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IN THE STUDIO WITH SCULPTOR PETER REGINATO

by CHARLES GIULIANO & April 24, 2005

During a museum visit some years ago it was shocking to encounter a plaster cast of a metope and section of the architectural detail of the frieze of the Parthenon that had been painted to simulate its original polychrome surface. The bright colors were harsh and garish. Seemed to cheapen the exquisite forms. Today it is insightful to realize that all of those classical Greek sculptures, which have come to us as shards in a ruined state, were originally strikingly different in appearance. We have come to accept the pure and simply beauty of the material. The pristine white marble is the norm of our thinking about classical sculpture. There is an inherent love and respect for the purity of wood, metal, or stone.

We accept if not worship Michelangelo's Neo-Platonic, poetic idea of finding and liberating the form and shapes trapped in the marble. The unfinished works for the Julius Tomb are a paradigm for what is best and purest about the process of sculpture. To then apply paint to that? To simulate flesh? Oh, gross.

Fast forward to the arguments of modernism and the critical flap when as executor of the estate of David Smith, the high priest of criticism, Clement Greenberg, ordered the removal of priming



Peter Reginato, *Polles Creek*, Steel, Insl-tron paint, 2003.



Peter Reginato, *Salmon Hill*, Steel, Insl-tron paint, 2003.



Peter Reginato, *Indian Summer, Late Rain*, Welded steel, Insl-tron paint, 2004.

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coats of paint on the unfinished

Cubi series. Some works from the series, with their polychromed surfaces, predate Smith's accidental death and fuel the debate as to the intentions of the artist and Greenberg's high-handed intervention. When pressed on the issue he stated that the paint just didn't work. So it is to Greenberg that we owe the brushed steel finish, the buffed look of the works that have found their way into diverse museum collections. It is arguably why those who admire the oeuvre are uncomfortable about the Cubi series.

The notion of polychrome sculpture has always troubled me. There was always something not right about the many examples of Germanic Gothic through Baroque works in museums. The dense color seemed to interfere with and render less dignified the appreciation of the forms. During a time of intensive study of the art of the Italian Renaissance, Luca Della Robbia (1399/1440- 1482) was my least favorite sculptor. His glazed Madonnas with their garlands of fruit make of him the Jeff Koons of the Italian Renaissance. But without irony and humor. Just the kitsch.

Simply put is there something inherently wrong, anathema, about putting paint on sculpture? Is sculpture one discipline and painting another, with never the two to meet and mix? This is a part of what I brought to an interesting and provocative visit to the Soho studio of the artist Peter Reginato. I had long viewed the work with intense interest and welcomed the opportunity to initiate a dialogue about it. It was a chance to work through some of the conflicts that have haunted me.

The artist proved to be a welcoming and insightful guide through these issues illustrated and jumping off from several sprawling, multi element, brightly colored, whimsical pieces that are gradually eating up space in the studio. Normally the work has sold well, indeed he reports having very little inventory of earlier pieces, but that process has slowed down in the past couple of years. He is showing with Adelson Gallery but is exploring other representation. It is not easy as gallerists who view the work state that they have few openings for sculptors in their stables. The degree of difficulty for sculptors always seems just a notch or two more intense. Significantly, he showed me a couple of brightly colored, biomorphic paintings that bring him back full circle to the beginning of his work when he gradually evolved from painting to sculpture. They are bright, fresh, interesting works but he is too early in this direction to think of showing it.

Recently he was included in a major group exhibition "Paint on Metal: Modern and Contemporary Explorations and Discoveries" at the Tucson Museum of Art. After the formalists, with whom he flirted a bit, like Smith and Anthony Caro, or Calder before them, Reginato is on the short list of major exponents of the marriage of color and form. While Greenberg made studio visits and gave him advice, Reginato did not prove to be a cultist or joiner. When he first moved to NY in the mid 1960s he showed with the influential artist coop Park Place which was run by Paula Cooper. He was invited to join but was already pulling away from their austere look and minimalist tendencies. For a time he showed with Salander-O'Reilly, from 1981-83, but reports that he was not a comfortable fit with that bastion of Greenbergian formalism. He reports that his best relationship was a ten year stretch with Tibor de Nagy Gallery. He also showed and sold work with the annex of the gallery in Texas. In 1973 he was included in the Whitney Biennial and the piece in that show sold to Storm King Art Center in upstate New York. But he reports that the color rusted off. For a time that prompted him to create works in steel which was allowed to weather. But this proved not to be satisfying. There were also works with synthetics which took the color well but were weak structurally. So there was a lot of experimentation to find a process of permanently applying color to steel that would endure exposure to the outdoors. This led to the use of Inst-Iron paint which involves a process of combining elements that result in a chemical reaction and a durable surface.

The artist has endured and survived a daunting array of challenges. In addition to an inherent antipathy to paint on metal, from critics such as myself, to the formidable technical experimentation to get the paint to stick and hold up. But Reginato exudes the confidence of a survivor. Surely life might have been a lot simpler had he just stuck to painting. But there is a bit of the contrarian in him. You see that in the work itself which is both lively, fun, whimsical and attractive, as well as puzzling and problematic. Viewing the work from the perch of a stool in the studio, I was never quite sure what I was looking at. There were loopy anthropomorphic shapes and forms. Suggestions of amoebas and cactus. You are reminded of Matisse and Arp or the surrealism of Miro. There is a playful Pop element. I asked if he had ever done a commission for a playground. Surely this is work, at a larger scale, that children would

love to climb over and play with.

Just how did he get here? At an apparent life and career crossroads? I was reminded of the Yogi Berra advice that when you come to the fork in the road, take it. So it took some history and backtracking to get at the source of the whimsy and convolutions of roads not taken.

It started at the San Francisco Art Institute where he was exposed to the hot bed of Bay Area Figure Painting and California Funk. The artist, who was born in 1945, states that he didn't get serious until he was 40. It was about then that he abandoned painting and concentrated on sculpture. But the paint got into the sculpture and has been there ever since. By the mid 1960s he was working with plywood but there was a crisis and four style shifts in a single year. He became fixed on what he quotes as Donald Judd's idea. "You can't paint an illusion convincingly but if you make a sculpture it sits in space automatically." From this came the idea that, "You can draw in space three dimensionally. The drawing thing is a big issue. For 30 years everyone has neutralized art. Duchamp neutralized things with the found object and the readymade by putting the object in the context of the gallery. So making a thing an art piece is the similarity of neutralizing the object."

He also states being influenced by the elegant way that Jasper Johns applies paint to a surface. Particularly the White Flag of 1970. There was the neutralizing of forms by the minimalists. Also the color was neutralized as their sculpture was rendered in primary colors: Black, white and gray. The work that he showed at the Whitney had just one color. But he recalls that it "looked like day glo" set against the gray stone floor of the gallery of the Whitney. This color rusted off when it was set outdoors at Storm King. That led to the use of fiberglass which was eventually abandoned. The outdoor pieces require a level of maintenance which has limited their sales. They need to be periodically cleaned and waxed. He points out that this is an issue with all painted steel sculptures.

Of the sculptors who have used paint he admires in particular, Smith, Judd, Nancy Graves and Bob Hudson. But adds that, "There is a lot of bad painted sculpture out there." Asked about Smith he said that, "While the painted Smith sculptures are successful I wish he had gone further with it. I wish he had gone a little more nuts with the paint and really let go." He recalled with some humor his own epic ongoing battles during studio visits with Greenberg who was famous for telling artists how to do their work. "The first time he walked in here," Reginato recalled, "I was putting paint on fiberglass and he didn't step off the elevator before he said, 'The Color is hurting you.'" He added that in at least 70% of the Smith sculptures the current owners have removed the paint. "I like Smith a lot," he said, "So for me the paint is not an issue."

For Reginato a turning point occurred when he was bored by viewing room after room of white marble sculptures in museums particularly Canova's "Three Graces." He got involved with the dichotomy of realism vs. abstraction and came to the realization that all realism involves abstraction so why not put color on the form? "I never thought twice about the color, it was something I always wanted," he said. But it was daunting to convince others. He recalls an early point where the dealer Dick Bellamy brought Jill Kornblee in to see the work. She didn't say much but he heard that she commented later that the sculpture reminded her of "Kandinsky gone mad." There was a time of reflection and doubt. He taught himself to weld and cut steel. Then his luck turned when Tibor de Nagy came by in December of 1969 and the relationship lasted for seven successful shows over ten years. It was a productive period that also saw dramatic changes in his personal life. And to solve technical problems with the work.

While on many levels Reginato is on the top of his game, the art world, doesn't stay still. There are other tendencies and directions. As a strong independent and outsider there is no ready and convenient movement to latch onto. Also the events of 9/11 were tough and traumatic. He recalls watching the buildings collapse and struggling through the aftermath. Despite this the work has a lively and whimsical touch. There is the irony that when mature artists are doing their best work the art world tends to be rocking to the beat of a different drummer. The kick is that Reginato is doing his best stuff right now.

Links:

[Peter Reginato website](#)

All images are courtesy of the artist.

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