Hybrid Dreams

Once known as a maker of lilliputian architecture, Charles Simonds has begun to explore his own psychic history—via figurative sculptures which rework the antique notion of the grotesque.

BY JOHN BEARDSLEY

There are bound to be those for whom the recent sculpture of Charles Simonds is disturbing, even irksome. Simonds was once appealingly picaresque, carrying his bag of damp clay and tiny bricks around the globe and using them to construct the abandoned landscapes and dwellings of an imaginary civilization of little people. These habitations were built first on his own body, in 1970, and over the succeeding decade appeared on window ledges and building edges from New York to Shanghai [see *A.i.A.*, May-June '75, July-Aug. '77, Jan.-Feb. '79 and Feb. '83]. Although small in scale and seductively fantastical, there was nothing "minor" about these works. The art world saw them chiefly as a commentary on commodification, as they initially weren't collectible. But there was more to them than that: by presenting a hypothetical culture in which the body, landscape and architecture were deeply analogous, Simonds was inviting meditation on our own ways of building and on the distance in our lives from the natural systems and processes of which we should be more avowedly a part.

But recently Simonds has turned inward, to chart a disconcerting geography of the psyche. Over the past several years, he has moved from a predominantly architectural language to a mostly figurative one, with an emphasis on physiognomy—on the face as a register of character and emotional experience. This metamorphosis has become evident over the course of his last two exhibitions at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, but it is traced in detail in a current retrospective that opened at the Centre Cultural de la Fundació "la Caixa" in Barcelona last April. (The show traveled to the Jeu de Paume in Paris this winter.)

In a word, Simonds's new sculpture is grotesque. While in current usage the term often has pejorative connotations, suggesting the repulsively distorted or deformed, this was not always so. In the Renaissance, it referred to the implausible combination of animal and vegetal motifs found in wall paintings in the underground vaults or crypts (*grotte*) of ancient Roman buildings. Decorative flourishes based on these motifs were widespread in the 16th century in architectural friezes, engravings and the marginalia of illustrated books, both in Italy and in Northern Europe. Later, the grotesque came to denote anything fancifully extravagant or bizarre, in which, as John Ruskin observed in *The Stones of Venice*, the ludicrous is yoked to the fearful. The term was applied retrospectively to describe, for example, the hybrid monsters in the stone carvings of medieval cathedrals. In the contexts of art, in other words, the grotesque implies inex-

Charles Simonds: I, Thou, *1993, clay and plaster, 14¾ by 86½ by 47¼ inches. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.*

Head (Mural), ***1991, clay and plaster, 38½ by 25½ by 9 inches.***

haustible inventiveness of a type that is at once serious and playful, fascinating and horrible.[1]

Simonds has made his new sculpture grotesque in several senses. He has freely combined plant, animal and human forms, and at times married them to architecture as well. *One, Two, Three* (1993), a three-part sculpture from 1993, provides a good instance of this implausible combination of images: it is at once wilting plant, detumescent phallus and collapsing column. At the same time, it is none of these: it is instead a suggestively feminine amphoralike vessel, especially in its most erect version. (Simonds himself reports that it owes its inception to the sight of a dead animal impaled on a fence.) Many of his other recent sculptures are grotesque in the sense that they are fantastical or monstrous; in some cases, the grotesque effect is heightened by hybridization with zoomorphic form. The 1991 *Head* melds the visage of a clown with the hollow-eyed image of a skull; the mouth and pointed beard are those of a goat, the creature associated with libidinous male sexuality. This sculpture in particular represents the aspect of the grotesque in which the ludicrous is wedded to the horrible.

We don't need Simonds's life history to find these sculptures fascinating. But they are even more compelling as bearers of both personal and social narratives.

But to what end does Simonds deploy this language of exaggerated and hybridized forms? As he observes, "It is easy enough to hook it to that [the grotesque], but what does it tell you?"[2] In Simonds's case, the grotesque has become the medium for an exploration of his own psychic history, touching on his conflicts with his father, his psychosexual experience and his meditations on death. At the same time, these personal ruminations have opened a window into a nightmarish world of violent fantasy that seems less autobiographical than expressive of social pathologies. With this new language has come a shift in scale. No matter what the literal size of his earlier works, because they were constructed of tiny bricks and twigs they typically had the feeling of miniatures. The new works, by comparison, don't seem like reductions; their scale is magnified instead. They are consequently far more confrontational, and the grotesque effect is intensified.

Personal history has provided Simonds with a rich vein of experience to mine for his sculpture. Both his parents, who died recently, studied medicine in Vienna and went on to become psychoanalysts. His mother, Anita I. Bell, trained and taught at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute; she was a notable researcher who subsequently broke with more orthodox Freudians over her divergent theories of the development of infantile male sexuality. (She traced the origin of castration anxieties, for example, to fears about the loss of the testicles rather than penis; she felt these anxieties arose from the boy's confusion between bowel movements and the routine ascent and descent of the testicles.) Simonds grew up in an atmosphere in which everything was given a psychoanalytic spin, even art. He remembers an early exposure to Ernst Kris's book *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1952); he reports that the sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, one of the subjects of Kris's book, was a "childhood idol."[3]

One, Two, Three, ***1993, plaster and clay, 3 pieces: 60 by 8 by 6, 51 by 8 by 8, and 45 by 16 by 8 inches.***

Messerschmidt, an 18th-century sculptor associated with the Austrian court, is now chiefly known for a series of grimacing heads, mostly self-portraits, that reveal how the face changes in reaction to different emotions. He followed a long line of artists in late medieval and Renaissance Europe—including Leonardo, Rubens, and Charles Le Brun—with an interest in physiognomy, a doctrine with classical roots which held that clues to character and emotion ("the passions") were inscribed in the human countenance. Inasmuch as character was thought to be more readily apparent in animals than in people, one branch of physiognomy looked for evidence of zoomorphic form in humans as an index of personal attributes. Now almost universally dismissed as a pseudo-science, the study of physiognomy was nevertheless the impetus for a remarkable assortment of hybridized images, at once ghastly and droll, that constitute their own mutation of the grotesque.[4]

Some of Simonds's recent sculptures, such as the 1991 *Head* with its goat beard and lips, use animal morphology to suggest character. Others employ the face to reveal emotional experience: *I, Thou* (1993), for instance, in which two heads with vastly different expressions—one obdurate, the other agonized—are yoked together. Simonds would thus seem to have been inspired by the example of physiognomic studies in general and Messerschmidt in particular. Indeed, he acknowledges the influence and points to *Just Rescued From Drowning* and *Afflicted with Constipation*, for example, as among his favorites of the earlier sculptor's works. But Simonds insists that the direct model of Messerschmidt's art is less significant than what Messerschmidt represents for him: "the license to think or to make almost anything," be it arcane, discomforting, loathsome or embarrassingly self-revelatory.

By comparison, Kris had a more clinical interest in Messerschmidt. Drawing on contemporaneous accounts of Messerschmidt's erratic, seemingly paranoid behavior, Kris diagnosed the artist as psychotic. From there, he went on to develop a psychoanalytic explication of Messerschmidt's work, interpreting the sculptor's obsessive representations of his own physiognomy in part as an attempt to master delusional fears that he was persecuted by demons. Simonds confesses some interest in the connection between creativity and mental illness; he has pursued the subject on his own in other ways. He saw the exhibition of art by the mentally ill that toured the U.S. in the early '80s, a show selected from the collection put together in the late 1910s and early 1920s by the Heidelberg psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn.[5] More recently, he took advantage of an opportunity occasioned by his show at the Jeu de Paume to work with patients at the Sainte-Anne Psychiatric Hospital, site of some well-known encounters between the Surrealists and the mentally ill before World War II and of two celebrated exhibitions of psychopathological art in 1946 and 1950.[6] Simonds suggests that in his recent works he is "exploring some of the same information" as is often seen in (or read into) the creations of the mentally ill, especially the expression of psychological distress or of sexualized fantasy. But Simonds is conscious of his purposes in a way that an institutionalized artist typically would not be: he is concerned to have his work understood, to have it "coded in a way that other people can understand it."

More relevant to Simonds than either the direct example of Messerschmidt or the possible correlations between psychosis and art is Kris's larger ratification of "the close relationship between the artist's life history in the psychoanalytic sense and his work." Psychoanalytic interpretations of art are prone to vulgarization; they are in opposition to more current views that stress the social and

Simonds's work has long reiterated the conceit that the body is a kind of landscape in the process of erosion and decay.

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt: **A Dismal Gloomy Man,** *ca. 1770, lead. Barockmuseum, Vienna.*

economic origins of art (an antithesis Kris himself described as "spurious").[7] They are also challenged by notions that madness itself is a social construction. There has always been a social dimension to Simonds's art: his work on the street and his insistence on the analogies among the body, earth and architecture both testify to his concern that his sculpture have a relevance beyond his own experience. But what is different in his current work is a candidness about his emotional history, a subject that was submerged—dare one say repressed?—in earlier years.

Simonds doesn't care to be or perhaps can't be entirely clear about what emotional experiences or inward psychological states these sculptures express (because, a practitioner would say, he has not experienced psychoanalysis himself). Instead, he reports that some of his first figurative images arose from "a kind of *horror vacui*, a desire to fill up the crevices" in some of his architectural and landscape pieces. Faces appeared in the rocks and clouds of *Here, Then, Now, There* (1987), for example, almost as a kind of marginal flourish that at first seemed to have no meaning. At the same time, he began to retain traces of smearing and splashing as a way to let some unconscious impulses register in his work, as in the 1991 *Head (Mural)*.

But "the artist's life history in the psychoanalytic sense," to use Kris's phrase, is more evident in some of Simonds's other recent sculptures. *I, Thou*, for one, is quite clearly a double portrait of the artist and his father: the latter stubborn and inert, the former in full flight and screaming. The struggle to escape is reinforced in some subtle details—the elongated neck that connects the two heads arcs off the ground, as if the grimacing character had tried to leap away from the intractable one. A 1993 *Head* may be a variation on this Oedipal theme. Craggy and ancient, laid horizontally, the bodiless visage carries the outlines of a crownlike fortress on its brow. The old man would seem to be dead but that his left eye is open, as if he haunts from beyond the grave. Simonds's simultaneous fascination with and anxiety about death is a subtext to a number of his other recent sculptures, such as the 1991 *Head*. That piece also suggests attention to the effects of aging on the body in general and on sexuality in particular.

As Kris insisted, it is spurious to separate entirely the psychoanalytic content of artistic production from its social meanings. The 1993 *Head* could easily represent a more generalized struggle against authority: it is an image of regicide. Collective disorder and rebellion, rather than personal conflict, also seem to be the overt subjects of *Man and Fish*. This was meant to be a representation of a kiss, but it was transformed in the making. It is now unclear—to us or to the artist—whether the man is swallowing or regurgitating the beast. Either way, it is an image of voracious consumption and of extreme violence against nature, which might just stand as a metaphor for life in late 20th-century America. Even the artist's fascination with death goes beyond the personal, reiterating a conceit that has long been central to his work: that the body is a kind of landscape in the process of erosion and decay, and that architecture is in a similar condition of only slightly less precipitous decomposition.

Whatever the precise meaning of Simonds's new sculptures, the uneasiness they cause is only intensified by the fact that these works are purposefully regressive, in both the art-historical and psychological senses. They were created with reference to an outmoded, even discredited, language of the grotesque, which has been used to evoke some ordinarily hidden subjects—death, Oedipal conflict, sexuality—that have erupted from deep in the artist's psyche. We don't

Photograph of **Landscape<—>Body<—>Dwelling,** *1971, a work in which the artist spread clay and built miniature brick structures on his body. Photo Nathanson.*

Head, *1993, clay and plaster, 26½ by 35⅛ by 29½ inches.*

need reference to Simonds's life history to find these sculptures weirdly fascinating. But they are even more compelling when seen as bearers of both personal and social narratives. □

1. For more on the grotesque, see E.H. Gombrich, "The Edge of Chaos" in *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, London, Phaidon, 1979. The reference to Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, London, 1853, is from Volume III, Chapter III, paragraph XXIII.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from recent conversations with the artist.
3. Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, New York, International Universities Press, 1952.
4. For a close look at physiognomy as an instance of the "illusions and fictions that spring up around forms," see Jurgis Baltrusaitis, "Animal Physiognomy" in *Aberrations: An Essay on the Legend of Forms*, trans. by Richard Miller, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1989.
5. Hans Prinzhorn was the author of the pioneering study *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (Berlin, Springer, 1922) later published in English as *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration*, trans. Eric von Brockdorff, New York, Springer, 1972. The exhibition that circulated in the U.S. was *The Prinzhorn Collection: Selected Work from the Prinzhorn Collection of the Art of the Mentally Ill*, Champaign, Ill., Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, 1984.
6. For more on the Sainte-Anne Hospital, see Sarah Wilson, "From the Asylum to the Museum: Marginal Art in Paris and New York, 1938-68" in *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 121-26.
7. The quotations in this sentence and the preceding one are from Kris, pp. 15 and 17, respectively. For an opposing interpretation of Messerschmidt's work, in which it is seen not as an expression of mental illness but as "an intellectually radical expression of his outlook as a social and artistic critic," see Victor Chan, "Natural Genius, Inspired Madness, and Romantic Protest: Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's Many Grimacing Faces," *Art News*, October 1986, pp. 84-93.

"Charles Simonds" opened at Centre Cultural de la Fundació "la Caixa," Barcelona [Apr. 26-June 5, 1994], and appeared subsequently at the Jeu de Paume, Paris [Dec. 19, 1994-Jan. 31, 1995].

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