

**Crop**

**By: David Broker**

Whether it is bodies suspended in space and frozen in time (Support, 2000), a black decapitated bull's head over the artist's naked body as he lays on a white tiled floor (Gore, 1999) or Robb hanging from a hook embedded in the nape of his neck (Address, 1999), the work of Charles Robb exists on the edge of nightmare. Freudian notions of ego, castration, self, narcissism, subconscious and death confront his audiences in works where he flaunts his vulnerability like a badge of honour. Robb scans a history of humanism and modes of representation from the classical period of Socrates and Plato to the present day in an attempt to explore ideas of objectivity and subjectivity, particularly as they pertain to a specifically male association with image and body. His works are sometimes reminiscent of baroque religious sculpture, evocative of the neo-classical marble bust extending to the medical model, the wax works dummy and special effects prop. However, they are always focussed on a composite, incomplete and fundamentally narcissistic subordination to self-reflection.

As if not to forget Jacques Lacan and the 'mirror phase' (or stage), Robb's point of departure is a mirror (or a reversed photograph). Whereas Lacan postulated a phase in which the infant anticipates on an imaginary plane, the apprehension and mastery of body unity, a unification of identity and reflected image, Robb situates his work in an illusory zone enclosed by self, image and object. While we may never know how we appear to others and an equivocal mirror image is the closest we come, undaunted, Robb enters into a struggle with the slippages between object and subject where the subject is a reflection of self. In his words, '... so the finished sculptural 'self', rather than an 'objective' form (me as I appear to others), is in fact a representation of the mirrored self (me as I appear to me).' Distinctions aside, that imaginary and often indeterminate 'me as I appear to me' not only recalls Lacan's mirror phase but also constitutes the matrix of what will become the ego or that slippery part of oneself that Freud considered to represent an individual's tenuous connection with the principle of reality.

Ego, however, could never be fully distinguished from the 'internal' world of instincts and passions. It would be misleading to suggest that Robb's interest in the implications or the possibility of a 'sculptural objective self' is not imbued with a complex and confusing register of emotion. In dealing with issues that seem never to have clear answers and in fact become circular in their ability throw up more questions on the nature of being and seeing, Robb challenges both himself and his audience. In looking at the works as self-portraits with broad historical implications Robb offers little comfort. His peculiar brand of egotism, or obsession with self, is tempered by works that are rarely to do with beauty and always express a vulnerability that results from the impossibility of recognising himself completely in the work.

For Robb, self-portraiture is a litany of personal, theoretical and artistic problems. His desire to be analytical, to extract himself from the Freudian notion of id, to eschew the narcissistic and avoid cliché, generates a labyrinthine set of uncertainties at every turn. Thus Robb's work displays elements of the tormented soul who can never really know himself even in a world replete with information on how he might. His meticulously produced sculptures have a quality of craftsmanship that might suggest mastery, a knowing, but on closer inspection this falls apart. In his portraits Robb is never clothed, he is nearly always hairless and seen with eyes closed in an attempt to produce a body that is neither an infant nor a cadaver.

Closed eyes suggest an inward gaze that cannot be seen—a sense of self-absorption that Robb attempts to render corporeal by way of visual metaphors that suggest the reversal of internal and external. *Protrusion II* (2005) for instance, is characterised by protuberances from the cranial cavities that represent ‘fissures in the rationalised skin of the bust’. They appear as neutral tumours that question the unresolved issues of self-knowledge while critiquing the inability of the bust to produce an idealised and accurate portrait. In other words, that which cannot be seen is solidified by the use of fibreglass and acrylic paint, media that figuratively describe what is absent from the portrait.

In *Intake* (2005), he reverses this idea with a bust in which these cranial cavities are ‘plugged’: earlobes are stuffed into the ears while the nostrils are drawn closed and the mouth seen in an inverted sucking motion. In both works, protrusions or plugs create anguished expressions that are, as Robb describes, ‘in keeping with the general project of resisting the authority of the subject/artist central to the conventions of portraiture’. *Extension* (2005), on the other hand, focuses on those parts of the body that are already protruding, the head and the genitalia. The positioning of this particular work, inverted and against the wall in an upside down position, is Robb’s way of challenging the traditional ‘phallic’ authority of the sculpted male body. As such, it seeks to parallel the interplay between interior and exterior as seen in the previous works, by focusing on the two parts of the body (head and crotch) where this exchange is most literally performed.

Profoundly suspicious of the heroic bust, its functions and its success as a real likeness, Robb sets about subverting its very nature. To begin with, his narcissism is not a matter of self-love but rather smacks of self-doubt and self-discovery. Highly critical of portraiture in general and its desire to reproduce the essential aspects of the sitter, he asks how we can ever know if the work has been successful. Ultimately his answers are simply questions packaged in the difficult imagery of bulging tumours and stifling blockages that leave the viewer with that feeling of biliousness the artist speaks of when reflecting on his apparent obsession with discovering the answers to his questions. Thus the heroic aspect of the bust is removed leaving only pathos; a pathos that is enhanced by the arrangement of his works in a large almost empty gallery. Isolation emasculates the heroic certainty of each work/bust so that to some extent it exists in the realm of casualty. Self-aggrandisement and the authority of self-portraiture are thus victim to Robb’s inquiry.