

James W. Sullivan

*Body : Fragment*



Meadows Museum





This catalogue is produced in conjunction with the exhibition

*James W. Sullivan: Sculpture and Drawings*  
 23 February through 14 April 1996  
 Meadows Museum, Meadows School of the Arts  
 Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

## *Body : Fragment*

*I see dust made of the fibers of grass, of paper,  
 from the rubbings of the dirt, the pumice of dead bone,  
 from the cells of our skin migrating to the surface,  
 and I see that the dust will never settle, neither  
 in time nor space, but in the rain of a thousand centuries  
 many things clear now to us—impulses at the core—  
 may come to rest in the form of a thought, and this  
 may be the way it is already: the way it was for Adam.*

Marvin Bell  
*Iris of Creation*

*What makes monsters is the irreconcilability of the forces  
 that produce them, and this ordains that every monster  
 shall also be a cripple.*

Harold Rosenberg

For much of human history, the unearthed fragments of often mutilated classical sculpture, with their distressed surfaces, have been valued for their inherent beauty and connection to events, people, and cultures past. Our contemporary eye seems especially satisfied with the partial, fragmented, and incomplete thought and/or object. The partial thing suffices now in a way never before seen in human history. It is one thing to respond to the fragment of a whole. It is quite another to have never had a “whole” and to make fragments rich in meanings.

For James Sullivan, the body fragment poses all the essential questions that he needs to confront as an artist working in the last decade of the 20th century. Sullivan obtains most of his fragments from one formal source: the archetypal classic monolith, the standing figure. While he employs a variety of traditional materials, Sullivan’s primary artistic medium is the rather untraditional material of straw. Through the use of this material, he is able to allude to his principal natural motif—the human body and its expressive ability to represent mutability, growth, transformation, decay, and ultimately annihilation in



death. Sullivan's figurative fragments serve as visual metaphors not only for the degenerative forces at work in our bodies but also in a broader sense for those same forces at work in the world. Heads and torsos made of layer after layer after layer of material, wired together one handful at a time, imply a geological process of building that has now reached the inevitable point of wearing away. Work after work appears to have "suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange."

In *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar, the emperor Hadrian speaks of sleep, "... what interests me here is the specific mystery of sleep partaken of for itself, alone, the inevitable plunge each night by the naked man, solitary and unarmed, into an ocean where everything changes ... and where we meet the dead." Yourcenar has a special love and appreciation for the expressive power of fatigue, age, wear, even unhappiness and the general inevitable "ruin of things" leading to death. *Everything* leaves its mark. In Yourcenar's book *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, she writes, "They [found antique sculpture] have changed in the way time changes us." Similarly, Sullivan's headless and armless torsos, with their apparently worn away features and gnawed, eaten away, and corroded surfaces suggest once "live" entities that have slowly been turned into ghostly apparitions. As such, they are an elegy for, and meditation on, what it means to be truly human. Coupled with that knowledge is the realization that every moment of human experience is precious and is disappearing even as it occurs. Time slows in the torsos' presence. We are forced to confront the eventual finality of our own lives, with the resulting and unavoidable heart-wrenching detachment from the things that we love and that love us, and our all too soon dissolution into the flow of time. We come face to face with the central cause of all human grief—the passage from permanence to transience. The frontal gaze of much of Sullivan's works causes us to linger and meet that gaze. The gaze seems to expand the instant of departing, prolonging our confrontation with loss, and isolation, and ultimately forcing our realization and acceptance of our mortality. Sullivan's works allow us "modes of mourning that realization."

How can it be that such a feeling is illicit by works of art that might best be described as ghostly, even grotesque? Baudelaire found that the grotesque "has about it something profound." Jean-Paul Sartre offered that "the most beautiful thing in the world is a mad dog." The faces and torsos of Sullivan's

sculpture cause mixed responses. Distorted and mysterious, they are surrounded by silence. What looks in one moment like an impassive gaze, impenetrable and calmly indifferent to human concerns, also unblinkingly returns our gaze from a vulnerable, exposed, tortured, expressive, highly charged surface. Their archaic gaze—steady, unyielding, constant, and directed straight at us—has the undeniable power to cause a bittersweet mixture of emotions. It wounds and yet astounds, causes distress as well as bliss. We inhabit the same space as the objects but the remoteness is tangible. We share body parts; we each have an inside and outside, bones (armature), and viscera. More importantly, we share a common destiny.

These ghostly shapes, resurrected from the grave of the unconscious, metaphorically excavate classical man from his archaeological past at a time when our own existence seems most threatened. What they are seeing may be the end of humanity as we know it. They represent the fabric of our psyche, wounded by the deep-rooted, disintegrative forces that wear away modern man's true awareness of himself. They are the ghosts haunting modernity. Their disintegrating forms clothe a wrecked and spiritually exhausted interior. Similar images in a Leon Golub painting are suggested by Donald Kuspit to be "hardly human, representing the ever-present, tragic human potential for self-destruction, [and] the difficulty of achieving constructive human selfhood." Such work pulverizes the classical notion of figurative sculpture almost beyond recognition, forcing us to confront our own destructive impulses like ghostly personages out of the archaeological fog of time. We, like Sullivan's figures, are ultimately annihilated. Sullivan's torsos and bodiless heads become—as Kuspit wrote of Golub's monsters—"allegorical personifications of power's unhappy consciousness."

Sullivan is sympathetic to Golub's interest in reconciling classical sculptural form and modern consciousness. Like Golub, Sullivan may be interested in classical archaic forms because, in the words of Kuspit, "they seem to have a special authority by reason of their venerability." In Kuspit's book on Golub, Kuspit sees Golub's work as, "in the disjunction between the classical and the modern visions [that] haunts modern thought." Sullivan, like Golub, approaches classical forms without forfeiting his modern sense of the world as fragmentary and disjunctive. Indeed, Sullivan's sculptural fragments and Golub's painted figures look as though they are in the midst of a search for



something they will *never* find. Such figures, Kuspit writes, “exemplify in their very flesh the distrust of the idea, of anything not practical, that is one of the leading traits of modern man.” Says Kuspit, “Modern man’s self-punishing postulation of the meaninglessness of his existence is based on his experience of a threatened individuality, the loss of control over his destiny.” Sullivan’s strangely awkward, even grotesque partial figures—incapable of having power with no arms, no legs, no complete bodies, and heads missing, or if there, featureless—are unable to assert themselves and move about in the world. Their sense of premonition and discontent stems from Sullivan’s desire to reawaken within the viewer a memory of the elementary value of being human.

Sullivan’s figures in their partially destroyed state seem made of waste product or foundry slag and radiate a haptic, expressive bodilessness. In this “haptic” state, they are neither completely figurative nor totally abstract, rather they appear to us as grotesquely expressive raw residues/ghosts. They announce suffering. If, as Kuspit wrote, “man is raw nature and as his identity disintegrates he becomes more raw,” then Sullivan’s work reveals to us the “pathos” of rawness—a place to recognize/announce suffering, a place pervaded by a powerful sense of the impermanence of man, the certainty of the power of time, and the uneasy relationship between the two. All of this emanates from the ability of Sullivan’s work, especially the most recent drawings and figures (1995-96), to, in Roland Barthes’s terminology, *prick* or *bruise* us. Barthes’s term for this is *punctum* (a derivative of the Latin word *punctura*, “to prick”). For Barthes, it is this aspect of art’s acuity that arouses sympathy and feelings of tenderness often keenly distressing in nature. Sullivan’s work manages to do this partly because of its age-old link to theater, especially primitive theater in which the first actors played the role of the dead, often wearing masks painted to represent the face of death. Sullivan’s work provides us with the equivalent motionless and made-up face beneath which we not only see the dead but encounter the uneasy truths that such confrontation provokes. As in archaic theater, the mask is the face of meaning.

Barthes says “[art] is subversive not when it repels but when it is pensive, when it thinks.” Sullivan’s heads look back at us seemingly lost in thought, almost as if they are listening not looking. Their disfigurement and fractured

nature offer no explanation for the gaze they possess. Almost grief stricken, they provoke mixed feelings. The details we need are obscured; for instance the face in *Black Head* [1995] is blackened, a further denial of features. How is it that although we aren’t provided visually with much of what we need to respond, we are still able to respond as if deeply wounded? Barthes says, “[W]hoever looks you straight in the eye is mad.” Sullivan’s work looks at us but also suggests to us that we might well turn Barthes’s quote on itself: whoever looks you straight in the eye reveals to you *your* madness. For Barthes and Sullivan, time can eliminate the emotion of loss but never the underlying sense that something is gone and can never be replaced.

Sullivan’s poignant creations are figures with a soul. Each work contains within it not only the signs of its past and future but the ultimate sign for human beings—our mortality—and the need to confront that death and concurrent total collapse of our personal world of conflicts and desires. In our final glance back, what is finally, absolutely irreducible is that death means the end of love, of all we hold dear as sentient beings. In the world of the late 20th-century sculpture, art often shouts but cannot wound. Sullivan’s torsos wound. The archaic stone pharaoh is on a journey to eternity not finality. We do not sense pharaoh’s death is real, or will ever come, or if it does it will not be our death. Sullivan lets us see that there are many deaths in 20th-century man’s journey—waking death, sleeping death, waiting death—and finally, there is the enormity of our own journey to eminent death. Sullivan’s large *Torso : Pole* [1996] near collapse and held up by a slender wood beam, shows us that what is necessary to transcend that knowledge is nothing short of heroic in an unheroic time.

*A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth, but only his Ariadne.*

Nietzsche

Philip Van Keuren, Director  
*The Gallery*, Division of Art



*Torso : Pole*

{1996}

plaster, straw, wood,  
steel, pigment  
72 inches





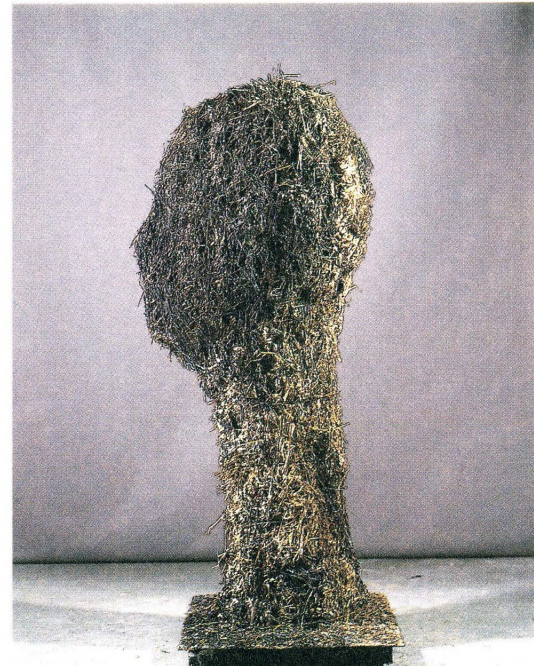
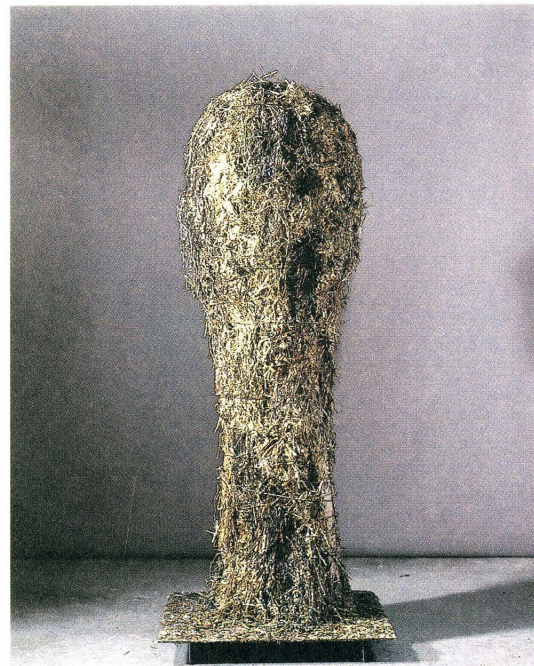
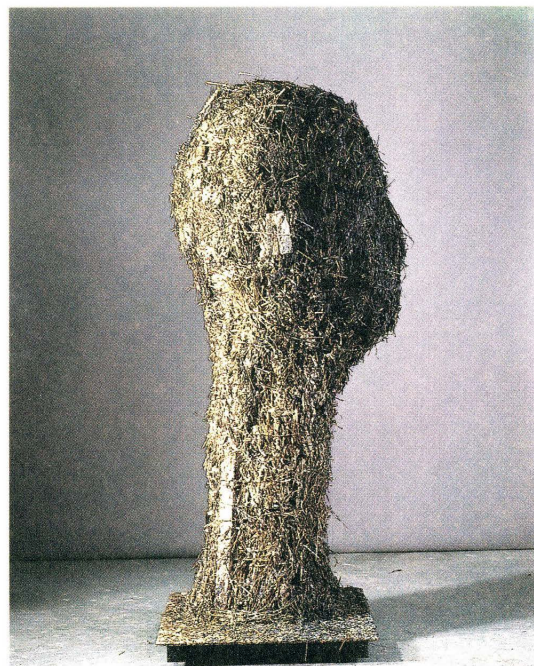
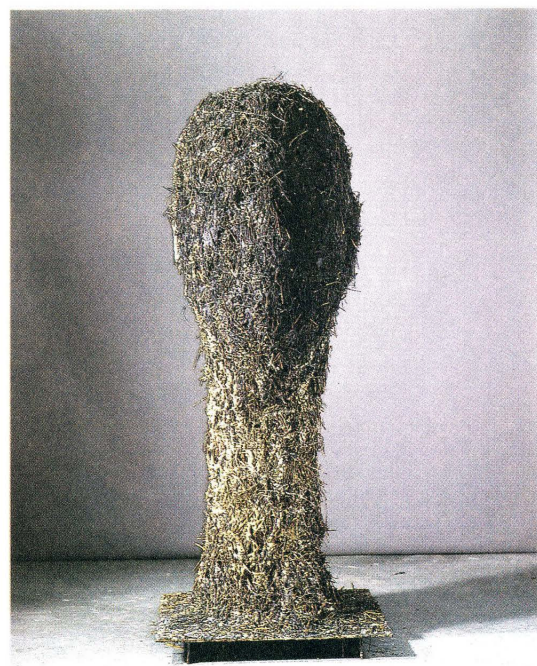
*Large Torso, 1995*

[1995]

plaster, straw, wood,  
steel, pigment  
75 inches







# *Black Head*

{1995}

(front, right side)  
plaster, straw, wood,  
steel, pigment  
78 inches

(back, left side)



*Black Torso, 1996*

[1996]

plaster, straw, wood,  
steel, pigment  
76 inches





(detail)

*Black Torso, 1996*

[1996]

plaster, straw, wood,  
steel, pigment





*Difficult Head*

{1995}

(front, right side)  
plaster, straw, wood,  
steel, pigment  
32 inches





## JAMES W. SULLIVAN

Born: Evanston, IL, 1952

Currently Chair, Division of Art, and  
Associate Professor of Sculpture and Design,  
Meadows School of the Arts,  
Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX

### EDUCATION

MFA, Sculpture; California State University,  
Long Beach, 1979  
BA, Philosophy; Yale University, 1974

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

*Body : Fragment*, Meadows Museum,  
Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, 1996  
*Figur/Umgekehrte Figur*, Installation,  
Berliner Dom, Berlin, Germany, Nov. 1994  
Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX, 1994  
*Drawings and Sculpture*, Brookhaven Community College,  
Dallas, TX, 1993  
Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX, 1992  
*Komodore/Sullivan*, Irving Arts Center,  
Irving, TX, 1991  
Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX, 1990  
Galerie Mühlenbusch, Düsseldorf, Germany, 1990  
Amerika Haus, Berlin, Germany, 1990

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

*Six Ways of Seeing*, Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX, 1996  
*Über Grenzen Miteinanderen*, Stadt Museum,  
Erlangen, Germany, 1995  
*Body and Spirit*, Galveston Art Center,  
Galveston, TX, 1994  
*Human Nature, Human Form*, Laguna Gloria Art Museum,  
Austin, TX, 1993  
*Senses Beyond Sight*, D-Art Center, Dallas, TX, and  
Abilene Art Center, Abilene, TX, 1993  
Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX, 1993  
*Kaleidoscop*, Haus Am Waldsee, Berlin, Germany, 1992  
*Commemara Invitational* (site-specific installation), Plano, TX, 1992  
*Drawings by Texas Artists*, Amarillo Art Center, Amarillo, TX, 1991  
*Werkspüren*, Bildhauerwerkstatt,  
Berlin, Germany, 1990

### GRANTS AND VISITING LECTURESHIPS

Philip Morris Sculpture Fellowship  
(residency in Berlin, Germany), 1989  
Resident Sculptor, Bildhauerwerkstatt,  
Berlin, Germany, 1989, 1992, 1995  
Visiting Professor, Hochschule der Künste,  
Berlin, Germany, 1995  
Visiting Critic in Drawing, Yale School of Architecture,  
New Haven, CT, 1984-present  
Resident Sculptor, Triangle Workshop,  
Pine Plains, NY, 1987

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Germany, January 23, 1990.  
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Exhibition catalogue,  
Amerika Haus, Berlin, Germany, 1990.  
Kutner, Janet. "A Force in Anti-Gravity."  
*Dallas Morning News*, June 16, 1990.  
Kutner, Janet. "James Sullivan."  
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*Dallas Morning News*, March 16, 1992.  
Mitchell, Charles D. "Heady Experience."  
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*Pan*. "Tabakduft und die Shoen Künste." December 1989.  
Philip Morris GmbH. *Werkspüren: Stipendiaten 1987-1990*.  
Berlin, Germany, 1990.  
Stadt Museum. *Über Grenzen Miteinanderen*. Exhibition catalogue,  
Erlangen, Germany, 1995.  
Triangle Foundation. *Triangle Workshop. 1987*.  
Exhibition and workshop catalogue, New York, NY, 1987.  
Van Keuren, Philip. *Body : Fragment*.  
Exhibition catalogue, Meadows Museum, Dallas, TX, 1996.

### RECENT LECTURES

Artists' Talk Series, McKinney Avenue Contemporary, October 1995  
"Beuys, Judd, and Figurative Art," Portland Museum of Art and  
Portland State University (two part lecture), Portland, OR, April 1995  
Panel Moderator, "Is Public Art Possible?"  
Dallas Museum of Art, February 1994  
"The Bodily Description of Space,"  
Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, 1992



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JWS, 1996

### Essayist's Note:

Writing about art is a very problematical endeavor. It is useful to remember Max Kozloff's words, "Criticism's merit lies exactly in the fact that it is neither a work of art nor a response but something much rarer—an interaction between the two." Additionally, and more importantly, Kozloff left us with the thought "that language and visual images do not co-exist in a mutual market of meaning"—an interesting notion for contemporary writers on art to ponder.

PVK, 1996

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Exhibition design by Anthony Foster

Catalogue design by Philip Van Keuren

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