

Geof Oppenheimer: Politics helps shape sculptor's work

Kimberly Chun *Friday, May 16, 2014*

An abiding interest in the art object commingles with the political in not only artist Geof Oppenheimer's career - he's an associate professor in both the visual art and political science departments at the University of Chicago - but also in his practice, in such works as "The Embarrassing Statue." There, a leaf blower appears to be caught with its Brooks Bros. pants down, literally.

Call this piece the bastard offspring of 19th century academic French sculpture and Constantin Brancusi, as Oppenheimer might. We talked to the artist, who earned his MFA at UC Berkeley, by phone from Chicago.

Q: What unites the works in the new exhibition?

A: The name of the show is "Monsters," and I would say, in general, but in this show in particular, it's really investigating the bodily reactions or results to social conditions. How is the body affected by the political regimes we live under?

Q: What made you want to start dealing with figures?

A: Everyone's got one. It's a good shorthand. That's why people like horror movies and we like porn. The body is a great unifier.

Q: The sculptures don't immediately seem figurative.

A: I disagree, actually. I think they're very figurative - they're just not anthropomorphic. In "Love and Other Abstractions," one part is a figurative fetish object. It's cast graphite, and the cast is of a human jaw and other body parts. There are all these direct references to the human body, but they've been degraded and deranged. The sculpture is in two parts. There's a neon sign, which is, to me, about the rules of the road, the strictures we live by. So it's filling the gallery space with an energy that defines relations between us all. The figure is, over time, degraded by those very rules: He's made of graphite and sucking all that psychic energy. When I speak of that sculpture, it seems like a



Love and Other Abstractions, 2011-2012
Cast graphite, neon, aluminum, Hermes scarf, and manufactured wood

protagonist that's affected by that system. I really wanted to personify the figure - hence, the Hermès scarf.

Q: How do those markers of status play into the artwork?

A: My work has always been sort of interested in how value is formed in society, how social value is negotiated through objects, and sculpture, to me, is a great kind of arena for those questions.

Q: Would you say your work looks back to art history's past?

A: I'm interested in traditional ideas of sculpture. I'm a pretty conservative artist in a lot of ways. I invest energy in a singular object in a room, and that's a relatively conservative idea today. In that sense, I'm just like everyone else - in dialogue with artists throughout history. I believe in a clearly bracketed form.