

SCULPTURE

Clifford Rainey

Dorothy Weiss Gallery

San Francisco. 1998

By titling his show "Homo Faber," Clifford Rainey placed the emphasis in this exhibition on the artist's role as the fabricator, or maker, of art, and on the process of art-making itself, as well as on the importance of that role in society. This reading is reinforced by Rainey's choice of the heroic self-portrait bust as his primary focus. Interpreted in this exhibition in a wide variety of materials, The Portrait bust has been explored by a number of contemporary artists - most notably, Robert Arneson - but Rainey's focus on the place of both the artist and art-making in contemporary culture gives his interpretation of this traditional form a different twist.

Although this show included works in bronze, plaster and lead, Rainey succeeds most powerfully in communicating his ideas through his mastery of the unique qualities of glass as a sculptural material. The centerpiece of the exhibition, a three-part work titled Where Are We From. Where Are We Now. Where Are We Going (1997), showcases this mastery in unexpected ways. Three oversized heads - each cast, in different ways, from a mold taken from the same clay original - have been placed on three imposing steel pedestals. The plaster head on the left has been painted in a manner that suggests Egyptian funerary figures, or maybe the colorful treatment ancient Greek statues are believed to have originally received. Its polychrome surface, once so commonplace as a treatment for sculpture, is disconcerting to modern eyes. On the pedestal in the middle, as if to remind his viewers of the old story of the Emperor's new clothes, Rainey has created an "invisible" head: the empty space inside the elaborate cast-glass version of the multi-part mold he used to capture the likeness of his clay original. Its several pieces, held together with workmanlike C-clamps, suggest a kind of armor, but there is nothing inside to protect. The almost unimaginably laborious task of constructing such a shell (requiring the fabrication of a separate mold for each of the pieces, the kiln-casting of all the separate parts, and the painstaking process of fitting them back together) draws our attention to one of Rainey's central questions. Is the most important aspect of art-making the product - the masterpiece, towards which all artists strive - or it is the process? The empty void inside the head also seems to imply that contemporary art is in some kinds of crisis. Still, whatever this dilemma is, the third head on the right offers some hope for the future. Here, the artist portrays himself (and, by extension, the process of art-making) in solid glass. Translucent, yet filled with light, the head's surface has been rubbed with black pigment, its traces revealing every tiny bump and fissure, as if to emphasize the presence of the artist's hand.

Two additional heads in the show consist of empty space inside a mold. One, cast in glass, is a smaller version of the center head in the triptych. The other, the largest bust in the show, is an imposing bronze shell. Both of these works are titled Portrait of the Maker as a Non-Minority, Non Woman (1997), and serve to make Rainey's point of view as clear as possible: that the identification of art and artists by race or gender is an arbitrary, if not meaningless, classification system. This message, however, is more effectively conveyed by two of the least polemical works in the show. A nude female torso cast in glass is shown

side by side with its elaborate cast-glass mold/shell/armor. Like a vessel, the mold is open at the top, allowing visual entry into its inner mysteries - something denied by the fully enclosed heads. Next to it, the torso itself, timeless and graceful, allows a more open reading of the relationship between artist and society. Though fragile, its solidity and presence serve as a reminder that artists past, present, and future, male or female, classical or Postmodern, speak to up through their work.

- Maria Porges