

NEW YORK**Evan Penny****Sperone Westwater**

What is real and what is true? These questions become increasingly pressing at a time when means are available to spread data with the mere tap of a key and digital tools enable us to distort information easily. Such issues came to mind when walking through Evan Penny's recent exhibition of figurative sculpture (all made of silicone, pigment, hair and aluminum, with the addition of fabric in some cases, and all 2008). The show featured work informed by digitally manipulated photography, time-lapse photography, the science of color printing, and high-tech lighting. Like Gerhard Richter, Penny is interested in transposing photographic effects to his own medium.

Few would mistake figures truncated, distorted, or multiplied to this extent for the real thing, regardless of how close the treatment of the body with its overlying skin and hair comes to the look of



Evan Penny, *Back of Danny, variation #4*, 2008. Silicone, pigment, hair, and aluminum, 24 x 28.5 x 6 in.

real men and women. But in this age, when plastic surgery has become prevalent among those who can afford it and digitally corrected photographs of our imperfect bodies have become normative, we must admit that the distinction between reality and fiction is becoming increasingly blurry. While Penny's sculpture is perfectly tailored for our information age, it also tackles some problems of great antiquity. One of these is the portrait bust, which has become relatively rare in contemporary sculptural practice. Penny has been exploring this form, which was fully developed during the Roman Republic, for some time now. The Romans of the Republic were willing to accept a mere fragment of a likeness, provided that this fragment include the head with the facial features rendered as truthfully as possible, in other words, without idealization. Penny likewise shuns idealization and aims

for the intensity of the veristic tradition.

He also accepts the widespread notion that the image is completed in the mind of the beholder. Most people acknowledge that the portrait bust stands in for the entire figure, though in this show, the arbitrary truncations were emphasized by extremely thin metal ledges that followed the curvature at the bottom of the arms and torsos, so that it appeared as if the busts were suspended in thin air in front of the walls—or rising from the floor, like Venus from the sea, in the case of the lone colossus (another classical form of sculpture), cut just beneath the hips, as if awkwardly cropped in a photograph. In some cases, the busts read splendidly from the front, but from the side, they are much thinner than they should be—photographs, likewise, collapse volume. Clearly, when we view these sculptures from the front, we

project roundness and depth beyond their silhouettes, for we have experienced bodies in space before and know that any one view provides only part of the information. Other figures appear terribly distorted before we even begin to examine them from other angles. They can be stretched along a powerful diagonal, as in *Self, variation #1*, or pulled vertically, as in *Male Stretch, variation #3*—a nod at unorthodox modes of manipulating form in Modernist as well as Renaissance practice (Holbein's *Ambassadors* and Parmigianino's *Self-portrait*).

Back of Danny, variation #4 was turned with its back to the room, the front of the head placed close to the wall. Its most important feature, namely the face, is almost entirely missing—in fact, it is sliced off—a particularly perverse take on the traditional bust. However, the remaining parts are modeled in a mesmerizing way—Penny does not take casts of his models—and the hues, textures, and blemishes of the skin are brilliantly seized—Penny paints into the thin superimposed layers of silicone that he pours into his mold. The final touch involves punching in the hair and, here, the stubble of the beard, which, once more, achieve breathtaking life-likeness. Penny displays extraordinary powers of mimesis and then reminds you, again and again, that his work, like so much else, is nothing more than a construct. In *Panagiota: Conversation #1, variation #2*, he translates a continuous photographic take of a speaking woman into sculptural terms. Here, the idea trumps the result, as Penny pays homage to the Futurist ambition of showing a sequence of movements across a span of time, intimating at the horrors that may lie in store for us as we continue to toy with the building blocks of life.

—Michaël Amy