

Clifford Rainey
"Boyhood"
Habatat Galleries
Boca Raton, Florida
January 12-February 6, 2006

Rainey's ten-year-old godson Alexander Georges was the model and armature for the "boyhood" series torsos. Each plaster cast from life was cut and reconstructed, the form amended and transformed, then carved like stone. Drawings were made from the worked plaster torsos. The glass casting process requires a back-and-forth between positive and negative forms until a high temperature mold is ready for casting the glass, and one of these stage is the creation of wax model. Rainey added a step by submerging the wax positive torso forms into hot water so that the wax would soften and could be worked to correspond to details in his drawings.

Revolutionary Modernism is widely defined by manifestoes and shock value--the clichéd shock of the new. There is a less prominent strain in Modernism--call it traditional or classical--that make progress in the accumulation of detail, built upon steady and reserved clarity of observation. I was impressed by Rainey's thoughtful working process and his lovely drawings, describing in literally gritty and rugged detail how the torsos were made: wax, 8, glass, 32. The use of pumice in the finishing process is carefully annotated, as is the kiln firing schedule. In job Number 1, War Boy, the size and silhouettes of the shells--inert ammunition--form a decorative frieze across the wooden pedestal base.

As a curator and critic, I spent a great deal of time searching for perfect works of art. Perfect, not in the almost demeaning contemporary sense of showy or ostentatious (and high-priced) but perfect in the old-fashion way: correct, suitable, and therefore compelling. Recent research in Egyptology, for example, has uncovered fragments that seem to suggest that glassmakers in the city of Tel El Amarna had access to seven colors of Glass--four more than their immediate predecessors. And those four additional colors--white, yellow, green, and deep blue--made all the difference, for now instead of making geometries, the ancients could more correctly portray the natural world. That was perhaps the perfect moment in the history of glass.

Rainey's recent body of work is correct and suitable to the present ambivalent moment in history, when we glorify innocence and rebuff the corrupt spectacle of terror. Innocent means harmless, but also unguarded, easily led, artless. War Boy is not a torso torn apart by the weapons of war. Rather, the handsomely constructed and burnished physical form recognizes the idea of war as part of our humanity. The remaining torsos in the exhibition, all displayed at child's height, acknowledge other human states that require cultivation if they are to blossom: Philosophical Boy, Nature Boy, Art boy. In his most perfect body of work so far, Rainey restores us to a time when much of our world was unfashioned, yet to come. All the seeds were within. Which would sprout?

WILLIAM WARMUS, contributing editor to GLASS Quaterly, received the 2005 Art Alliance for Contemporary Glass Award for his critical writing. He is at work on a book about the Stroemple Collection of Art and Nature.