



james w sullivan

james w sullivan:provisional self

sculpture and drawings

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Curator, Elizabeth Mead



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provisional self

“In the intersection there’s an air of
memories, encounters, of strange,
absurd, and very important things.”

—Robert Desnos

We live in a time of great contradiction. We are conflicted in our search for the right answer, the right path, the right political position. None of our choices is simple or clear. Those who appear to be our allies one day are our enemies the next. Yet it is exactly within the conflict of yes and no, here and there, them or us, that we situate ourselves. We live within varying shades of gray. We live between night and day. We are held by the tension of two opposing or seemingly opposing forces.

James Sullivan's sculptures inhabit this place of contradiction. They posit themselves within the moments in between. While the pieces in this exhibition are individual, they also compose an extended series of studies, a meditation on being in continuous development. One piece anticipates the next. Slight variations occur; subtle shifts move an idea forward. This series of work presents us with Sullivan's thought process. He is deeply committed to the evolution and development of thought, and his working methods reflect this. Each piece serves as a permanent marker until the next is under way, relegating the previous to a more tenuous and provisional presence.

place/body

The sculptures are perfectly situated within the notion of becoming. They exist in the interstices. We witness *Boxer* (2002) in motion, leaning in, about to jab an arm forward or perhaps retract that arm. We see the body in equipoise, posed and poised in an indeterminate place, frozen in time, in a moment, in stasis. The sculpture is both *within* the space it occupies and at the same time *is* that space. It mediates the physical and the metaphysical, the spatial and the nonspatial.

While Sullivan's work possesses moments of pure objectness, to perceive only this object state is to miss a more fundamental relationship. This work lives in a place in between the figure and the body. The figure refers. It tells us the story, gives us the narrative. It always speaks outside of itself rather than being the story. It remains external. The body is somatic. It reveals the physical state. It is internal. We experience the sculpture through our own body and in the landscape of our mind. This vacillation between figure and body breathes life into these bundles of plaster and straw. For a brief moment they linger in the state of bodily presence, but only for a single moment more. It is in the tension between, in the back and forth, that they come to be: they come here, they go away.

The quality of between reminds us of ourselves as we experience ourselves from within, as we see ourselves in our mind's eye. Slowly, our body becomes apparent. We are aware we are standing within a space. We are not alone. And then the room begins to reveal its presence to us. To say these figures composed of plaster and straw refer to us is inadequate. They are us as we stand at this particular moment in time, as we have previously stood, and as we will continue to stand.

“If somebody says ‘I have a body,’
he can be asked, ‘Who is speaking here
with this mouth?’”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

spatial/nonspatial

Descartes argued that bodies are spatially extended; he also believed the mind incapable of spatial extension. These sculptures physically possess spatial extension, yet the presence they evoke is nonspatial. It is within the habitation of the mind or other. Sullivan believes one of the roles of sculpture is to project spatial extension of the mind. His work confirms the existence of other by his use of simple and mundane materials to evoke a presence that extends beyond their materiality. The sculptures bring us to a place of contemplation both within ourselves and within the larger context of the world we inhabit.



BOXER (2002)



LARGE TORSO (1999-2002)



TORSO (ASCENSION) (1994)

being/materiality

The calm, gentle presence of this series of work, vacillating between the here and the there, abates our worries, gives us the strength and courage to continue. If it is possible for an inanimate object to affirm our sense of life, inspire us to continue, then these sculptures do just that. They reassure us. They remind us, in the words of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, that “the only thing to do is in fact to be.” As they stand at the ready—ready to move, or having just moved—they beckon us to go on, to continue. They are about being, about being in the moment, as well as before it and beyond it.

The choice of materials—straw and plaster—establishes a tension of contradiction. The figures invite us to move closer, to view them intimately. We are drawn in by the complex surfaces and mute gestures, yet the materials—a bundle of straw held together by plaster—create an aura of fragility and prickliness, keeping us at arm’s length. The straw works to break down the notion of surface and touch. “Matter,” as author Primo Levi wrote, is “vacuous and sparse, like the star-studded sky; minuscule granules suspended in the void.” The materials create a surface that is open like the pores of the skin, allowing the sculptures to breathe. The surface is both dense and devoid of density. We feel the air circulate in and out of these figures as our own breath circulates in and out of our bodies. The warm, golden straw and slightly blushed color of the plaster invite us nearer only to repel us at the last moment. This is the paradoxical nature of straw.

The impermanence of the straw and the plaster, and the sculpture, stubborn yet gentle in its stance, reminds us of what it means to be human. The figures’ gaze gently nudges us. Looking back they seem to ask us for the same reassurance they lend. We are complicit in this relationship, dependent one on the other.

“When we first begin to *believe* anything,
what we believe is not a single proposition,
it is a whole system of propositions.
(Light dawns gradually over a whole.)”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

proximity/fragmentation

As we stand directly in front of the monolithic sculpture *Large Torso* (1999-2002), our field of vision is completely engulfed. We are surrounded by a sea of straw and plaster. This is a fragment, even though its massiveness says otherwise. It is a torso, a part of a whole. Yet it is whole and complete unto itself. By definition a fragment is a whole, reduced in complexity to a simple state. As we approach it, the torso becomes a wall, a piece of architecture. We are no longer able to know it as an object; it becomes the space it inhabits and it becomes its own architecture. When we move back, it slowly recedes within our field of vision. We see it becoming a fragment. As architect Bernard Tschumi reminds us, “Fragments of architecture . . . are all one actually sees.

These fragments are like beginnings without ends. There is always a split between fragments that are real and fragments that are virtual, between memory and fantasy. These splits have no existence other than being the passage from one fragment to another. They are relay signs. They are traces. They are in between.” There exists a tension between scale and fragmentation: large implies a need for distance yet does not consolidate the whole; small suggests a need for proximity yet reveals less cohesion.

Similarly, in *Torso (Ascension)* (1994) the form seems to dissipate under our gaze as we move down the torso to the ankles. The feet are no longer there. As we move our gaze upward to the top, there is no head to complete the form. Even within this fragment we cannot take in the whole at any given moment. Still the form is complete nonetheless.

They are sagacious, these figures and fragments. They are all-knowing. Yet they do not hesitate to question. They do not hesitate to ask why. They cast doubt, and at the same time they reassure us. They have one foot in this world and one in another. The sculptures are between here and there; they inhabit the space in between. It is in this otherness where they remain, in a limbo, a purgatory. The straw creates a very tangible presence, and at the same time the plaster binding the strands of straw together isolates the strands, making each individual blade of straw more apparent. Our awareness of the space between each blade of straw, both penetrable and impenetrable, is heightened.

memory/presence

We are always aware of a presence through our surroundings. In every architecture a body is present. We recall experience through a place, a person, or an object triggering a memory, which elicits a response that brings to the forefront something having to do with the person, place, or thing. No one of these—person, place, or thing—is subject to an individual experience of memory. More or less each is intricately linked one to the next. All become a part of a fabric woven together, an interdependency. A sound, a smell, or a photograph can remind us of a person, a moment, a place, or an object. Memory plays a significant role in the work of James Sullivan. It reminds us of ourselves, of others, and of the world in which we are situated. They, the sculptures, are us.

They become us; we are them. As Sullivan states, “This wholeness is not a picture or image but is a state, and its particulars can change in position or attitude. It need not even be complete in the usual sense, but the barest of fragments. Yet it must always be a totality.” The difficulty of the figure is not to approach it in part or even as a collection of parts. It must be a whole from the beginning as it comes into being. It is complete from the onset. Memory works to create the evolution of existence, revealing one isolated moment linked to another, and in so doing presents us with a whole creating our current reality.

Elizabeth Mead
San Francisco, 2002

“[T]here are attitudes [that] remain in one’s mind for reasons that are clear, the carriage of a head for example, bowed when one would have thought it should be lifted, and vice versa, or a hand suspended in mid-air, as if unknown.”

— Samuel Beckett



HEAD WITH MOUTH OPEN
(2002)



REMAINDER (1998)

