Clifford Rainey
Homo Faber
Dorothy Weiss Gallery,
San Francisco
October 2 – November 29, 1997

ill. Torso, 1997. Glass, 40 x 241/2 x 14”.

Pygmalion, who strived for perfection, is a role-model for the artist. At length, he achieved it and became forever satisfied with his new-found love. It is a sign of our times that instead of being is dismissed as hubris, this myth is now faulted for shoddy Darwinism. Perfection is really the only optimum adaptation to the current environment and is thus a moving target. In Clifford Rainey’s show at the Gallery he casts himself as Homo Faber, man-the-maker, pursuing this target, and, subtly, as man-the-made, shaped by the environment that he tries to control. Appropriately, Rainey has returned to his favored subject, the human figure – here in the form of heads and torsos made of glass, plaster, lead and bronze – and also includes multi-part molds that, were they not made themselves of cast glass, could be used to fabricate new forms. He steps beyond the commonly heard idea that the process is as beautiful as the product and uses the cycle of mold-to-form-to-mold to confuse the two and show that no step is final. His Torso, a delicate life-sized female figure of midnight blue glass, is pleasingly incomplete, with shoulder blades held in place by rusting pins, ought in the mist of fabrication. It is twinned with Hollow Torso, a precisely crafted thirteen-piece translucent glass mold darkened on the inside with black pigment that seems to describe the same form in negative. The uncertainty of the work’s interior and the unfinished nature of it’s alter ego leads to a game of mental construction as we try to fit the pair together. Indeed, “Faber” from the show’s title, comes from the Indo-European root meaning “to fit together”; so not only Rainey, but the viewer also becomes Homo Faber. This successful interplay between pieces continues in the most dramatic work, a triptych entitled Where We Are From, Where We Are Now, Where We Are Going, comprised of three massive thirty-inch high busts overseeing the gallery. The leftmost head of brightly painted plaster in an Egyptian New Kingdom style, a bold literal borrowing for Rainey, is balanced on the right hand side by a more familiar thoughtful self portrait in clear glass accented with small touches of rubbed-in pigment. The center piece, Where We Are Now, is built of six cast glass mold parts held together with steel C-clamps, framing a head of nothingness. A clear past and a clear goal do nothing to relieve us of uncertainty in the present. In owning and embracing this doubt, Rainey admits that his future, Where We Are Going, is dependent on a moveable and easily changed present. But by claiming control of this by making his own mold, he asserts a new kind of fitting together for Home Faber, a Darwinian fitness, a constant adaptation through a process of mold-form-mold that makes Shakespeare’s Prospero, rather than Pygmalion, the model for the contemporary artist.

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