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ART REVIEW

Sculpture in High Relief

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A show at the D. C. Moore Gallery rescues from oblivion 11 wood sculptures made by Mary Frank between 1957 and 1967

It has been a while since sculpture could be dismissed as "something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting," as Ad Reinhardt, the Abstract Expressionist painter, once said. Even before Reinhardt died, in 1967, the medium was going supernova, expanding and diversifying at an astounding pace. First it began incorporating all manner of found objects and nontraditional materials; then it lifted brilliant color from painting and achieved new levels of abstraction. Since then it has come to include installations, environments, land art, performance and all manner of spectacle.

Right now sculpture is enjoying a high-profile moment, thanks to a head-spinning assortment of solo shows in Chelsea and elsewhere. Some present recent work by living artists spanning several generations; others showcase fascinating historical material of varying vintages. There are more shows than can comfortably be encompassed here, so what follows is a selective tour.

In Chelsea work by three major figures of postwar American art — John Chamberlain, 84; Jasper Johns, 81; and Donald Judd, who died in 1994 but would now be 82 — form something of a high-end trifecta. All played pivotal if very different roles in turning sculpture away from traditional figuration and toward new relationships with found objects, materials, process, color and the viewer's space.

Mr. Chamberlain, having recently joined the Gagosian franchise, is making a stunning debut at that gallery's West 24th Street big-top space. (There is also a relatively scattershot, seemingly sour-grapes exhibition of his work at his former representative, the Pace Gallery, in its West 22nd Street space, but never mind).

Among the largest works he has ever made, the Chamberlain sculptures at Gagosian all incorporate his signature crushed car bodies, fashioned with tremendous compositional variety and verve, and his usual unerring color sense. Variously comical, stately, architectural and gestural, these pieces erupt from the gallery's expansive concrete floors like unusually well-shaped mesas, turning the totality into an exhilarating indoor landscape.

Mr. Johns's show at Matthew Marks's West 22nd Street gallery is as quiet as Mr. Chamberlain's is boisterous. It centers on a series of reliefs that perfectly illustrate Mr. Johns's best-known axiom: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." As stated in Mr. Johns's revealing conversation with the painter Terry Winters in the show's catalog, these works stem from a relieflike SculptMetal grid of the numbers zero through nine that Mr. Johns made somewhat hurriedly and a bit on the cheap as a commission for Lincoln Center in 1964.

Recently he made a sturdier, more precise version from scratch, which unexpectedly yielded a wax model of the piece, in addition to the radiant aluminum final cast on view at Marks. With typical economy, he did "something else" with the wax work, creating six smaller, exquisite two-sided relief fragments in bronze, aluminum and even silver that conflate painting, sculpture and printmaking in a new way.

It takes a while to enter into the obsessive concentration that suffuses these works, with their shifting textures, newsprint scraps and other small objects, all embalmed in cast metal. Their combination of lapidary detail and casual process reveals the intensity of Mr. Johns's mind with unusual clarity.

Meanwhile, the David Zwirner gallery is celebrating its new representation of the Judd Foundation with an exhibition of nine large anodized boxes made in Germany in 1989 and never before shown in such numbers in the United States. From a few feet away, the boxes appear as identical silvery aluminum sheaths, open on top, just over three feet tall and nearly seven feet wide and deep. Up close, however, their interior volumes take over, each articulated in surprising and expansive ways by various vertical divisions and bright Plexiglas floors. Each box is a well of space and color whose overlapping, intersecting planes evoke Judd's origins as a painter and his lifelong admiration for painters like Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Josef Albers, who favored simple forms and strong color.

Mary Frank's wood sculpture is on view at DC Moore Gallery through June 4.

Two other exhibitions in Chelsea unearth very different parts of the more distant past. A show at the D. C. Moore Gallery rescues from oblivion 11 wood sculptures made by Mary Frank between 1957 and 1967, just as Mr. Johns, Mr. Chamberlain and Judd were making their names. These gruffly carved, erotically charged pieces draw from Brancusi, Degas and folk art, and their fusions of forms — human and not — feel vital and contemporary. Several pieces start in one place and end somewhere else entirely, like "Leafing," which suggests a figure in an extreme one-legged yoga pose from one side and a strangely flirtatious bit of topiary from the other.

And surely one of the most startling art historical sights in all of New York right now is on offer at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery: Vladimir Tatlin's wacky, visionary "Monument to the Third International" — one of early Modernism's most ambitious and best-known works of unrealized architecture, as embodied by one of its biggest architectural models. It is being shown in the United States for the first time, surrounded by an extensive display of Russian film posters from the 1920s and early '30s.

This tilting, spiraling, viaductlike structure was concocted by Tatlin (1885-1953), a founder of Russian Constructivism, between 1915 and 1920, after a 1913 trip to Paris that involved close encounters with the Eiffel Tower and with Picasso's guitar constructions (currently the subject of a heady exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art). The spiral, intended to rise higher than the Eiffel Tower, wraps around a stack of four geometric buildings — a cube, a pyramid, a cylinder and a hemisphere — each meant to rotate at a yearly, monthly, weekly or daily rate.

Planned to house the new Communist government in what was then Petrograd (St. Petersburg), the monument was a pipe dream of a structure; by 1932 the nearly 16-foot-tall model itself had vanished. Today it exists only in several actual-size copies. (The version at Shafrazi is the first, made in 1967 in consultation with T. M. Shapiro, Tatlin's collaborator.) Much of late-20th-century sculpture seems presaged by this idiosyncratic amalgam, not least the geometric forms of Minimalism, and the spirals of Robert Smithson and Richard Serra.

And completely by chance — but who knows? — the latest sculptures from the Post-Minimalist Richard Tuttle, on view at the Pace Gallery on West 25th Street, seem to riff on Tatlin's tower, or at least its precarious permeability. Each presents a kind of stage-set-like open volume within which all kinds of sculptural events unfold, patched together from colorful, lightweight materials and objects. Quite a bit larger than Mr. Tuttle's usual work, these pieces evince a somewhat slovenly, art-supplies Constructivism that is characteristically light, ephemeral and full of joy.

Other worthwhile sculpture shows in Chelsea include Jene Highstein's display of new sandblasted (and vaguely ceramiclike) aluminum orbs and spires, forming a landscape of their own at Danese; David Nyzio's show at Postmasters, where the most interesting piece is a modest row of gleaming white blocks of salt, whose seemingly water-worn, scholars'-rock nooks and crannies were unwittingly licked into being by a flock of sheep over several years; and, at Meulensteen, the latest in flexible sculpture, furniture and partitions from the Slovenian artist Tobias Putrih — all made from thin, perforated sheets of black-painted aluminum that can be bolted together any number of ways. These last recall Modernist ideals that Tatlin would have embraced.

One of the city's best sculpture shows is on the Upper East Side and features neither contemporary nor Western art: the ravishing display of Kota reliquary figures from West Africa that the Paris dealer Bernard Dulon has orchestrated at Friedman & Vallois. These works are familiar from art history texts because their large, concave faces; stylized features; inventively worked bronze and copper surfaces; and ineffably human geometries exerted a crucial influence on early French Modernism, starting with Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon." This show provides a rare opportunity to study 15 examples free of glass vitrines and to appreciate the variety of surface, technique and expression that this style afforded individual artists. It is breathtaking.

Returning to the present and moving downtown, at the shoestring Lower East Side gallery Ramiken Crucible, Elaine Cameron-Weir explores Minimalist simplicity with wit and variety. Her works include a Persian rug dipped in indigo dye; a long, gracefully curved wood dowel covered in rolling tobacco; and, best of all, "Pedestal," a tall, narrow, stepped monolith tenderly worked in plaster that resembles an architectural model for a skyscraper.

Nearby, at Rachel Uffner on Orchard Street, Hilary Harnischfeger is showing a series of intriguing vessel-like objects that combine fired multicolored clay extended and impacted with plaster, paper and chunks of rock and quartz. They improve upon her already striking carved-paper paintings.

The best solo debut in sculpture during this Manhattan minute is that of David Adamo, a 32-year-old New York artist living in Berlin. After drawing interest in the Whitney Biennial and MoMA/P.S. 1's "Greater New York" last year, Mr. Adamo pulls out most of the stops at the Untitled gallery, also on Orchard Street, presenting an extended meditation on sculpture, its materials, evocations and techniques, both additive and

subtractive. The installation begins with a New England stone wall that reads as a lumpy Carl Andre sculpture. Beyond awaits a Brancusi-like array of cedar beams (an early Andre staple) and wood chips. Some beams are hollowed out, like incipient canoes or coffins; more are carved to the breaking point, but remain upright.

Casualness alternates with bravura precision. A delicate violin scroll emerges from one block of wood; a slight-looking string ladder turns out to be copper wire carefully wrapped in cream-color yarn. And trompe-l'oeil-painted plaster casts of partially eaten fruit are strewn everywhere — a dispersed vanitas that recalls Mr. Johns's love of detail. Slightly anomalous is a finely wrought half-size re-creation of an old, heavily paneled double door painted bright red that Mr. Adamo passes daily in Berlin. A matter-of-fact homage to endurance and traditional values, perhaps, it anchors the show's inspiring message: sculpture can be whatever you make it.