

*Linda Ganstrom
reports on the event of
Arrowmont's Figurative Association*

The Human Figure Symposium





SEEKING A CONCENTRATED LEARNING EXPERIENCE AND HUNGRY FOR connections with artists whose primary expression is the figure, my curiosity about current trends in philosophy, practice and shifts in figurative art motivated my participation in Arrowmont's Figurative Association: The Human Form Symposium. Just beginning to employ the figure in his work, my graduate student and travel companion, Josh Novak was primarily focused on absorbing the technical skills offered by a diverse and highly respected lineup of presenters. Arrowmont's figurative symposium promised to sustain us both.

A day of travel culminated in the winding drive towards Gatlinburg, Tennessee, US. The Smoky Mountains offered a visual treat of breath-taking natural vistas and Pigeon Forge supplied eye-popping kitsch in the form of flying pigs and huge figures (a Blacksmith, Santa and Scarecrow vied for the tourists' attention near Dollywood). Bright colours, shiny surfaces and flashing lights underscored the devices advertisers were willing to employ in order to attract attention to their figures in a world filled with visual clutter. The contrast was startling between Gatlinburg and the natural beauty and rural history of Arrowmont. As we stepped into a realm dedicated to art, craft and intellectual engagement, we were greeted by the friendly Arrowmont staff and soon felt at home. Forming the symposium was a mixture of highly accomplished professionals deeply rooted in figuration and budding beginners freshly enamoured of the figure. We immediately shared a bond, as if enjoying an artistic family reunion, as we greeted old friends, met new relatives, all of whom had established priorities, sacrificed, converged and merged in the isolated and focused atmosphere of Arrowmont in order to grow in ways not yet imagined.

CONFRONTATIONAL. Our first stop was the exhibition. Each of the 10 invited artists was allowed to invite an artist of his or her choice. This mixture of established and emerging art created a dynamic, if disjointed exhibition. At the entrance to the gallery, an intimate, open courtyard interior space, Elizabeth Higgins O'Connor's 11 foot tall figure assembled from recycled bedding and cast off discards resembled an abandoned Disneyland character knock-kneed, frazzled and scheduled to dissolve in a quiet corner, its huge head bowed in a pained grimace/snarl. Immediately confrontational, *Reckless* set a challenging tone by evoking questions about concepts of beauty, the heroic, craft, permanence and the enduring tradition of figuration. Clearly the exhibition and symposium organised by Thaddeus Erdahl

Facing page: Doug Jeck. *Likeness. Performance.* Photo by Linda Ganstrom.

Top left: **Thaddeus Erdahl.** Photo by Linda Ganstrom.

Top centre: **Thaddeus Erdahl. Work in progress.** Photo by Linda Ganstrom.

Top right: **Thaddeus Erdahl demonstrating.** Photo by Nan Smith.

Leaving the woods before the final speaker, we came away with new techniques, knowledge of specialised materials and shifts in attitudes towards the figure and a wider network of artists sharing our passion and engaged in similar struggles.



Top left: Christina West demonstrating. Photo by Nan Smith.
 Top centre: Christina West's moulds. Photo by Linda Ganstrom.
 Top right: Christina West demonstrating. Photo by Linda Ganstrom

and Dustin Farnsworth offered more than a 'how to' workshop for forming figurative sculpture.

ABJECT. Immersed in the tightly packed exhibition, one was surrounded by the crowd of figures. Ordinary people, burdened by cares and disappointments, fears and worries, populated the gallery. The pathetic or abject dominated. Vulnerable, isolated, fallible and clearly

mortal, these figurative works elicited a compassionate, even protective response. Overwhelmingly dark and disturbing, these figures represented the flip side of the glitz, glamour and materialistic lifestyle offered by commercial advertising. Self-absorbed, the majority small in scale, their powerlessness exposed the vulnerable underbelly of mankind.

MORTAL. Gazing down upon a grey cement box or sarcophagus situated quietly on the side of the gallery, the viewer discovered a figure covered in slip and apparently laid to rest in a pseudo burial. Upon prolonged, closer inspection, the slight movement of breathing could be detected. Still baffled by the unexpected, it slowly became apparent that the figure was alive, at least the face was allowing wrinkles to crease and crack the slip. Yet undead, the artist, Doug Jeck confronted his mortality in a performance ritual that allowed him to die unto himself in order to be raised a new man in the likeness of god/God.

MYSTERIOUS. Delighted by the shadow play and apparent magic of Kumi Yamashita's light sculptures, the ephemeral collided with the permanence expected in most craft media based sculpture. Aluminium plates, cut and installed to cast a figurative shadow when lit by a single light source, created a mysterious ghostly image that seemed more memory than reality, a vague impressive of an everyday life, quickly forgotten, leaving only a trace.

PRIVATE. Squatting to get a closer inspection of Christina West's *Misfits*, the voyeur intruded on a disturbing scene suggestive of sexual exploitation, if not violence and danger. The larger male's erection pushed issues of power, gender and sexual orientation to the forefront, as the viewer ran the probable consequences of the scene in any number of directions, none of which ended well.

INTENSE. Thaddeous Erdahl's highly detailed *tromp l'oeil*, *The Smoker* evoked an impression of a wooden masthead whose eyes bulged with concentrated intensity while the character's frazzled hair, un-kept moustache and pipe made him seem an unlikely mascot for any serious adventure. Nearby, Dustin Farnsworth's fragile wooden heads sagged under the weight of their overwhelming cultural and architectural burdens.



Although the majority of the art was based in craft practice, organisers Bill Griffith, Erdahl and Farnsworth included works formed from ceramics, wood, cast glass, metal, light, paper-mache, plastics, resin, bronze, paper, found objects and mixed media assemblage connecting with the current sculptural practice of using a variety of media for forming and surfaces based on the expressive needs of the art rather than a media based approach. Stylistically, the works ranged from the convincing realism of Christina West's aqua resin *Strip*, Dean Allison's bodycast heads in cast glass and Cristina Cordova's drawn portrait, to the fantasy of Kris Kuksi's elaborate post-apocalyptic vignettes, to the pared down abstractions of Jacob Foran and Robert Brady. Fragmentation continues to be a rich vein in figuration as seen in Carmen Lang's paper-mache legs, the head studies of Erdahl, Farnsworth, Bob Trotman and Foran's classical seated torsos. The dignity and importance of everyday lives is apparent in Susan Hagen's *Citizens*, Leslie Ansteth Colonna's straightforward figures and Lori Norwood's athletes. Anti heroes abound in the works of Doug Jeck and Ashley Maxwell, whose (*Segment of*) *Dumpster Beat Down from the (White Trash Cherub)* series blends humour and disgust in a compelling insider view of the reality show that is life in the grimy and glorious trailer parks. Biomorphous blobs merge with the body in the couple play of Kyungmin Park while Kim Tucker's seated figures expose what it means to be imperfectly human.

Springing from the rich foundation of the exhibition, the speakers, demonstrations, panel and private discussions built upon the shared experience of viewing and responding to this art. Pinch-hitting as the opening speaker, Glen Harper, the editor of *Sculpture* magazine saturated the audience with images of contemporary sculpture. Citing a lack of organising boundaries for contemporary art, he stated that each artist must create his own movement, its intellectual underpinning, style and be able to convince others of its worth. In this time of individualism, each artist must find a vision, develop the skills to realise that vision and communicate in a variety of formats to build an audience to support her creative practice.

Designed to elicit thought and spark conversation, Arrowmont's facility fosters interaction at meals, during informal gatherings and formal meetings as well as in the living arrangements. Hosted simultaneously in various rooms in the large Arrowmont facility, the participants were free to come and go. Deciding where to focus was a hard decision. Erdahl demonstrated his use of press moulds to create fast blanks upon which

Top left: *Cristina Cordova's working sketch.* Photo by Linda Ganstrom
Top centre and top right: *Cristina Cordova demonstrating.* Photos by Linda Ganstrom



*Top left: Doug Jeck and Kris Kuksi.
Photo by Linda Ganstrom.
Top right: Workshop audience at
Cristina Cordova's workshop.*



he sculpted individual features and intense expressions. Using a sling for creating a stable rounded base provided a practical and an inventive solution to ending a work based on the head.

Elaborate work in slip, underglaze and post-fired surfaces such as encaustic embellished Erdahl's portraits with the patina of age and the specificity of the portrait, evoking history, age and the darker side of humanity tempered with a dose of humour.

Cristina Cordova packed her workshop to standing room only. With a group of seasoned followers front and centre, she fielded questions while speaking about the importance of developing references before touching clay. Whether working with a live or virtual model, she sketches and draws the figure to scale and from various angles to become acquainted with its potential and particular qualities. She quickly built a hollow lower torso from a slab while using callipers to transfer measurements from her drawing to the clay form, explaining that she learnt to build using pottery techniques from John Gill. Working with tough reddish clay, she quickly scored with an old fork, low tech and hands on. The upper torso evolved from another cylinder. When firm enough the top was measured, cut and attached to the lower trunk. As the torso evolved, she discussed her training in Italy and their emphasis on working slowly while paying attention to subtle movements of the flesh. She added tiny dabs of clay creating facets that refract light. On the second day, Cordova formed a twice life-size head from a cylinder, so participants could see how she created the features and modelled the details. After a tall neck/spine was added to the torso from the first day, she slipped a head onto the cylinder creating an exaggerated, but elegant neck. Next, she formed arms similar to sleeves and sculpted hands with long coil fingers, completing a life size torso in only a few hours. Citing inspirations as diverse as her mother's religious icons to the sculpture of Javier Marin, Cordova's style possesses a spiritual toughness that is at once vulnerable and enduring, majestic yet fragile.

Christina West formed a sculptural hollow with clay dabs, pinching and squeezing to compress the clay while speaking about the resin casting that allows her to make light weight durable multiples. Aqua Resin S3 and Smooth-On Rebound 25 (a brushable silicone) were displayed. Conversations ranged from the awkwardness of sexual encounters to the potential of art to engage life's most significant issues.

Kris Kuksi shared a workroom with Elizabeth Higgins O'Conner. Instead of demonstrating up front, these sessions were conducted in the round. Tables filled with model kits, some from Preiser, ranging from teeny tiny to merely small, were assembled and adapted by assistants. On a central table reclined a life size mannequin, assembled and sculpted using Apoxie Sculpt, Apoxie Clay and Smooth-On Free Form Air Sculpting Epoxy Dough. Sobo, a premium craft glue and various craft paints



Left and right: **Doug Jeck demonstrating.**
Photos by Linda Ganstrom.

were nestled among the assemblage chaos. Several small works were created on a grid board easel and a larger pre-assembled wall relief was painted. His discussion of the business of art, working with dealers, celebrity clients and copyright issues, informed and entertained. O'Connor began her assemblage with two by four pieces of lumber and wrapped them with a variety of found objects, fabrics, foam and bedding, working on a ladder while quickly forming an over life-size creature. Participants stood and visited while asking questions in this conversational type of symposium.

Bob Trotman's space featured drawings, plans and paper cutouts. His woodcarving of a one-quarter life size figure stood centre-stage. Dustin Farnsworth sculpted a scorched and battered wooden skull that appeared to have survived a fire.

Doug Jeck formed a head, focusing on the features toward the end of his demonstration. With a video camera over his shoulder projecting onto a large screen, it was easy to follow his every move. With expert facility, Jeck transformed the head into a battered boxer with one eye swollen shut. Capping the open top with a slab, he sealed the air pocket inside the head and set it aside. He then broke and crumbled dry clay into a loose powder, next he vigorously rubbed the dry clay over the carefully sculpted features and wrinkly details softening the face into an extraordinary realism.

Although the panel discussions were intended to address the topic of the grotesque and the sensual quality of clay, they lacked focus and wandered into territories of more interest. Social events, delicious meals, conversations at the table, exquisite corpse drawing, music, food and fun offered a change of pace from the intensity of the workshop learning and created lasting memories. Leaving the woods before the final speaker, we came away with new techniques, knowledge of specialised materials and shifts in attitudes towards the figure and a wider network of artists sharing our passion and engaged in similar struggles.

A creative, Linda Ganstrom enjoys making, thinking, writing and curating ceramics. A professor of Art and Design at Fort Hays State University, Ganstrom served as the NCECA Exhibitions Director from 2009–2014.