colours, and what's also clear is the reference to print as opposed to the real body. Finally, it's beautiful; the colours are just gorgeous. Technically, it's easily the best piece. It's a work I had to leave for quite a few years because I knew what I wanted to do, but I didn't have the ability to control the materials enough to do it.

BC: *You set a really rigorous standard for yourself. You talk about a lack of virtuosity in the work and yet you're moving in that direction.*

EP: Totally now. I think what we tend to do is skirt around virtuosity because we have a sense that within virtuosity is a narrowing containment. Maybe it has to do with the attitude and vocabulary we've inherited from Modernism. As you gain virtuosity, should you tie your arm behind your back and strap the



L. Faux 2 (Libby), 2005, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, 152 x 122 x 25 cm.

brush to your elbow to stay real? I agree that is one way, but another way is to go right through it and come out the other side. That's what good realism will do. It's not about realism; it's about passing through to a point where it becomes very unstable. I guess the underlying idea is that the real is that which cannot be represented; the real is that which cannot be symbolized; and so what you're left with is representation. That's what you can do. The paradox is that it isolates you, alienates you and removes you from the real. I think that's what the "Skin Drawings" are about. They equate the body with the real; the body is the field and the figure is

the interpretation. The figuration is the representation of the real, which is the body. That's the basic framework.

BC: *That's the paradox of the real?*

EP: Yes, and I think it's why realism tends to be denigrated because there is the assumption that, by definition, you don't get it. You're trying to make it real. I think we just know that. It's embedded.

BC: *A specific question: why are you doing Philip Glass?*

EP: That piece is going to be called *A Not So Close Approximation of Someone in Particular*.

BC: *But we'll know it's Philip Glass. It's unmistakable.*

EP: Is it? I don't know that yet but I'm hoping it's there. Again, it's just another twist. I'm limiting myself strictly to information that I can get either from published information or from his Web site. Just anecdotal stuff that has to do with the image.

BC: *Is the sense of play inside the project utterly necessary to keep you interested?*

EP: That's really all it is. The project is, how do you do figurative sculpture and make it relevant and contemporary

when the terms are constantly shifting? For the moment, the thing that is working is this relationship to the digital zeitgeist. These works have some sense of belonging to the present, which is a whole other conversation. How do you get figurative sculpture to attach itself to the present? It should be a no-brainer but it's a hard one. And the body is the answer. Maybe it's how you define something. When you speak of contemporary figurative sculpture—or, to be more specific, let's say realist figurative sculpture—those are loaded terms that situate the work in the past. But if, instead of realist, you say the real, or the representation of appearances, or the world of appearances like in photography; and instead of figurative, you say the body; and instead of sculpture, you talk about real time and space, the three-dimensional, the space of the making of stuff, then the possibilities are inexhaustible.

BC: *It's a good time for you, isn't it?*

EP: Yes. I think the new work is being received very differently. Something we haven't talked about is the contributing role the film work I did for so many years has had in that reception.

BC: *You started doing film work in 1990, didn't you?*

EP: Late '80s, actually. Ironically, it coincided with that period when I wasn't doing figurative work. I was doing the "Skin Drawings" and more abstract work. On the one hand, I was distancing myself from the figurative work, while on the other hand, my job required me to do even more realistic and illusionistic work. I was doing the very things I had avoided: stereotypical, anecdotal, hyper-illusionistic, goofy and monstrous caricatures—all the stuff I would never allow myself to come close to.

BC: *Was that contradiction weird for you?*

EP: It was a very difficult relationship because I always felt the film work was a threat to my artistic identity, as many artists feel who work in the film world. It's creative work and it seduces you away from your work through offering you a good livelihood. But you don't own it. It's somebody else's vision and as dynamic or as mundane as it might be, you have to do it. It's hierarchical and you're relegated to essentially a worker's status. You're never the star; it's never about you. That should make it easier because you go in and do your job, but as an artist, you can't not identify. Also, the kind of work I was doing was so technically demanding; you couldn't do it in half measures. The standards are very straightforward; it just doesn't have to look real, it has to be real.

BC: *Kennedy's exploded head for Oliver Stone had to look real?*

EP: It didn't have to look like Kennedy, it had to be Kennedy. There is no separation there; it's pure illusion; on film it has to be real. So that collapses an awful lot of the space I'm interested in working with, and it also puts you in a world that in so many ways is antithetical to an artist's world: the relationship to creative process. With the film work, you have your production meeting in the morning and by 10:00 a.m. you've figured out your solution and then you make it. That's not how you operate as an artist; you have your idea, you mull it over, it gestates, you let it evolve, it percolates and when it comes out, it looks

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totally different from what you thought. It's a very different process and yet is so easily confused because they use the same skill sets.

BC: *How have you reconciled them?*

EP: I didn't until I left. It was only once I started to distance myself from the film work that I could start bringing it in. It was also that moment in 1998 when the film work was on the way out. I was wanting to dig into some serious figurative work. I wanted to make extraordinary objects again. I'd really let that go with the early figures. The middle period was not about extraordinary objects; it was about being very distant from that idea. I think some of them were extraordinary—the best of the “Skin Drawings” were pretty lovely—but it really wasn't about that. I realized that not only am I not optimizing on the level of making something really extraordinary, I'm compartmentalizing myself. I guess the other factor was that Ron Mueck came on the scene just about the same time. Here was someone who stepped right into all the areas I was avoiding and, in his own very simple, direct way, he succeeded. *Dead Dad* is an extraordinary piece. There were all sorts of things in that piece that I could do but that I wouldn't allow myself to do. So I had to think about what am I avoiding here and why am I compartmentalizing and if I really wanted to make extraordinary objects, I needed to bring everything into play. Bring it all in: the early figures, the monumental heads, the “Skin Drawings,” the “Anamorphic” projections.

BC: *The monstrous?*

EP: And the monstrous. Don't be afraid to be implicated and bring in the film work. It all belongs because it's who I am. I think that bringing in the film work was the real gift because that's popular culture; it's about the here and now in the most obvious way. I think that's why the new work was better.

BC: *I'm taken by this ambition to make extraordinary objects.*

EP: I had those instincts early on but I think I was discouraged from doing that. The climate has been hostile to the idea of the extraordinary object because it's about believing in and committing to building something and on a certain level it implies a non-critical process. It shouldn't but it does. We're more comfortable with the idea of taking things apart. Dismantling the extraordinary

object seems like a more valid project. I think artists need to do that and we shouldn't be afraid to do it. But there are all sorts of ways we've been taken off our game, where we start to second-guess ourselves in maybe not the best ways. That relationship to doubt is important but it needs to be a productive doubt. ■



L. Faux CMYK, 2005, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, 152 x 122 x 25 cm.