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Tony Paterson's work shines in retrospective at Center for Inquiry

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI - News Arts Writer

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A bronze head of Philip C. Elliot by Tony Paterson.

It's fair to say that they don't make them like Tony Paterson anymore. And that goes double for the sculptures he creates.

REVIEW

WHAT: " Sex, Bronze and the Human Form"

WHEN: Through April 7

WHERE: The Center for Inquiry, 3965 Rensch Rd., Amherst

TICKETS: Free

INFO: 636- 4869 or centerforinquiry. net

Paterson, 73, the retired former head of the University at Buffalo's sculpture program, is a figurative sculptor of the old style. He creates finely honed representational work in the age-old sculptural process of cast bronze. It's an artistic endeavor that in the swirling, abstract world of contemporary art, is about as

en vogue as papier-mache.

But “Sex, Bronze and the Human Form,” his current exhibition at the Center for Inquiry in Amherst may be a case in point in a wider argument for a vision of challenging art for a contemporary audience that includes such sculpture — from the crafty devil who sculpted “Artemis and the Stag” some 2,000 years ago to the famous reclining figures of Henry Moore. Or it might be simply an indulgent throwback, a particularly well-crafted collection that revels in the fact that such pieces can still be produced by a skilled and rapidly dwindling few.

However you approach it, Paterson rewards you with his stylized vocabulary of female forms, distorted pieces that challenge our notions of confinement, and, to tie all the disparate pieces together, a refined technical skill that’s impressive on its own.

Whatever draws you to Paterson’s work or repels you from it, it does indeed feel anachronistic. The oldest work dates from 1958 when Paterson was a student at Boston’s Museum School, with many pieces from a particularly productive period of Paterson’s life during the ’60s. There are plenty of more recent works too, as well as a handful of compelling abstract sculptures.

In opposition to Paterson’s beautiful renderings of face and form, the really interesting stuff takes on an entirely darker look and feel. Several pieces feature semi-translucent skulls, most made of an epoxy resin and usually encased — or imprisoned — in a cast bronze enclosure. They deal with ideas of constriction, imprisonment and perhaps mental bondage that are particularly resonant in a piece called “Esclavo,” two gender-opposite totem poles and a series of small objects enclosed in movable bronze encasements.

Also notable are three large-scale plaster casts of female forms, each with distinct sectional pieces. Their exaggerated size means that Paterson hasn’t yet had the opportunity to cast them in bronze. And it’s a good thing that Paterson’s work is so intriguing, because the Center for Inquiry makes a lousy exhibition space for what could

have been made into an elegant career retrospective. The best was made of the situation, obviously, but objects do seem thrown more or less where there is space without more than an offhanded regard to thematic or chronological groupings.

That said, much of Paterson’s work would be compelling in a bus terminal. This show, and his body of work in general, shouldn’t be simply consigned to history.

Focal Point: A Closer Look

TONY PATERSON’S collection of bronze heads are impressive simply for their technical achievement. Many, including portraits of Paterson’s former colleagues, teachers and students, are done in the classic style. Others, particularly those of older subjects, are more engaging and magnetic owing to their rough-hewn, thumb-printed texture.

Paterson obviously has a great affection for the female form, and has created a kind of repetitive symbolism across his form-inspired works: breasts morphed into curved, vertical configurations resembling insect pincers, other parts metamorphosed into what Paterson called a “transgender or transsexual” appearance that suggests a certain universality in physical beauty. This appears in works like “Female Form as Flower” as well as a gleaming series of small polished brass pieces encased like precious stones in a glass cabinet. — *Colin Dabkowski*

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