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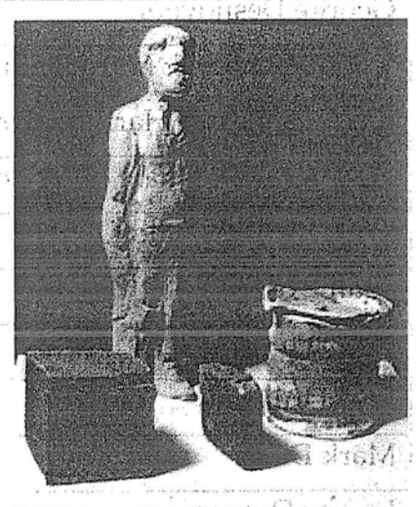
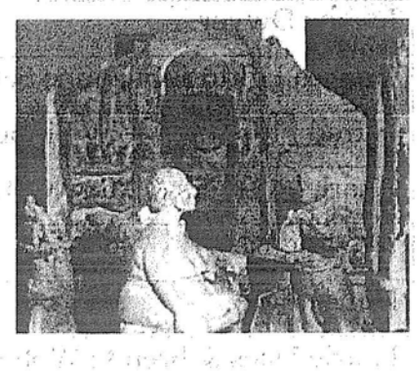
Harriet Diamond's Humanist Vision: Portraiture Propelled by Emotion

By Judson Brown

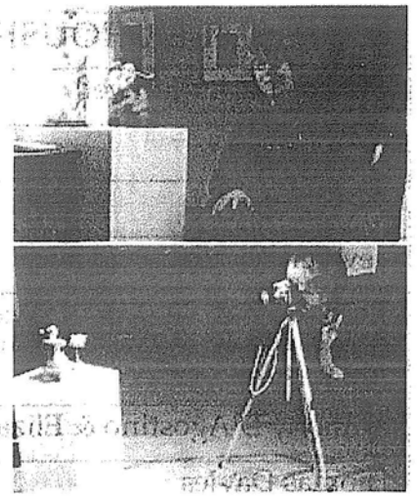




Harriet Diamond made a decision early on in her artistic career to give up on the professional ambition of trying to push and refine technique as an end in itself. She jettisoned a mostly abstract style and embraced realistic representation. She traded in her painter's brushes and palette for the raw materials and the muscular manipulations of sculpture.

Her epiphany, if such it was, came a quarter century or so ago in the form of a squirming, bawling, newborn son, Theo. Instantly she found her creative preoccupations swamped by the innumerable, messy, exhilarating demands of motherhood and family. She was at the time a graduate student in fine arts at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. In pursuit of her master's degree, she had been cranking out rather impressive, rather large, rather abstract, rather academic, rather complicated canvases with

surrealistic touches. All of a sudden making these big aesthetic statements became uninteresting to her. They did not seem to have anything to do with her demanding new life and its new focus.



Harriet Diamond recently had an exhibition of her playful sculptures at the Hosmer Gallery, Forbes Library. We see not only the artist's work here but images of the artist, as well (photos by Judson Brown). Click here to see more of her art.

She now had an urge to make simple, direct, three-dimensional, earthy things. "I wanted to make things that expressed the energy of what was going on in my life." She started to make cats and dogs out of clay and chicken wire and papier mache. She found this way of working deeply satisfying. She had discovered a way to harmonize her art with the new and expanding physical rhythms, realities and responsibilities of her life, and that has been her modus operandi ever since.

"I don't want there to be a really definite line between art and life," she told me recently as we walked about a small exhibition of her work at Forbes Library.

"Making art for me is trying to figure out who I really am," she said later in the same conversation. "It's a way of thinking about what it means to be a human being."

She with her MFA and her husband Bill Diamond with his degrees in social psychology and marketing moved back to the area when he took a job on the faculty of the School of Management at UMass Amherst. They had first met while she was at Smith and he at Amherst College. They had married and gone off in the Peace Corps together to Fiji. Now another boy, Noah, was added. The household was buzzing. Her own family and a growing group of friends and neighbors who also were discovering the joys and struggles of parenting would provide her with more than sufficient subject matter for her work.

She started to do large life-sized portraits of children, husband, friends and relatives in chickenwire and papier mache and then to make groupings of figures and block them out in large installations.

"Big Wheels" was one of the first: a trio of children rambunctiously riding fat tired tricycles in a swirling energetic vortex of expressive but correlated postures and gestures. It is a piece that expresses joy and abandon but also a deep compositional harmony and almost a classical balance.

In "River Passage," she recreated a naturalistic life-size scene of casual naked bathers strewn singly and in pairs along a wide turn in a peaceful stream. Two naked adult figures sprawl on a beach by a rock in intimate conversation. Partial figures of individual children are made to look half submerged in or just emerging from the "water." Two naked children cavort around a rock in mid-stream. The atmosphere is bucolic, the mood idyllic.

In "Built While They Dream," two naked boys sprawl in deep sleep atop their tousled bed sheets. In "Pulling Together," two women are caught up in animated conversation as they walk along together in big bold strides, one pulling a wire shopping cart behind her.

Each of these pieces captures a moment that is at once intimate, ordinary and universal. There is no mystery to this and the other immediate attractions of these pieces including their arresting scale, all the carefully observed documentary detail, expressive modeling of the human form so that one always senses both the working of gravity and a working against gravity, and finally Diamond's infallible gift for portraiture. Every figure she releases from her hands is a unique character, with a story to tell.

Portraiture, she tells me, "is the basis of all my work. Everything else is sort of aspiration." She has such a strong instinct for portrait-making that even her anonymous, purely imaginary figures appear as fully realized persons caught up in their own unique dramas.

The story of "Anne's Aunt Imagined," a small painted terra cotta portrait of an elderly lady nesting in a Queen Anne's chair contentedly absorbed in reading a book, provides an amusing example of how thin the line can be between real and imagined life. It started out to be a realistic portrait of Diamond's friend, Anne Lombard. "But then," she says, "one night I put her in the back of the car and forgot to take her out and she froze. So I had to like squish her together. And the more I squished her, the older

she got. Meanwhile, I remembered that the whole time she had been sitting for me Anne had been talking about her favorite old aunt. It finally came to me, this was Anne's aunt."

"I have always felt that what is most real is not what is objectively represented but what feels real," she says in an artist's statement.

For all the masterful technique and workmanship that goes into her art, it is how deftly Diamond succeeds in subordinating technique to subject matter that suggests the secret of the charm of her productions – how she manages to embody in such flawed human vessels and everyday meetings the sweet and holy mysteries of the human affections that bind us one to another. It is a quality which cannot be understood from any purely aesthetic angle.

"I navigate instinctively by emotion," she told me. "That is the bed rock. Where there are strong feelings, that's where I want to work."

The locus of feeling, the focus of her attention, naturally keeps changing as she moves from one phase of life to the next.

The boys grow up, go off to college. She turns her creative eye to her parents and parents-in-law and the complex drama of aging and loss, and "to exploring family mythologies in a sort of gingerly way. I'm really not interested in total exposure of anyone."

New subject matter sometimes calls for new methods and new materials also. In recent years she has been working mostly in painted terra cotta clay rather than chickenwire and papier mache. She also has been working on a much smaller scale, partly for reasons of economy, but partly also, paradoxically, because her subject matter has become more complicated. Tabletop "scenarios," as she calls them, have replaced the life-sized installations. The mise –en-scene she packs into these smaller, more compact pieces is if anything denser than was the case with the roomy, life-sized installations. The drama has become more intense, more concentrated.

A few of her most bittersweet elegiac pieces, including a stark one called "So Many Good-byes" that shows her parents giving farewell waves on the front porch of their New Hampshire home,

she has splurged on and cast in bronze.

The ruminative disposition which is so evident in Diamond's conversation has been coming out more in her work of late, most notably in a series of sculptures that reflect and comment upon the arts and the mysteries of the creative process and seem to search out the line where outward doing and inward feeling meet.

She has done a variety of delightful studies of chamber string players both in the midst of their making music together – a moment she captures in a piece called "String Quartet" purely through angular gestures of the players, leaving the instruments out – and also in the creative aftermath when the music has faded and the applause has died away. There is palpable and metaphysical poignancy to "After the Music is Over" which depicts several musicians bent over their cases to put their instruments away.

She has done a couple of remarkable psychological studies of nude models. "In Lee's Studio" draws the viewer's eye to the wistful, faraway gaze of the voluptuous female model who not only in volume but also in sheer attitude dwarfs the impressionistic rendering of the "artist" toiling diligently away at a maquette in a corner. "In Lee's Studio" is a wonderfully accomplished, witty and ironic comment on the dialogical nature of the creative process itself.

Diamond is active in her community and in recent years has been politically engaged both on neighborhood issues and as a peace activist. She is one of a hearty group of protestors who stake out the iron fence of the County Courthouse in downtown Northampton every Saturday morning holding up signs, sometimes beating pots and pans and handing out leaflets in protest of the U.S. policy towards and pre-emptive attack on Iraq.

Since to her adopted community and to the welfare of the larger world she has entrusted her affections, it follows that these subjects been incorporated into her work.

Showing off the warm sense of humor and flair for illustration that mark all her work, she has been documenting community life in richly observed dioramas of familiar institutions or gathering places. "Cummington Fair," "Whately Antiquarian Book Center" and "The Pool" were on display recently at Forbes. The latter

picts the old Look Park Pool crowded with swimmers in various ages of submergence and sunbathers in all kinds of playful or anging attitudes.

itely she has been sketching out in her mind a sculpture of the raq Line," as she calls the weekly anti-war vigil. She wants mehow to embody the maxim "act locally, think globally" into e piece. One way to do this, she thinks, would be to suggest ell-known landmarks from various world capitals in the ckground of the piece. The solution remains to be worked rough in the making. It is not easy, she acknowledges, making a litical statement in clay.

owever she solves the problem of the background for "Iraq ne," she has already decided on the foreground. That will be a ries of portraits of her beloved friends and collaborators, with ngtime local Quaker activist Frances Crowe squarely at center ge.

've wanted to do a portrait of Frances for a long time."

r more information on Diamond, consult
p://www.sculpturestories.com/

ee-lance writer Judson Brown, a resident of Northampton, is ormer newspaper reporter.

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