

3008 commerce kirk hopper fine art



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Mac Whitney, "Brazoria," steel, 96" x 30" x 36", from the Underslung series



Roger Winter, Bill Haveron, Mac Whitney

By Susie Kalil

It's no secret that the art market can consume artists as fast as they emerge. Many become victims of a recent trend, fueled by a zeal for newness that places artists in the spotlight before they are ready, or deserve, to be there. Youthful passion is often mistaken for brilliant work, encouraging many artists to expect midcareer surveys before they hit thirty. For some, art school is just a finishing school, rather than an arena in which to square ideas. Others emerge as hyper-professionals, institutional guarantors of The New. Indeed, the support system of galleries, curators and collectors that once made it possible for artists to pursue serious careers is in a state of near collapse. There is simply no longer a structure that nourishes incremental artistic growth. Fewer and fewer galleries are willing to make the commitment to help the artist mature professionally. Often, exhibitions are not events that evolve naturally, presented in rhythm with an artist's development; rather, they are responses to market pressures.

Art does seem to have moods and phases rather than distinctive moments now. Anything is acceptable for an artist to undertake: any style, any media, any content. Yet this openness, this freedom to deconstruct, appropriate, emulate and re-present is also accompanied by a good deal of aesthetic flailing around. Trust yourself? Doubt yourself? Kirk Hopper uses his gallery as a site for argument about what contemporary art production might entail, rather than a place to repeat received behavior. Toward that end, artists at Kirk Hopper Fine Art are engaged in dialogues that are diverse, fragmented, challenging, irritating, demanding—words that describe the time as we speak. The issues raised by their works are very of the moment—the cognitive legitimacy of the artificial or inauthentic, the haunting transformations of childhood experiences that kick around in our adult memories, conflicts between the rendered and the real, and the renewed aura of the handcrafted object. Manifest throughout is a faith in their own art making processes. Unlike conventional curators and art dealers, who keep some scholarly distance from their work—by striving to define movements and attempting to chart stylistic transformations—Hopper operates on the assumption that art is a raw material capable of embodying its own ideas and sentiments. To his credit, he refrains from cultivating the mystique of a public persona, instead letting the work he selects convey attitude, taste and a personal sensibility.

The quality celebrated by KHFA does not subsume individual works into a pompous game of postmodern intimidation, but is powerfully democratic and readily accessible. These artists are unencumbered by rhetoric; they are undertaking art-making strategies that are materially seductive and visually alluring. All of the artists aim to decenter the viewer and reintroduce a range of experiences that go beyond a brief retinal tinge to a visceral and engaging world. Their works are made in such a way as to encourage close-up and distant viewing,

tactile and visual experience, and both physical and emotional involvement. These are artists who invent, reinvent, and synthesize outside the hegemony of contemporary art's self-referencing, who force us to define anew our relationship to both art and the world around us.

For this particular showing, Hopper has focused on works by Roger Winter, Bill Haveron and Mac Whitney—artists who came of age in the 1970s and early 80s, in the wake of independence and revolutionary movements. This is a timely exhibition. At a moment when too much art is dependent for its effect on lengthy museum labels or nattering art dealers, Hopper has pursued an adamantly visual art that allows for rich, free rumination of the viewer's part. In doing so, he reminds us, when we especially need reminding, what it takes to be a great artist—why a particular group of Texas artists kept working along, evolving in boom times and in bust times. Partly it is the restless, renegade spirit. Partly it is the fact that they bring to the work a combination of ambition, wit and technical competence. They have never rested on their laurels, but have persisted decade after decade, always trying to go deeper and further in one direction or another. They are risk-takers, venturesome in their attempts to forge a distinctive language during years of relative isolation. By representing artists who have been determined to follow their own light, Hopper evokes the urgency and raw passion, the unabashed curiosity and searching quality that has taken them through the ebbs and flows. Perhaps the only generalization that applies to all of them is that they are persistent, even in the face of adversity. They share an attitude of irreverence, verging in some cases on contrariness; and take pride in being in the aesthetic opposition.

Overall, the works weave a quiet spell of moment-to-moment truth, but the shock of heightened forms and symbols spring at you with unnerving ferocity. Now, moving toward the half century mark of their careers, Winter, Haveron and Whitney have hit their primes. Their paintings, drawings and sculptures show a clarity, a confidence and sureness that only comes from long years of hard won experience and fearless determination. Grappling eloquently with such syntactical elements as scale, surface, materials and illusionistic forms and spaces—with visual vocabularies as informed as they are idiosyncratic—the work can literally take your breath away. In these pieces, Winter, Haveron, and Whitney simply dig more deeply into a darker terrain. They'll move you with the rawness of their exposure, the brute images of both nature and human life experienced close to the bone. Coming out of the backside of middle age, they seem to have acquired a second wind and are producing extremely powerful work. Accordingly, it speaks volumes about being an artist as a lifetime pursuit, rather than as a career choice, as is the prevailing notion among many artists today. With the KHFA showing, Winter, Haveron, and Whitney embark on the late period of their artistic endeavors, what is generally considered the mature work. And with age, comes wisdom.

Their search for meaning doesn't proceed along compass course. Rather, it wanders and meanders, revealing a core that is greater, deeper through the living out of the messes and gaps. Their images and forms tap into memories of strange places and the wonder that both attracts and frightens us. Vulnerable to the transformative

▼ Bill Haveron, "Reverse Osmosis Post Pubescence," 2005–2012, graphite on paper, 60" x 83.5"



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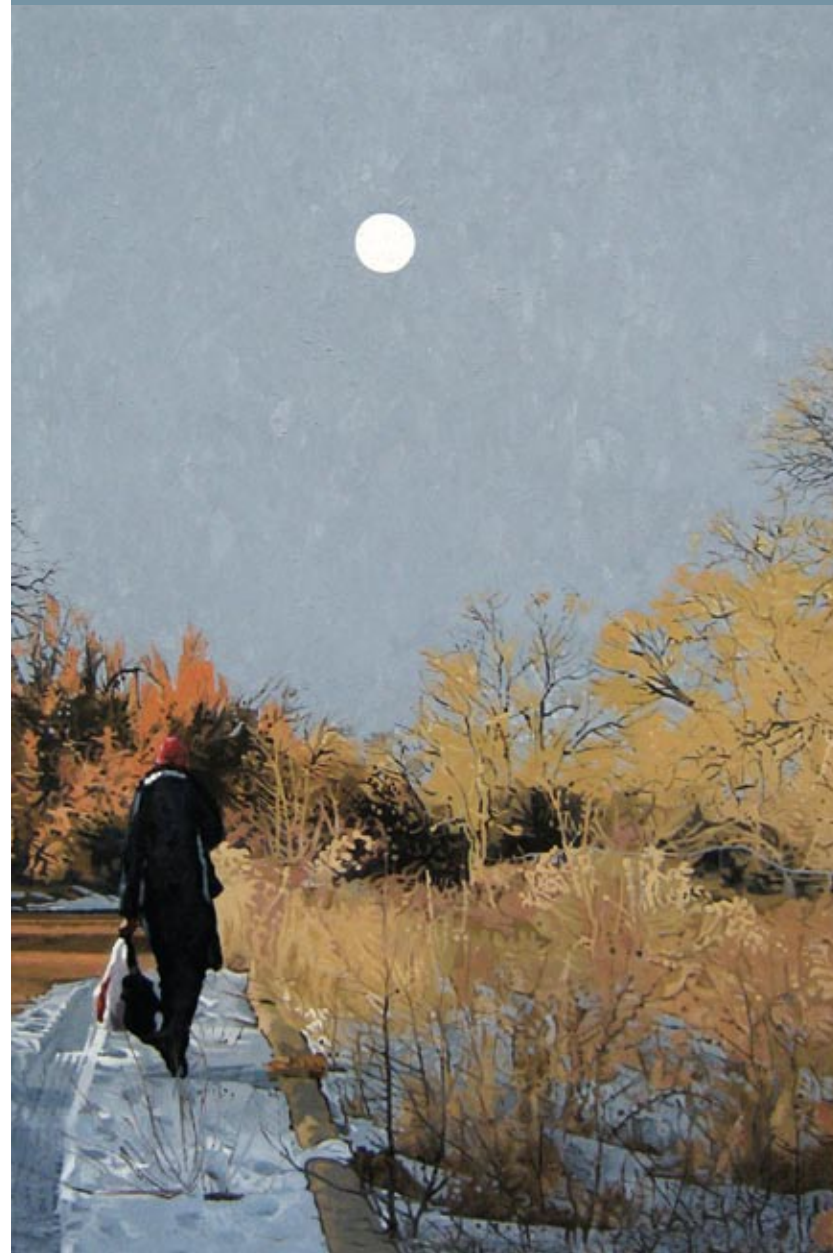
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events of an engaged human life, some works investigate notions of identity and metamorphosis, a kind of reassembling of the spirit, the mind, the body and the environment. Others suggest a role for art in the world and a set of problems for it to address, works that bring with them a sense of contingency, of quirks and commotions of our daily lives. All of the works, however, exude an overwhelming sense of desperation or obsession; it's as if they had to be made according to a deeply personal urge or interior force. Each artist literally breaks up, wrenches open and disrupts the familiar, thus creating new realms of significance. The message of the work, if properly assimilated, has the potential to reconfigure our orientation in the world. Throughout, Winter, Haveron, and Whitney are unafraid of challenging their viewers, of making us work. That quality of conviction makes even the more romantic images part of a bracing resolve, never mere striving for effect. There is no one meaning to grasp, nor do we read the works according to a particular syntax. We are not conscious of the final image or form as much as the sum of its parts, the process and incessant struggle, even urge, to find a language that communicates. For each artist, this language is grounded in personal experience.

Good art does not, of course, deliver messages like moral telegrams. Rather, they speak directly to the need for capturing the very electricity of life. This may strike a discordant note in today's irony-saturated cultural landscape. The idea that art should say something—and not necessarily with a smirk, may seem quaintly out-of-date. But the crux of this art is one that we all confront at one time or another: the discomfiting discovery that the world is not ordered as we thought it was. Rather, the work comments on the dangerous human tendency to take refuge in certainty when the truth may be more complicated and elusive. It's precisely this quality of desperation, of hanging on by one's fingernails, that gives the art its continued resonance and distinguishes it from a younger generation.

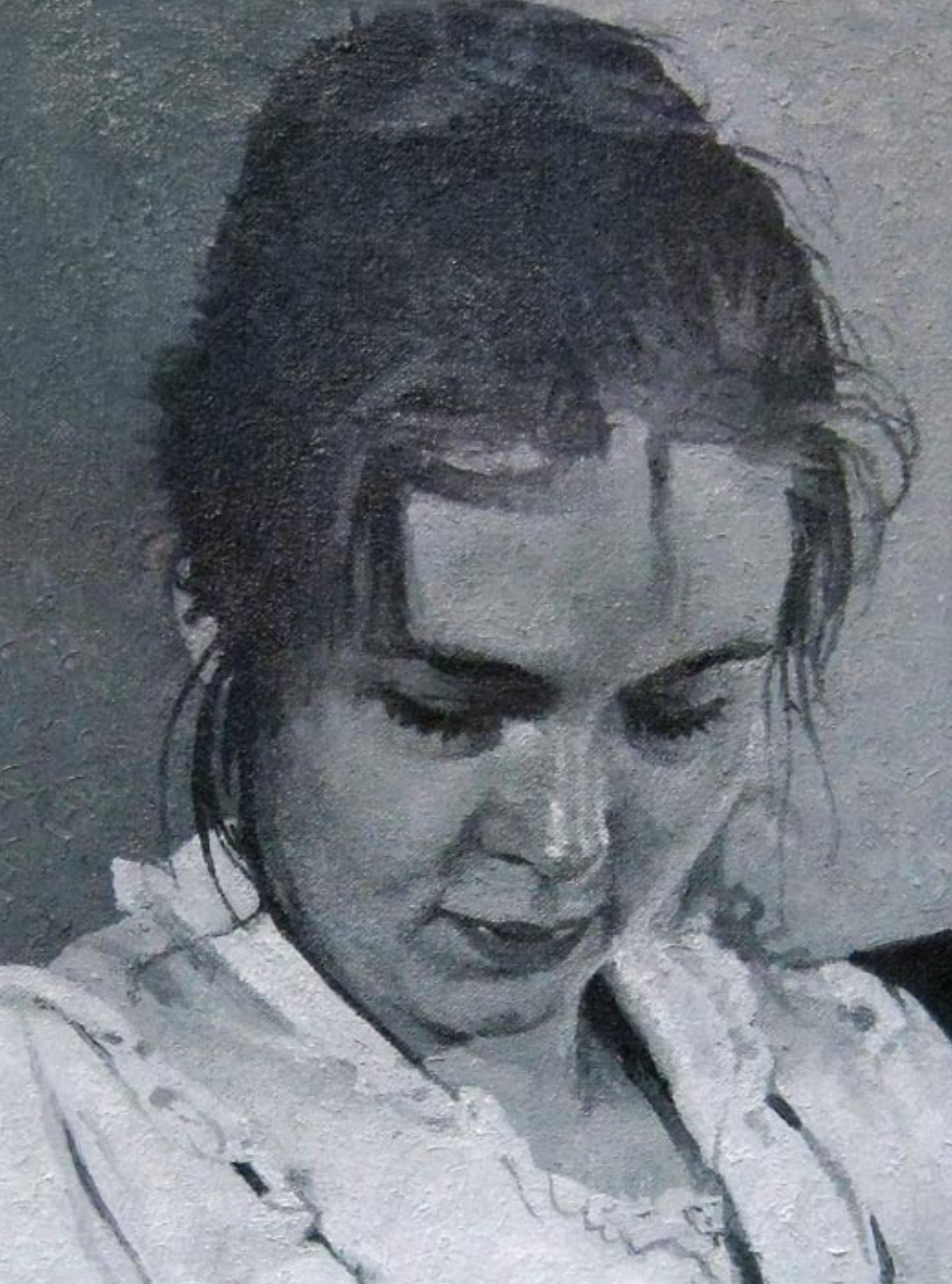
Roger Winter's extraordinary, hauntingly beautiful paintings of the mundane and unobtrusive pay close attention to subjects seen on the quick, in a glimpse. The works at KHFA show this former Dallas artist's continued commitment to the precise rendering, the studied demarcation and incongruities of sections of the natural world and the manmade—sections that may seem, to the casual viewer, differentiated in an arbitrary way. Yet all of the landscapes and portraits are rendered as if by virtue of a stare that never seems to end. Winter captures the spirit of diverse locales and environments, from arid plains of West Texas and snowy fields of rural Maine, to congested intersections of New York City. But to say that Winter is a simple-minded realist is to miss all the ways that he fuses precise observation with structural rigor and painterly sensuality. Indeed, Winter's meticulous attention to the appearance of things and their capacity for mysterious drama yields lyric passages that evoke feelings of transcendence.

There is always a deep sense of quiet in a Winter painting—of breath both held and released. His art is balanced between abstraction and realism, not because he moves from one to the other, but because he has found a space between the two. The representational elements of a Winter painting act not only as signifiers of the



outside world, but also as pretexts for the physical act of painting and as templates for viewing. They demand a scanning, all over read. But by keeping the images close to the surface, they maintain the flatness of the picture plane while allowing us the pleasures of mental contrast or a Modernist flip-flop between material surface and illusory depth. Spaced more or less evenly over the surface, edge to edge, the pictorial incident invites a slow look. To experience one of Winter's paintings is to feel simultaneously the sudden reality of a specific place as well as the slow passing of time.

A prevailing notion of landscape painting implies that the artist must capture some likeness of a certain geographic locale. To render a sense of place, an artist should have a kind of primitive earth-consciousness of his native region. For Winter, the understanding of place includes but goes beyond the local, but also of the larger, universal implications of what has been discerned in a given "place." Winter has the courage and intelligence to inform his work with what he sees and feels. He is intensely aware of his surroundings



Roger Winter,
"Jeanet in 1962,"
2009, oil on linen,
12" x 9"



and responds to the shifting narratives with an acutely critical, objective observation, as well as a highly intuitive sense which sometimes borders on an understanding beyond a merely physical reality. Toward that end, Winter's investigation is often framed within the context of a journey at once literal and allegorical, whose changing landscape continuously challenges the very limits of perception and consciousness. Flowing associatively, Winter's images traverse a strange yet hauntingly familiar territory that evokes the realm of dreams, memory and the imagination—those often subliminal and turbulent layers of experience in which the potential for self-discovery and renewal reside.

Winter has always been an artist of tenacity, deeply conscious of the tradition he works in and the homages to other art that it entails. His work has changed considerably as it has developed over the decades, demonstrating the artist's capacity for continuous self-criticism and awareness rarely matched by his contemporaries. Winter comprehends the nature of art at its most fundamental as a mutating, vibrant and evolving force. To many viewers, however, Winter's landscapes and portraits represent the re-embrace of bygone values sorely missed in painting today. Their fine qualities of light, craft, surface, form and space blow fresh air into the lungs of an audience seeking the wholeness of a unitary visual expression. Still, the successful bodies of work that Winter has produced during his career do not so much "develop," one from the previous, as loop back and branch out, so each body of work cleans new visual space adjacent to the next. Accordingly, Winter's earlier works may be taken as clearing a visible field for the later landscapes. Throughout, he celebrates the everyday miracles that only paint can achieve, miracles that come from attention to and engagement with the materials at hand. His art is as much a form of behavior as a product of poetry and craft. All in all, Winter's finely tuned paintings, animated by contrasting forces of palette and structure, seem alternately Spartan and generous. It's as if radiant energy has been collected between the tufted and skittering, staccato dabs of paint. One moves from the sharp contour of paint to the large masses of forms, weaving in and out of flickerings of light, which bring one back to the palpable vehicle of paint. The whole effect is sumptuous and absorbing. Nature is visible here, albeit in hiding; it is simultaneously close and distant, encompassing and eluding. The philosophical questions that emerge from these compositions deal with the mystery and enigma of our identity and existence, our solitary state in the world, our limits in space and time, our desire for the infinite.

For Bill Haveron, even more than most artists, drawing is the soil out of which his thinking grows—the very core of his style. And Haveron's line—there's nothing quite like it, which is why viewers see all things in it. The strokes tower, bevel, loop and dart. The sureness of his hand is almost infallible. The contours crackle and splinter; the color bleeds, just as his images shift, fuse and transmute. The highly-charged velocity, set down at collision speed, endows Haveron's people, vegetation, animals and hybrid creatures with smoldering intensity that is pronounced, arresting and inescapable. Throughout, Haveron's line is coextensive with image. It does not describe it; rather, it embodies it. For decades, Haveron's art has been influenced by experiences as a youth at this mother's honky-tonk bar and spooky agrarian upbringing in Bryan,

Texas. The darkly enchanting narratives at KHFA describe a vision as generous as it is wounded. Life can be genuinely gruesome, and civilization is but an easily played veneer. About this, Haveron makes no bones. Yet he delivers the storylines with an undeniable delicacy and self-effacing humor that curdle into some kind of gut clutching optimism. These images can make you chuckle or wince in less time than it takes to read a cut-line. I'm sure many viewers either closely examine Haveron's trailer-park narratives, or give the works a once-over then head for fresh air. An existentialist with sharp technical skills, Haveron seeks both to draw and provoke. They are intimately diaristic, serve as meditations on family life, and demonstrate his keen awareness of the urgent needs of contemporary society. Deep in his work is the need to be separate and the fear of it, and also conversely the need to connect and the fear of it. These drawings are about many things: about longing, good and evil, and those who fall in between. Haveron has a gift for staring at human frailty—our meanness, fear and distress—so intently that he burrows down to its absurd and hapless core.

His works exert a palpable closeness, an intimacy with the viewer that is disorienting and destabilizing. By uncovering hidden layers of meaning, by pointing out inconsistencies in our world, Haveron breaks down religious, cultural and intellectual hierarchies and reintroduces the play of intuition and metaphor. All of the works at KHFA are prickly, abrasive and confrontational. Haveron doesn't propose a comforting sort of art; nor does he believe in the art object as one of passive contemplation. Rather, he intends the work to be an irritant, a kind of shock treatment that jolts viewers into an examination of their own values and behaviors. Confronting these large-scale drawings can induce vertigo. It's as if you've been through some kind of maelstrom and have yet to reach a state of calm, the result of living in a world in which physical and psychological stress predominate. The content of this work, springing from extremely human desire and pathos, is rooted in a discovery of who we are and how we fit into this world. In its striking poignancy, Haveron's art is implacably bound by life.

His deep insights and profound reflections on the nature of human existence—birth, death, war, home, sex and faith—provide opportunities to consider fundamental issues that could face any individual. Yet Haveron also strips away the veneer of the world—its false innocence—to reveal a hidden content of anxiety, aggression and vulnerability. Instead of simply valorizing or sentimentalizing it, Haveron gives the imagination its due as a ferocious force—stories rife with tortuous family dramas, events bordering on the supernatural, and violence that could erupt in a flash. The folksy/outsider nature of many of these stories suggests the voice of an artist who intrinsically mistrusts any institutionalized canon. Haveron's formal anarchy reads as a metaphor for the randomness of life's events. Accordingly, we enter a world where ruptures and irreparable fissures are part of the natural flow. Order and stasis, his work tells us, are illusions. Entropy, decay, disruption, and chaos are part of the process to which we all must submit if we are to have any understanding of where and how we exist in time. His drawings grab us instinctively, yet suggest poetic understanding of the plight of souls. They are not so much descriptions as outbursts of life—hence their messiness and compulsive intensity. Haveron rubs together low life, primitive and polished images in ways that strike sparks. A number of works, in fact, have a potent

▼ Bill Haveron, "What's Wrong Thanatos? Got Lead in Your Ass? Guts Fall in the Chit'lin' Pot? Tardy with the Requiem for Oedipus?" (detail), 1998, mixed media on paper, 60" x 106" x 3/4"



incisiveness that borders on high camp, often using cartoon riffs to make visually demanding statements about the tension inherent in the social construct. Fearless in their archetypal intensity, these eye-popping images hit us with the force of speeding bullets.

Jammed to all four edges with incident, Haveron's drawings are dominated by symbolic forms and figures culled from his personal vernacular and demonology. Overall, the work has the undercurrent of dread evocative of Hieronymous Bosch and Francisco Goya. An heir to the venerable tradition of art as a vehicle expression of belief, Haveron's horror vacui is charged equally by vitriol and wit. Like his predecessors, he inspires hope that the imagination will triumph over all forms of oppression. The eye is led by the pencil's rhythmical, repetitive motions across the surface, inducing a kind of trance. Fragments of form, color and marks congeal as rising and cascading forces. It partakes of a dreamlike wandering or searching trace. Still, his subjects continue to be rooted in real events and to express contemporary angst. Yet a healthy proportion of their strength comes from the use of compelling imagery to create stories out of wrenching pathos. At every turn, Haveron makes certain that his narratives expose what he sees as the virus of moral malaise. In such a visual realm, everything contends with, interrupts, and invades everything else. Indeed, Haveron's works breathe life—our own fleeting lives—as well as a physical awareness of ourselves within a broader zone of cultural associations and personal desires.

Mac Whitney's steel sculptures have an intense effect on all who engage them. Working without assistants or fabricators, his hands-on approach to the metal makes poetry out of industry. Few sculptors have given raw steel new life as magically as Whitney. Every fold, hollow, plane and bulge is given lively form, producing a sense of dynamism, as if the inert material were pulsating with metaphysical energy. Surfaces are pierced, pitted, channeled or intertwined so the whole looks like multiples in a writhing embrace or twirling dance. Every alignment, every lyrical hairpin curve speaks of aesthetic decision. For the most part, the works have an inspired tension and emotional resonance not anticipated in one's first contact with them. Industrial components are almost invisibly but flexibly joined together. Currents ebb and flow from one surface to another, thus unleashing the hidden life held with the form.

Experience has taught Whitney an essential point; that sculpture is an engineering problem, one that deals with manipulating or defying the constraints of gravity. Throughout, he has refused to valorize the art object over "blue collar" labor. Although Whitney has lived in Texas since 1969, he grew up on a Kansas farm and later worked on huge oil field pressure tanks in a boiler factory. In the use of steel as form and primary material, Whitney's process-oriented sculptures bring to mind not-so-distant times when tinkering, basic craftsmanship and resourcefulness were necessities of daily life. For all its elegant facility, Whitney's art has a Midwest quirkiness that runs continuously back to childhood experiences. Indeed, his most poetic sculptures always express a sort of existential gawkiness—that strange and loveable effect of what, in these confusing times, it is like to be a person. Whereas the sculptures embody a tough mix of aesthetic refinement and intuitive chutzpah, they also work hard for pleasure. Distilled, self-assured, historically conscious without being mannered, the pieces seemingly



▲ Mac Whitney, "Helotes," from the T-Angle series, stainless steel, 94" x 55" x 24"

swing between an out-of-control obsessiveness and the exacting restraint of understatement.

The contradictions within Whitney's sculptures, of course, are in sharp contrast to the skill with which they are realized. Industrial and organic, mechanical and sexual, inside and outside, passive and aggressive, functionalism and poetic license are just a few oppositions which the sculptures manage to blend in surprising ways. The power from which the distinctive works derive their strength evolves from the artist's personal mechanics and intuitive vocabulary he has gradually built up over the years. Inasmuch as they recapitulate memory, audacious formal rigor, and hard manual labor, the sculptures also give the viewer the artist's sense of angle, surface, texture, space and surprise at the perception of solid and void. Whitney is far from a finish fetishist, yet the viewer can't resist touching, even caressing the configurations of rounded volumes, smooth planes and tough "skin."

Each vibrates. As in the best jazz compositions, they are works of the inspired instant, approximating the freely drawn swiftness of calligraphy. Industrial process has its own cycle of birth and dissolution. But look into Whitney's work, at any point, and observe it growing, extending. It is solid and moving in time; it evolves and devolves, always becoming more complex. As vehicles for articulating negative space, Whitney's sculptures evoke those by David Smith which allow emptiness to seep in—not so much displacing space as defining and activating it. Whitney also shares a similar penchant for primitive totemic sources and "drawing" in space. In any case, Whitney's shapes swell and lift in taut axial successions, both lyrical and erotic. The rugged, massive qualities of the material and scale are played off against the ease and grace of their movements. Most certainly, the forces from which these distinctive sculptures derive their power evolve from the conscious desire to engage the viewer. Admittedly, the sculptures suggest the bends and folds of the body and the pull of gravity. More often than not, they rise from the ground as monumental presences, confronting the viewer as tantalizingly elusive beings. Significantly, the works bring to bear a profound identification and magnetic force between the sculpture and the viewer's body. To walk around them is to sense a reflex you may not have felt so clearly before—pull, sensuousness, illusion; but also insecurity, risk, danger. Component parts take on a strange internal energy—things come out of things, pushing, nudging, linking their outer parts.

Evident is a renewed focus on material decision-making and through it, on the poetics of seeming to display the mind in operation. They are familiar forms, but now with a cumulative pathos illustrating an undefined anxiety. The reverberation of muscular forms and undulating “lines” induces an intensely vertiginous effect. Whitney’s sculptures unfold in time. A shape seems recognizable only for an instant before transforming into another related form. They beckon us to crouch down, duck underneath and carefully inspect their exposed masses and voids. The eye is led over and through sensual curves and slides; we are projected into an almost balletic whirl. Move around Whitney’s sculptures and watch how the characteristics change with the light of day. The slightest shift and they yield a dazzling array of new and complex information—facets now consumed, now multiplied in the play of reflected light, a constant state of tension between abstract concept and natural form, between finished form and metamorphosis. One can’t help but be struck by a connection: the time Whitney gives the work and the time spent on it by the viewer. For one’s response to the sculptures certainly has something to do with the care and fine-tuning that have gone into them. And therein rests Whitney’s special gift—to temper the aloofness of his forms with the omnipresent quality of his human touch.

Kirk Hopper Fine Art is loaded with heady ideas—and potential spin-off exhibitions—eager to be teased out. All of the material at this time gives us more of what is filtering through the brain and heart, an interplay of what’s remembered, what’s seen now, and what may come. For Hopper, the primary work of the artist is to interpret the contemporary world as experienced in terms of its relevance to his own inner life. Winter, Haveron, and Whitney create a vortex of history, visual culture, language and form that is both provocative and exhilarating. Each artist is, above all, a maker. The imagination is rooted in craft and promotes a delight in the action of the shaping hand on material substance. It is about vigorous embodiment, intuition, nature, dreams and humor. Overall, the works’ iconic power comes as much from the sensual delights of their chosen media as from their true and generous natures. What these artists share, however, is an insistent freedom in their art. Trust yourself? Doubt yourself? By continuing paths of exploration of personal and social myths, the rehabilitation of common materials in forms that speak of play and process, these artists signal a direction that more precisely explains our world.

Houston-based curator and critic Susie Kalil is a former Core Fellow in Critical Studies at the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. A frequent contributor to publications including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews* and *Sculpture* magazine, Kalil currently serves as Managing Editor of *Spot/Houston Center for Photography* magazine.



Mac Whitney,
“Lucin” (left), 2010,
welded stainless steel,
13' x 5' x 4'; “Carrizozo”
(right), 2010, welded
steel, 20' x 5'4" x 8'



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