

# All Wrapped Up

Adam Geczy writes on Alexander Seton's  
'On Hold' sculpture series, 2008.

In the absence of the works themselves, the titles of Alexander Seton's works seem innocent enough: *On Hold: Lawnmower*, *Life is Serious Young Man: Harley Davidson*, or *I Used to Play: Grand Piano*. There is a wistful air to them, and they seem to suggest a perverted play on the object. However, the objects themselves are of a different order. Carved from white marble, they are enveloped in a blank material that conceals the object inside. Instantly the titles become forced conundrums as they divulge only what the object withholds. The artist offers something that has already been removed. What follows is an effort if you like, to unwrap the riddle of Seton's work.

There are several historical precedents that instantly spring to mind and the first is Baroque sculpture, particularly the work of Gianlorenzo Bernini. One of his most ambitious works is the *Four Rivers Fountain* (1648-51), in the Piazza Navona in Rome, in which the world's four great rivers, the Nile, the Ganges, The Danube and the Amazon are allegorised using four male figures. While the figure for the Amazon, with his bald head and his earring, is a predictable enough example of early Orientalist cliché, and Ganges is a fine example of generic heroism, it is the figure of the Nile that robs all the attention. The left arm is extended to hold taut a swathe of cloth covering his head. Thus Bernini depicts the Nile as a vast repository of secrets and his symbol eternally escapes symbolism. Unlike the other three sculptures that can be seen in a conventional manner, evaluated according to their manifested attributes, the Nile-figure

deflects its own visual representation, directing it inward to a place (or places) forbidden to us.

In many respects, Bernini's sculpture encapsulates the differences of the Baroque as he defined it, from the era before him. As opposed to permanence he emphasized transition, and as opposed to clarity he often resorted to ambiguity, or, as here, overt evasiveness. As also seen in the differences between his *David* (1623-4) and those by Michelangelo, Donatello or Verocchio, Bernini challenges the viewer to complete the work in his or her own imagination. This was something of a watershed in marble sculpture, whose function since Ancient Greece was to assert self-sufficiency, both aesthetic and spiritual.

Another historic point of reference is the work in marble by Rodin. In particular, his sculptures of figures rising from the surface of untreated stone, themselves having taken inspiration from the *Captives* (intended for Pope Julius's tomb) by Michelangelo, who drew inspiration for their title from the way they seem to be trying to writhe free of the very material from which they are made. In the works by Rodin, such as *Danaid* (c. 1889), in which a woman's smooth back arches serenely out a lump of roughly hewn white marble, treated and untreated form have struck a balance. However, always in the soft rendering of his material, as if a marble carving could be out of focus, or as if he had hastened and exaggerated the effects of centuries of attrition by the elements, one gets the strong impression that Rodin is bringing something to form yet at the same time suggesting its disembodied return, its reclamation by the material whence it came.

Then there are the works, not limited to marble, in which the object is wrapped up. Preeminent among them is the work by Man Ray that pays homage to Surrealism's dark priest (Isidore

Ducasse (1846-70), aka Lautréamont who described that the beauty of a young boy was like 'the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'), in *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920, remade 1972), a non-descript lump wrapped in a blanket and tied with twine. It is among the most intuitive and successful of all Surrealist works. For unlike so many of those by his contemporaries that tried to represent dreams and dream-images, in *The Enigma* the image remains hidden, or rather, the truth of the work is in concealment itself. The title makes this relationship even more deliciously cryptic: is the 'enigma' of this work equivalent to the enigma of Isidore Ducasse? Indeed what is the enigma of Isidore Ducasse? The fact that we do not know the enigma is in itself, another enigma. This is an excellent model for unconscious thought as links to reality (the inner object looks like a sewing machine but who can be sure?) soon loose their mooring in mismatching and misdirection.

The final works in this genealogy are the mammoth acts of wrapping sites and monuments by Christo and Jean-Claude, whose first major project, incidentally, took place in Australia with *Wrapped Coast* in 1969. Many subsequent works, such as the wrapped Reichstag (1995) in Berlin, or Pont-Neuf (1985) in Paris, are inscribed fairly deeply within the popular memory of the late twentieth century. In their case the act of concealing something so difficult to conceal and so recognizable became the main event. It also provided a way of drawing attention to the way that in recent times, architectural landmarks in cities have taken on the role of a devotional site, places of cultural concentration where the identity of the city is played out in the imaginations of citizens and tourists on a regular basis.

The recurring motif in all of these examples is, of course, the imaginative pressure that the act of wrapping exerts on the viewer. It is with oblique or provocative titles, that this dynamic is made all the more powerful. Seton's titles, or at least the first part, are either epigrammatic, as in *Life is a Game Young Man: Shuttle Endeavor*, or descriptive of some physical or psychological condition, as in *Scar or a Bruise: Wheelchair*. They divulge enough to prompt the viewer to ask why the object has been obscured, except that we know that for the object to appear to us in all its unremarkable materiality would hold nothing of the same associative allure that the titles seem to imply. The kind of imaginative energy that these works provoke is furthermore a timely reply to the relatively recent cult of interactivity and user-friendliness with its predilection for art in which you can actively take part or can be fiddled with. Seton's work is of the kind that is a sound corrective to what has become a chauvinism for 'audience participation', since all good art is interactive in as much as it makes demands on those who see it.

Crucially, in Seton's sculptures the 'real' object is *not there*. Or if we are to be more pedantic about the matter, we would have to say that the real object before us is of a real object that is kept from us. It is as if Seton has wittily synthesized Bernini's figure of the Nile with Man Ray's *Enigma*). In the case of the former, we are gestured to a place we might be able to see and experience, but we will never *know*. In the latter we see an object whose purpose is to show us something we *cannot see*. However, one big difference between Seton's sculpture and Man Ray's object, is that Man Ray's enigma can, if we were to tamper with it, be solved at least in a literal way (literal since the enigma is that the enigma is an enigma), whereas Seton's cannot. There is nothing to lift. As in so many examples in the Baroque, cloth is used well beyond its

function to clothe, to hint at subtleties that cannot be represented through simple mimetic representation alone such as a belief, a foreboding, doubt or ecstasy (one need only turn to Bernini's *St Theresa in Ecstasy*, 1647-52).

In this respect Seton's works represent memories or hypotheses; what has happened but can never be, or what could be. In either case the experience is incomplete and will therefore remain partially undisclosed. These works can be like wish-objects (*Any Dessert You Want: Porsche*), or they can be like missed opportunities (*I Wish I Could Fly: Plane*). It would be a mistake to attribute a single strategy to these works let alone a similar frame of mind. Some hide/divulge flippancy, others yearning, still others resignation.

Seton's sculptures can also be construed as meditations on the linguistic and communicative process. Explaining an intense, elaborate, involved experience is never an easy affair, nor is trying to describe a dream. Efforts at just trying to approximate the experience in the mind of the other soon run aground. What we are typically left with is the wide gulf that exists between acts and words, and between ourselves and others. One of the first impulses of children or inexperienced artists is to try to replicate precisely an image or idea, only to feel disenchanted at their failure. One of the formative stages of an artist's maturity is to become reconciled to the infidelities, imperfections of one's idea and of the way of the medium, and not to try to force the process too much, and to allow the process to speak for itself and to a certain extent to allow the work of art to point to its own outcome.

Yet what is intriguing about Seton's objects is that they seem to hold a certain nostalgia for the childhood idea, that all things can be owned and

we can be whoever we want to be when we grow up—just as ideas can be perfectly translated into things. Of course, they cannot be, just as maturity is a callous set of ongoing personal treaties with disappointment. The covers, or veils, on Seton's objects are like admissions that certain goals cannot be met and most things in the world remain beyond our grasp. However, at the same time the artist has it both ways, for underneath lies the unrequited form, the dream, the wish, the eternal enigma. But be assured it is there. That is the artist's promise, and his consolation.

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