C

FACE TO FACE

Evan Penny
discovers
himself

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

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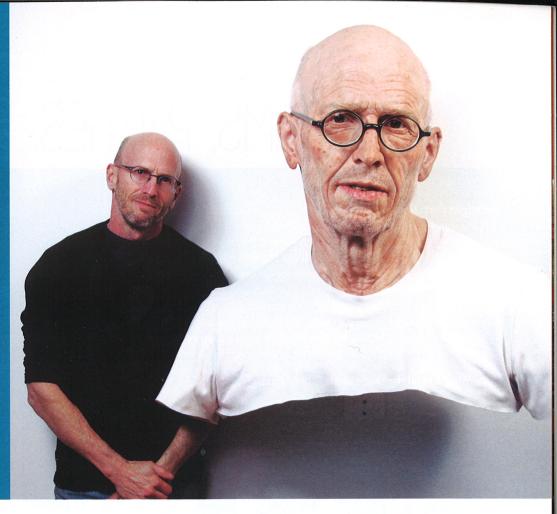# FACE TO FACE

WITH EVAN PENNY

Evan Penny began his professional career creating hyper-realistic sculptures at 4/5 scale. His oeuvre has included abstract "skin drawings" that examine the surface of his own flesh in topographical detail, as well as realistic three-dimensional "anamorphs" with distortions more common to the two-dimensional world of Photoshop manipulation. He also worked in the film industry for 13 years, creating sculptural illusions for films such as *JFK*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Face Off*, and *X-Men*.

In more recent years, Penny has been interested in our modern relationship to photography as a means of self-definition. *Old Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Will (Not) Be* is part of a series of busts and photos which project questions of reality, perception, and identity not only forward into the artist's imagined future, but also backward into his past with *Young Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Was (Not)*.

Right: Evan Penny poses with *Old Self, Variation #1*, 2010, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, and aluminum. Photo courtesy of Evan Penny.

Opposite: *Old Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Will (Not) Be, Variation #2*, (detail), 2010, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, and aluminum.

C: You said in one interview that once you started using hair in your sculptures, the public related to the works in ways you didn't expect. What was it about hair that caused the reaction?

EP: With the work prior to that, there was more formal distance. The color was more neutral and the hair was sculpted. That allowed for more emotional distance, I think. As soon as I added hair it became more viscerally real, and that was shocking. I think we're more used to seeing sculptural images like that now, but back then it was less precedented.

C: Did it make you question yourself?

EP: Very much. I guess I wasn't ready for that loss of distance. It became very personal and almost voodoo-like. It was the first time I really understood or started to appreciate that realism could take you into a wild and unstable place where the conceptual reading is challenged by the direct bodily response.

C: Your earlier works were directly hand-rendered from scratch. With more recent works, including *Old Self*, you've been starting from a clay base cast from a three-dimensional scanned image. Can you explain your reasons for making this change?

EP: If I were to try to describe what I think my work is about in a single statement I might say. "I try to situate my sculpture in an ambiguous space somewhere between the way we experience ourselves in real time and space, and the way we imagine ourselves in the two-dimensional (photographic) image space.

My early work was concerned primarily with a direct and prolonged observational process in which a model would pose and the sculpture would evolve through the course of many hours of observation and hand rendering. Over time, I began to realize that this was presenting me with a conundrum: why was it that the longer I worked and the more accurate the sculpture became, the less it felt like the subject? Why, as it brought me closer to the look of her or him, did it not necessarily bring me closer to the *feel* of them? I started to realize that the reason might be that those sculptures evolved through the course of, say 400 hours. And what they became was really a representation of that experience—what someone looks like "in" 400 hours, not what someone looks like "after" 400 hours, and that's why I think it didn't feel like them. Those sculptures exist in a novel, unfamiliar representational space.

Photography has been the dominant medium through which we make representations of ourselves for more than a century. We are much more acclimatized to imagining ourselves in that space. However, a photograph is just a slice of time, an instant, and

because of that, a very limited description of who we are. Of course, the other space that we imagine ourselves through is the lived, animated, physical, sensoral, conversational space of everyday life. Scanning allows me to capture the "photographic moment" and import it into the sculpture.

In my recent process, I do a 3D scan of the subject and have that image milled into a block of hard foam. From that, I make a mould and make a clay replica. So starting from a very generalized "photographic" impression in clay, I evolve and transform the image through a hand-rendered modeling process. The challenge is to make the necessary transformation, but not to override the animated expression that comes from the photographic capture. That is a real challenge. As one works over it, the easiest thing to do as it evolves would be to lose that sense of the moment. That's the precise feature I can't generate necessarily in this long observational process.

C: What do you come away with when you create self portraits like the *Old Self* and *Young Self* portraits? You said once you felt "older" after having done *Old Self*.
EP: I will admit that the "Old Self" piece really did impact me. I can usually maintain more distance, but that one really was a bit of a journey. The whole point of that exercise was

to explore the notion that : The way we imagine ourselves, past, present, and future, is significantly defined and limited by the technologies we use to make images of ourselves.

I do think, again, it's our relationship to the photograph that is most significant. I have images of myself when I'm young, but does that really represent what I looked like? It represents how that camera captured that likeness at that moment, but it's just such a fleeting thing that you can have multiple images of yourself and they all look different. So there's nothing reliable about any of that information, but yet we rely very heavily on it, and we build these strong impressions of ourselves based on it.

With this project, in both cases, the scan gives me a starting point. I try to maintain the feeling and the look, captured through the scan, of myself in my late 50s, imagining myself old and imagining myself young. So both of those portraits are representations of how I might look, past and future, but they are also expressions of who I am now.

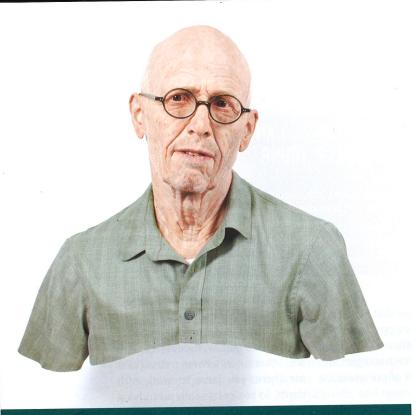**C: What kind of factors did you take into account when you were deciding how your "Old Self" would look?**
EP: One of the things I used to do in the film industry was old-age makeup effects. You basically sculpt a veneer of clay over the

top of a plaster cast of the actor's face. You've got to respect what the actor's got. Whatever creases are there, whatever structures are there, you have to work with them. So you're basically amplifying them. The creases that are there are the ones that are going to become stronger. So you ask them to grimace or do whatever so you can see where those structures separate and move and then you build on that. So when I'm doing it to myself in this kind of context, it's not that different, except I can carve down deeper into the object, I don't have to respect the original surface. Beyond that, I am also referring to images of other older faces, including my father's.

C: With such a high level of detail in your work, how do you know when you're done?
EP: That's a tough one. The goal is to keep it going as long as possible. For this you need both a conceptual and technical framework. But that framework also defines the limitation of how far it can go. You get to the point where the decisions you have already made are dictating the limitations, rather than the potentials of what you can still do. So at a certain point you just say ... okay... I'm done. (laughs)

C: You said that if you had still been making figures at the time, you wouldn't have been able to do the work you did in the film

Old Self: Portrait of the Artist as He Will (Not) Be, Variation #2, 2010, silicone, pigment, hair, fabric, and aluminum.

industry. Why is that? How has your film work impacted your work today?

EP: Coincidentally, the time I spent in film was a time when, in my own art practice, I was not doing realistic work. I was still doing work, but it was more body-based. It was not like I stopped making art in order to be in the film world. The early body of work is something that kind of just ran its course, and I reached a point where I didn't know where to take it. So I think that was a critical kind of point there, and it did require me leaving realistic figurative work for almost a decade. Had I still been making realist work, I think I would have had a lot harder time moving into the film world because I think I would have felt more threatened by that relationship. (There was) this connection to pop culture. I think that was probably the most threatening: the values of pop culture as opposed to these values we presume to have as artists. As artists, I think we imagine ourselves as being more on the margins of popular culture—that our function is not to be at the center of it but to be at the periphery and to make whatever statements we have to make from that sort of position. As it was, I still felt threatened by it, but I at least had a little bit of a distance. I was making essentially abstract work at that time. And so probably it's not that coincidental that as the film work wound down for me, I was ready to do figurative work again. I probably couldn't have started the figurative work unless I stopped the film work. However, in the meantime what happened was that film work really did inform and shift and change my thinking quite dramatically.

C: How so?

EP: I guess I kind of reached a point in the late 90s where I had accumulated multiple histories, in a way. I had my early body of work, and then I had this middle period when I was doing different kinds of projects, and I also had the film work. I had all these histories, but I was keeping them kind of separate from each other. There was a moment where I realized, well, if I'm ever going to be really good at what I do I have to recognize that these things are all me, they're all part of my history and I should be able to use them all. And I think it was that resolution that allowed me to include the film work and kind of pull it all together. The new work really comes out of that moment. The elements that come from the film work are clearly certain relationships to materials like silicones and hair and this kind of slice-of-life illusion. Illusion was never was my primary interest, and it still isn't really, I'm more interested in the question of representation.

C: You said once that you never thought of yourself as a realist, but rather as a formalist, that "The goal isn't realism, the by-product is." Can you explain that distinction?

EP: Obviously I'm a realist but it isn't productive for me to say I'm a realist. Because my goal isn't to make something look perfectly like something else. And I think often we assume with realism, that's the whole idea. I just don't think that's a very interesting way to approach it. For me it's always been about the question of observation: What is this? How do you describe this? What assumptions am I making? How complex and difficult and impossible is this to actually know and describe? So I am bound up in the question of how does one describe it, and the more one describes it, the more nuanced and precise that becomes, the more realistic it becomes, and in that sense the realism is the by-product of this process of inquiry. Staying in the "question" is way more productive. I think that's a constructive role that realism can play.

C: You began your career when abstraction still had a lockdown on the art world. How did you persevere with your hyperrealist work in that environment?

EP: I think it was just the love of it. I loved working with clay and working from observation. I just kind of knew that this was what I probably could do best, so I had to find a way to make it work. I think it's always a question about the *possibility* of something, not the *impossibility*. And I think that's still a really central question: "how is it possible to be a figurative realist sculptor and be a contemporary artist at the same time?" It's a question I have to pose to myself quite regularly and find, of course, one is forced always as you move forward to answer that question a little differently each time. ●