

Janusz Walentynowicz

by James Yood

There is something both familiar and surprisingly unexpected about the recent sculptures of Janusz Walentynowicz. The familiar rests in his subject matter—after all, self portraiture and evocative treatments of the female nude have been topics much visited in the history of art. The unexpected, though, the compelling and mysterious aura that often surrounds the work of this artist, resides both in Walentynowicz's highly personal use of materials and in his poetic and mysterious attitude towards his subject matter, an attitude that keeps this work from seeming traditional or expected.

Walentynowicz is a sculptor, but one who works most often in a planar manner, creating objects that, like paintings, are largely flat, and like paintings can be mounted to a wall. This makes Walentynowicz somewhat of a rarity in the world of modern glass, where the infinite physical flexibility of glass is one of its most investigated qualities. Walentynowicz usually uses glass as a surface, as a filter through which we see his figures, as a field on (actually, under) which to paint. This gives his painting a curious sense of being seen through an atmosphere of substance, a haze of slightly translucent glass that, like clearish amber, preserves while slightly distorting, perhaps even amplifying, the delicacy inserted within. A sequence of casting episodes is at the center of this procedure. Walentynowicz will usually fabricate his desired pictorial element in wax or clay, and then make a rubber mold of that. He fills this mold with a mixture of plaster and ground silica, and casts glass over that, making in effect a thrice-removed negative impression of his original sculpture.

He subsequently paints the underside of the glass. The surface we see is flat, but the hidden surface beneath is volumetrically active, not just with a painted depiction of a figure, but with the actual vestiges of true curves and forms in space, of literal substance and weight. In a sense, Walentynowicz overcomes the flatness of painting and gives it mass, and even if we do not sense all the complexities of his procedure, we respond to the physical presence it delivers. His use of variously treated and decorated steel plates framing his glass makes these sculptures seem like enlivened boxes, composed and pieced assemblages of surprisingly delicate construction. The manner in which these often highly patterned and striated steel planes provide a symbiotic armature for his glass and paint is superbly resolved.

To what end? Sculptures by Janusz Walentynowicz are so wistful and romantic, so imbued with a sense of longing for some classical eden as to become poignant and fragile. To situate a kind of Arcadia in the nude bodies of young women has been a special dream of artists for a very long time, and there are moments here that can remind us of the world of Correggio and Prudhon, of Balthus and Picasso. Innocence and sensuality are evoked in meditative interchange, becoming suggestive dualities that can give this non-narrative work a kind of timeless quality. It is as if these figures will always exist just at the periphery of consciousness, just outside of our conflicted and corrupted world, and function finally as perfect vehicles for Walentynowicz's ruminations upon the frailties of the human condition.

left:

Her Garden

1999

30 x 32 1/2"

Kiln cast glass, steel, oil paint

previous page:

Angel and I

1999

29 x 20 1/2 x 8"

Kiln cast glass, steel, oil paint

James Yood teaches contemporary art theory and criticism at Northwestern University, and writes regularly for GLASS and Artforum.