



# MICHAEL BISHOP



JOHN NATSOULAS GALLERY



## Michael Bishop

John Natsoulas Gallery

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Essay by David Pagel

Photography by Izzy Schwartz

A majority of the works in this exhibition were initiated during a three month Arts & Industry Residency at the Kohler Foundry Facility in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Cover:

*Calendar*

2001

Variable, this installation: 97"h x 97"w x 3"d

Cast iron, cast brass, natural patina

Cover photography: Tony Novelozo/Axiom



***In Progress***

2001-02

Cast iron, cast bronze, fabricated steel with patina  
40"h x 84"w x 67"d





Quite some time ago, it meant a lot to say that someone was a sculptor and not a painter or even an "installation artist." Back then, sculptors gave form to three-dimensional objects that occupied the same space our bodies moved through. Their primary concerns were weight, volume, and gravity, as well as the ways these physical attributes created coherent experiences of material integrity and formal logic. In contrast, painters gave shape to generally flat surfaces, whose abstract or illusionistic spaces viewers entered via our minds, which often allowed our imaginations to take off every which way. Their works' abiding commitment was to compositional coherence—the various ways shape, color, and line worked together to make an image with punch and longevity.

Not so long ago, meaningful distinctions between sculpture and painting went the way of the corset and girdle. Thrown out for being constrictive, old-fashioned, and unnecessary (if not quite cruel), such rule-bound conventions gave way to newfound freedoms that went hand-in-hand with the desire to let it all hang out. Media mixed promiscuously, genres crossed paths fast and furiously, and the once-distinct boundaries between disciplines dissolved in an intoxicating swirl of permissiveness. Artists of all shapes, sizes, and stripes concocted wildly uncategorizable hybrids, impossible-to-repeat events, and spontaneously improvised situations in which it was hard to tell where the art ended and life began.

Today, such freewheeling experimentation lacks the edgy urgency it once had. At the same time, it's impossible to return to the Edenic fantasy of medial purity, to go back to the long-lost era when a painting was a painting, a sculpture was a sculpture, and viewers only wanted to know what distinguished one from the other (because that was enough to identify each as the real thing). In their place has grown up a highly evolved yet amorously dull sort of anything-goes relativism. In the world of contemporary art, much is tolerated and little stands out because almost everything is viewed in terms of self-expression.

After more than a century and a half of boundary-bending exploration, both professional viewers and amateur enthusiasts have come to distrust every type of aesthetic categorization, not to mention any groups, movements, or schools that have more than one member. As Americans, we tend to see art as an individual phenomenon, an enterprise that often involves collaborators and assistants but is, at its core, the singular expression of an individual's inner sentiments or the original articulation of his otherwise inexpressible intentions. Breaking down the boundaries between forms and feelings has become such a tried-and-true avant-garde strategy that it is now something of a rule unto itself: a recipe for acceptability and an uninspired way of shoring up our tendency to relate works of art to their makers' biographies—rather than to the mediums they belong to, the genres they address, and the histories they update and transform.

Michael Bishop's new works begin by sifting through the wreckage of these historical developments. Picking up bits and pieces that might be useful, he forges these fragments into poetic wholes that have a whole lot less to do with his personal feelings than with the public nature of art at its best. Each of his nine most recent pieces is nothing if not a sculpture. Its physicality is undeniable. As is its density and the no-nonsense way its components rise up against gravity's unrelenting tug. Made of iron, aluminum, and brass that has been cast, sand-blasted, and treated with volatile chemicals—as well as steel that has been rolled, cut, welded, drilled, and bolted—Bishop's heavy-duty works have the weighty presence and industrial-strength solidity of objects built for the long haul. At the same time, there's nothing thuggish about them. All of their constitutive parts are either scaled to the proportions of the human body (which makes them feel familiar, even comforting), or suffused with so many finely crafted details and nuanced textures that the care and devotion that went into their making is palpable. This endows them with an aura of enhanced value, a level of labor-intensive dedication we commonly reserve for



things of great significance, like public memorials, shared talismans, and revered artifacts. Yet there's no mystery about how these qualities got there: Hard work and willpower brought them into being.

Nothing fussy or esoteric diminishes the directness of Bishop's sculptures. Using readily identifiable objects from the everyday world that we ordinarily don't pay much attention to, he transforms these elements into enigmatic ensembles that have the presence of pictures—crisp, vivid compositions in which both the clarity and mysteriousness of dreams are simultaneously embodied. A dyed-in-the-wool sculptor who works pictorially, Bishop carefully fabricates and painstakingly arranges his pieces so that they function like images: deliberately composed scenarios in which visual balance and harmonious placement are as important as physically engineered equilibrium and literal stability.

Imagine what a movie still from your dream life would look like if it could be frozen in time and rendered in three dimensions. This gives you an idea of Bishop's capacity to load so many emotionally charged "befores" and "afters" into his perfectly still—and resoundingly silent—sculptures. To anyone with an active imagination, his serene yet stimulating ensembles give birth to narrative sequences from which it's impossible to disentangle one's own desires, musings, and memories. Yet viewers who presume they can project whatever stories they want onto Bishop's accepting works are deluding themselves. His elusive, open-ended sculptures have a bit of the Sphinx in them: They deflect meretricious interpretations and tug others in the direction they're headed.

Part of the power of Bishop's uncanny tableaux is that they elicit the animated participation of viewers at the same time that they seem to be complete unto themselves. Unlike props for theatrical dramas, whose arrangement on stages also activates our imaginations, his rationally constructed and intuitively assembled tables, chairs, desks, benches, sawhorses, planks, faces, theatre weights, and model boats are oriented toward the present. In con-

trast, a stage on which props have been set up always calls to mind the actors who have not yet appeared there or have already finished their performances and departed. Rather than getting us to speculate about what might unfold in the near future, or to recollect what has taken place in the recent past, Bishop's strangely self-sufficient works occupy the moment. They treat it as if it mattered more than those that led up to it and those sure to follow. Neither anticipatory (like so much utopian, forward-looking art), nor cynically resigned to the belief that the present is the inevitable aftermath of the past (like so much melancholic, backward-gazing art), Bishop's pragmatic sculptures set an even-keeled course for themselves. Rooted in the present, they are generous because they give viewers more room to maneuver than art obsessed with expressing its maker's subjectivity.

Figuratively speaking, Bishop paints himself out of the picture. When viewers look closely at paintings and drawings, we often say that much of their meaning is conveyed by the particular qualities of the artist's touch, in those passages where we detect the signature presence of his hand. As a sculptor who works pictorially, Bishop distances himself from this way of thinking. He playfully refers to it in "Heavy Hand" (2000), which includes six pairs of cast aluminum boxing gloves laid out on a long steel table, and "Indispensable Articles" (2002), in which eight lifesize oars, also cast from aluminum, rest in an iron rack between the top of a table and the bottom of a model boat. If you're looking for the delicate, telltale traces of the artist's hand in these beautifully patinaed pieces, you won't find them where you expect. He has transformed such conventional ideas of handiwork into physical emblems of raw power and basic locomotion—unglamorous, close-to-the-earth endeavors that involve not just one's hands and arms but one's entire body. In neither sculpture is the cliché of the artist's hand called upon, valorized, or fetishized. On the contrary, notions of endurance—of laborious, incremental conditioning, accompanied by a fair share of corporeal





suffering—drift into focus as the instantaneous appeal of flashy theatrics and easy answers fades into the background. The simplicity of small, endlessly repeated movements is called to mind, as is the faceless ordinariness of mundane tasks. To both, Bishop brings a particular type of dignity, one leavened by humility.

A similar sense is embodied by "Victorian Helix" (2002) and "Sisters" (2002), which include components cast from a wax death mask that is all the more haunting for its anonymity. Like the inscrutable expression on da Vinci's Mona Lisa, the placid face of the unknown woman in Bishop's borrowed portrait conveys a sentiment that is impossible to pin down. From some angles the woman appears to be at rest, utterly beatific in her repose. But from others she seems to be smiling ever so slightly, as if amused by her own restlessness, as well as the mild discomfiture she induces in viewers.

Masks also figure prominently in "Site" (2002) and "Calendar" (2002), both of which include dozens of iron and brass representations of a man's face. Cast from a rubber mask and arranged in grids on the floor or the wall, they recall the smiling and frowning faces that serve as the international symbol of the dramatic arts. In Bishop's hands, however, the contrasting duo has been fused into a single, three-dimensional image. Each of his metal faces seems to be frozen halfway between a hearty laugh and an agonizing grimace. Forcing these extreme expressions together, Bishop derails a viewer's ability to read images quickly. Caught in an interpretive conundrum, we begin to play tug-of-war with ourselves, struggling to use our minds to make sense of what our bodies are trying to tell us. A similar response transpires before "Plane Truth" (2002), in which more than 50 moon-shaped faces, laid out on the floor, also teeter-totter between pain and pleasure. The ambivalent sentiments they elicit are all the more intriguing for being triggered by objects of

such miniature scale, whose intrinsic cuteness ordinarily prevents us from taking them seriously.

Nowhere is this indeterminacy more potent than in the two works that feature iron forms cast from an antique Bakelite doll's head. In "In Progress" (2002), six of these realistically scaled children's playthings rest on a plank alongside another plank that supports a model boat and several lengths of raw metal. An iron chair invites viewers to have a seat at the makeshift, sawhorse-supported table while we contemplate the unfinished nature of childhood, the ongoing character of our adult lives, and our inescapable need to bring some sense of completion to the works of art before us. "Study Table" (2002) is similarly structured, with a functional chair placed before a common table on which rests a big pedestal and a huge version of the doll's head. Buddha-like, Bishop's blown up copy of a copy of a real child towers over the room, casting an enigmatic shadow over everything around it. Like some kind of godhead from a religion that offers soothing serenity, his Brobdingnagian child sometimes seems to embrace viewers with benign, heartwarming innocence. At other times, it has the presence of a monument to a political movement that promises equality to the masses but hides unspeakable injustice behind the façade of selfless magnanimity. To stand before any of Bishop's consummately crafted sculptures is to feel such conflicting emotions begin to stir within you. With an eye on the big picture, he draws each of us into the ongoing drama, whose unscripted plot allows for all sorts of unpredictable twists and turns—just like life, but significantly condensed and intensified.

David Pagel  
Los Angeles, 2002

*David Pagel is a freelance art critic who writes regularly for the Los Angeles Times. He is also a Visiting Scholar at Claremont Graduate University and a Macgeorge Fellow at the University of Melbourne.*



***Victorian Helix***

detail  
2002

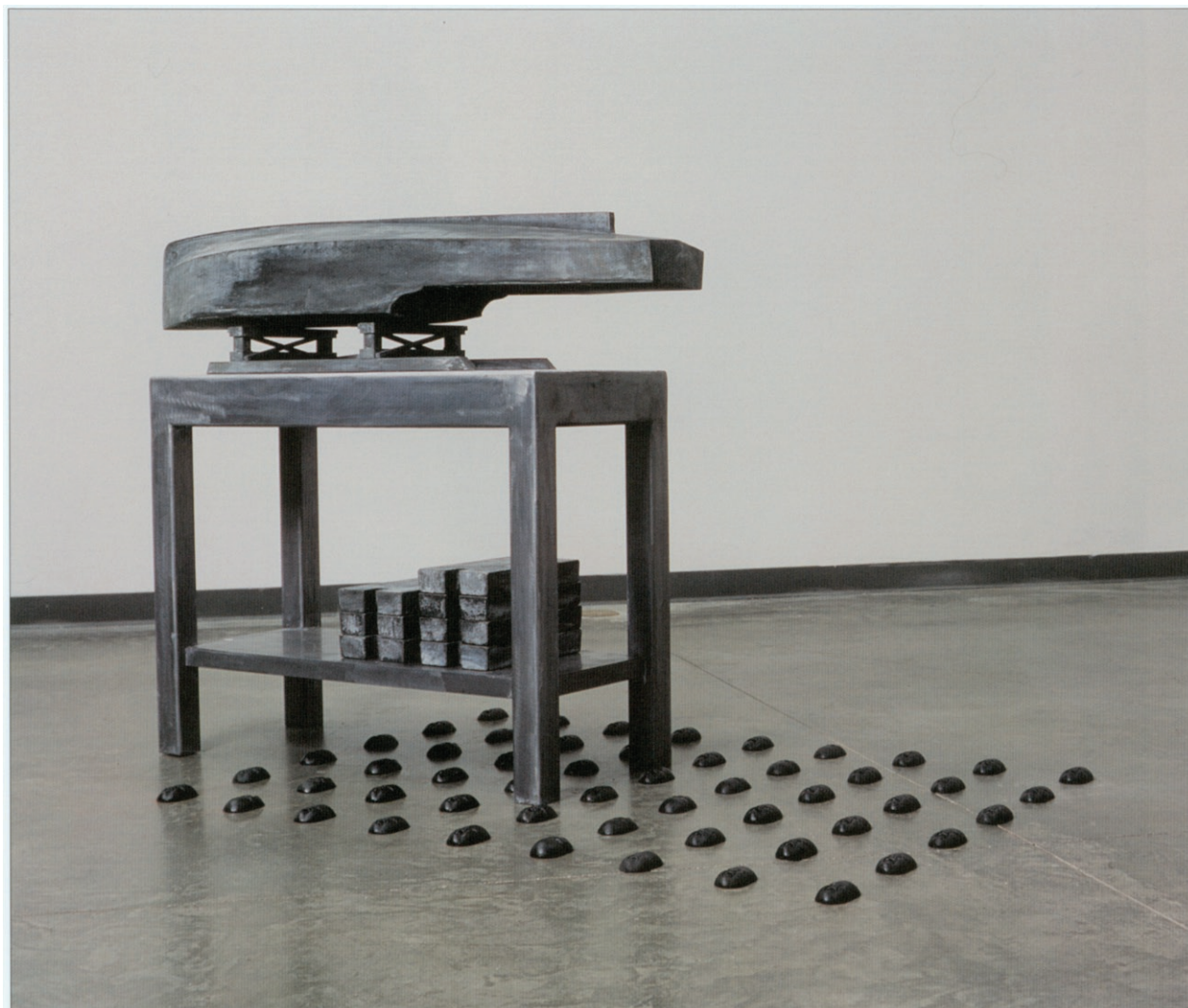




***Victorian Helix***  
2002

Cast bronze, fabricated steel with patina  
133"h x 11"w x 11"d





***Plane Truth***

2001 - 02

Cast iron, cast bronze, fabricated steel with patina  
41.5"h x 78"w x 41"d



***Study Table***  
2001 - 02

Cast iron, fabricated steel with patina  
91"h x 48"w x 64"d





***Site***  
detail  
2001 - 02



***Site***  
2001 - 02

Cast iron, bronze & aluminum, fabricated steel with patina  
98"h x 121"w x 171"d

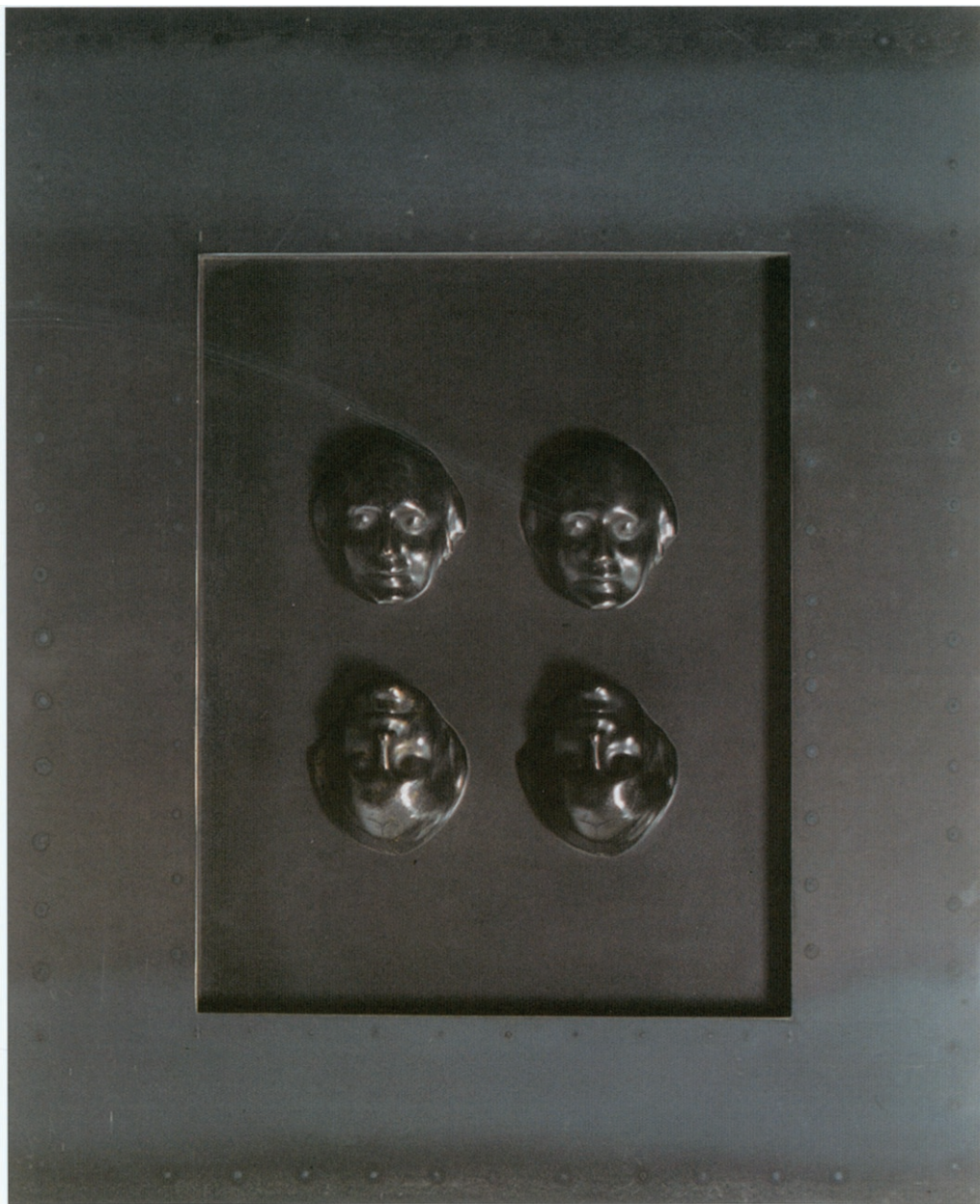




***Indispensable Articles***

2001 - 02

Cast iron, cast aluminum, fabricated steel with patina  
56"h x 94"w x 17"d



***Sisters***  
2002

Cast bronze with patina, fabricated steel  
36"h x 29"w x 3.25"d



