

Art is dangerous, fanatical, magical, and some additional comments on Enrique Marty's sculptures, Stefanie Patruno

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"I know there has been some protest; it would be astonishing if there weren't any. There are always protests against something – I won't say 'new' but rather 'revived': this disturbs many people in their repose and routine. Anyway marble is sacred... one wasn't touch it, well! I've already put a sacrilegious hand on it, and I'm of a mind to continue."
Jean-Léon Gérôme

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The Pygmalion myth is probably the symbol of sculpture par excellence. Ovid's ancient narrative, in which an ivory sculpture by Pygmalion is brought to life by Venus, reveals the longing of artistic creation for a living soul. One of the few representations of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth in sculpture is the one created by French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme, who experimented with the topic simultaneously along different paths: in sculpture and in painting. His marble group, produced in 1892, shows the sculptor Pygmalion in a passionate embrace with his newly awakening creation Galatea. Moving away from previous sculptural interpretations of the artistic myth, Gérôme, in fashioning his female statue, used a change of colour – a motif already canonical in painting – to illustrate the process of coming to life. A little known fact is that the torso of his white marble sculpture was originally coloured. Although it was already general knowledge at the time that ancient sculptures were polychrome, Gérôme's painted sculptures were viewed as exotic and were the subject of hefty debate, reviving comparisons with Madame Tussauds and the pale rigor mortis of the wax figures.

This blurring of boundaries between artistic media, namely presenting painting in the form of three-dimensional, fleshy bodies in an interplay between art and reality (or vice versa), along with a confrontational attitude towards tradition, and his use of grotesque stylistic means and his experiments with materials, characterize the sculptures of Enrique Marty. In his "total artwork", sculpture and painting always interact and mutate, in a complex artistic process, into pictorial-sculptural shapes, painted expressively in multiple colour layers like an oil painting, and with real hair. This liaison leads to the realization, and not only in respect of Pablo and Ruth, that Marty's art can also be dangerous: "Art is Dangerous" stands in ornamental letters on the wall of his eponymous installation, which also includes two sculptures. Over their flesh colour-painted bodies, these two less-than-life-size figures are dressed in skin-tight costumes of elaborately extravagant tattoos. The caudillos named Ruth and Pablo confront the viewer not only with the large-scale body paintings covering almost their entire skin, and with their punk hairstyles, but also with their offensive gestures and live weapons. In this way the permanent Yakuza tattoos symbolize their membership of the art mafia and, in their individual expression, stand for the obviousness of using also to extra-legal methods to enforce one's own artistic claims.

With disarming reality Marty revives in this work a theme of sculpture that deals with sculpture itself with all its boundless evolutions in the field of contemporary art, and at the same time points well beyond its artistic heritage, in so doing rendering obsolete the question of the limits of representation. For his multimedia oeuvre, which apart from sculpture includes paintings, drawings and video, is comparable to the heterogeneous growth of the rhizome in nature. The concept of the rhizome as a model for non-hierarchically structured thinking, coined by post-structuralists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is applicable to Enrique Marty's labyrinthine, often inter-connected works, and illustrates the ever-growing inter-linkages – both within a single work and across several works – as well as the numerous variants and ever newly growing forms.

In this way Marty's sculptures can be both part of a larger whole, closely linked to their spatial context, or else autonomous works. Sculptures such as Luis exist as single figures or in animated film. Others again are part of a series or a multi-figure group, such as the horned tie-wearers in Miedo y Megalomania en 15 estados diferentes, all with the artist's face. To gain the viewer's active participation, other sculptures draw in their entire surroundings, pointing additionally, like the 80 fanatic clones, coupled with a mural, to a "tendency to total artwork".

However, there is in Enrique Marty's work in, addition to the multimedial combining of varied art forms, materials and styles, another intrinsic combination: that of art and reality. Inherent per se in any total artwork is the tendency to abolish the border between aesthetic form and reality, Marty's exalted variations of a total artwork aim at something else: a truthful, sentimental, magical, Dionysian, anti-heroic art that, away from the "fine arts", is searching not for a beyond-reality effect, but (potentially or destructively) for reality itself. In so doing, Marty stages in his sculptures and sculptural installations only a part of this reality, and generally the more extreme part, the state of exception, in order to fashion more realistically, not the work, but reality itself.

Enrique Marty's way of using at one and the same time veristic forms of representation and grotesque and caricaturizing tendencies, as encountered in the Baroque period and in the 19th century in dolls and cabinets of curious wax figures, disconcerts today's spectator as in Gérôme's day. But while the French classicist was concerned solely about the simple illusionistic reproduction of reality between nature and imitation, the Spaniard is seeking to place the viewer in confrontational mode.

Added to this, Enrique Marty's direct visual language and pervasive iconography, coupled with a theatrical intensity, invariably revolves around the human creature. Although the human figure is one of the oldest subjects of visual art, sculpture is no longer the "represented, palpable truth" or "the finest, most beautiful and pure" as Gottfried Herder characterized it in his 1778 essay on sculpture. Beyond idealization, elegance and lightness, Marty's protagonists remind one of something fundamentally repressed: physicality. Well aware that the viewer is repulsed by direct confrontation with the unadorned nudity, Marty chooses exaggerated realism as a means to express his substantive concern: to illustrate collective life tragedies that his sculpture types condense into permanent symbols of human existence.

Marty is moreover a ruthless physiognomist, as his until now only life-size sculpture called Luis vividly demonstrates. In many ways, he is, within Marty's total oeuvre, a particularly idiosyncratic and dramatic example of the human species. Stripped completely naked, Luis has, along with his clothes, torn off the masks covering his inner emotions. His inner rage permeates from every pore, is turned outwards by the colouring of his skin, his tense posture, in his ecstatic look, in his entire creaturely existence.

While 16th century painting had already developed ways of representing themes such as fear, sexuality and vulnerability (for example, Lucas Cranach), the human figure in sculpture remained always somewhat heroic. Luis embodies, with his expressive patina, real hair and standing in his socks without a base, a representational code that isolates it from the human image as treated in sculpture from antiquity to the 20th century. As such the figure of Luis is the epitome of an anti-heroic sculpture, behind which lies a particular conception of communication, connecting him with the concept of sculpture of British sculptor Reg Butler. For Butler, one of the few artists since 1945 to have developed new strategies within figural sculpture, art should touch the viewer directly. With this goal, he created around 1970 a series of painted bronzes, which also breach the border of the modern nude. In the erotically charged female body of the Bending Girl from around 1968-71, comes across a grotesque realism, heightened by the use of glass eyes and real hair, that symbolizes the essential themes of modern life: suffering, sexuality and cruelty. With this dramatic look at the naked body, both Butler and Marty stand in a single tradition, less with the hyper-realism of a John de Maria, but rather with the understanding of the body of a Stanley Spencer and a Lucien Freud.

Beyond this the encounter with Marty's installation sculptures is comparable with a total experience, in which the observer is invited to actively reflect on this non-canonical representation of the ravaged human body, confronting him with a very real representation of what is simmering beneath the surface and lurking behind the corner, and calling forth his own projections, fears and obsessions.

Marty's verism points in this context to aesthetic references that programmatically link past and present. Veristic and baroque style, grotesque and theatrical elements, private and political mythologies, the narration of independent films and comics merge in his works with everyday and art-historical contexts. Dramatic expressive gestures and visual intensity are the elements of a Spanish art tradition that has, from Velázquez to de Mena's sculptures to Goya, generated totally unique iconic creations. Naturalistic sculptures with expressive physiognomies, real garments and applications of material are common in religious processions in Spain down to the present day, "such as the Christ in the Cathedral of Burgos, whose hair is real hair, whose thorns are real thorns, and whose clothing is made of real fabric". Marty's Catholic Children series in particular is closely related with this typically Spanish mentality, and its expression of inner spirituality and mysticism. With their eccentric gestures and their emaciated limbs the children's portraits are reminiscent of depictions of martyrs, but also of South German and Flemish Baroque sculptures. Even if coloured sculpture has generally lost its self-evident character since classicism, resonances can nonetheless be found in the colourful Baroque sculptures of Borromini or terracotta sculptures of Luca della Robbia. Spiritually and physically close to Marty's coloured sculptures are also the brightly painted medieval Madonnas and depictions of the Man of Sorrows.

In a similar manner, it was only in the late 19th century that Edgar Degas again encouraged reflection on sculpture, taking it to the boundaries of the medium. With his only sculpture, Petite danseuse de quatorze ans, presented while he was still alive, the French painter immediately created a scandal: his young dancer being not at all in the old sculptural tradition. For Degas' contemporaries this work was an unimaginable smorgasbord of coloured wax, real hair and fabrics – substances that in their terrible reality appeared far from adequate for "high" sculpture. At this point comes the element of metamorphosis, mentioned at the outset, which, through the use of materials and the shaping of the sculpture, is an essential part of Marty's sculptural work. By applying the colour on top of transparent latex layers and using it as a modelling medium, the surface is made alive and sensual, becoming light, shadow, materials, flesh, alive. At the same time, in this artistic process and the progressive anonymization, Marty's figures lose their significance as subject and colour is elevated from means of representation to object of representation, without belying the actual material.

Using Old and New Masters, Enrique Marty stages a post-modern contest of the arts within his own world theatre, linking in, with his own distinctive repertoire of figures and materials, with the traditions and practices of these masters. If the historical paragons targeted an opposition of art forms, each seeking to outdo the other with its own artistic means, Enrique Marty has not raised one genre over another. Quite naturally and in an ironic inversion of the paragons, he makes the disappearance of the boundaries of genres and hierarchies into a precondition for a total art work, which builds a bridge between historical and contemporary sculpture and connects the universal human drama to a cycle of everyday psychological pathologies.

Stefanie Patruno.