

Art in America

OCTOBER 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Matthew Monahan:
Basbo, 2014,
polished bronze, 17□
by 23¼ by
2½ inches; at
Anton Kern.

MATTHEW MONAHAN

Anton Kern

Matthew Monahan doesn't want to tell a story or make a scene. He doesn't want his sculptures to sing or dance. "They are remote and incomplete and need a careful observer in order to survive," he wrote in the catalogue for his 2011 retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati. Fragmented, twisted and tortured, his figures often appear trapped within their elaborate confines in this exhibition, titled "Contenders," of 20 sculptures and reliefs and five charcoal drawings. The partial personages seem in some way to beg release from the bondage of armatures, frames and other structures the artist devises. Though never maudlin, and sometimes comic, the works suggest a metaphorical and universal cry for transcendence from the tyrannical restrictions of time and space.

Many of the sculptures resemble archeological relics. The small, polished bronze wall reliefs *Basbo* and *Ikkyu* (both 2014), for instance, look like battered ritual masks—recently recovered remnants of the Mycenaean Age, perhaps. One of the most striking pieces in the show, *First Aid* (2014), recalls a miniature Inca mummy. Mounted on a low-lying pedestal, this 4-foot-long sculpture, made of plaster, resin, stainless steel and oil paint with gold and silver leaf, shows the small gilt head of an androgynous figure emerging from one end of a red-and-gold-striped metallic shroud.

Monahan alludes to Greco-Roman mythology and the heroic statues of antiquity in *Hephaestus* (2013), the exhibition's

largest and most imposing work, installed alone in a rear gallery. Titled after the ancient god of fire, sacred to blacksmiths and sculptors, this 12-foot-high sculpture features a stylized figure in bronze mounted on a support of thin steel rods. Unlike the nude figures of Classical art, this god appears in a tattered suit. He has a blocky head and oversize hands, but the torso—with part of the rib cage exposed—and posture are well defined. Raising his elongated right arm, he points in an emphatic gesture, ostensibly to offer guidance and direction to all devotees.

Works by the Los Angeles-based artist, 42 years old, are often compared with those of like-minded peers such as Thomas Houseago and Huma Bhabha, who similarly explore new possibilities for the figure, creating handmade works using fragmented images and unorthodox materials. In this exhibition, his sixth solo at this venue, Monahan seems to have reached a new level of refinement that sets him apart. This was especially evident in large charcoal drawings, such as *Double Blind* (2013) and *Quick Fix* (2014). Although these composites of torn and reconfigured female faces and limbs suggest an almost Picasso-esque Cubist space, more often the sinuous technique of Bellmer or Dalí comes to mind in the way Monahan defines the forms with facility and grace.

—David Ebony