

Clifford Rainey

Heller Gallery  
New York, NY

On viewing the sculptural works of Clifford Rainey, one can immediately sense the nature of Rainey's complex world of inspiration. On exhibition are two thematically different bodies of work. There is a strong sequence of single cast African male heads, each resting on its own piling. Two groups of these heads relate to painted canvas backgrounds, one being blue, the other red. Two small pieces and two very large diptychs incorporate cast-glass and bronze bison heads, and painted and metal surfaces.

His smaller wall pieces reflect two themes—one, the African head so widely explored in this show, the other, a coke bottle, something Rainey has worked with in the past. Both pieces are contained within box structures and incorporate additional found elements, painted surfaces, and the manipulation of forms. This body of work shows Rainey's strong migration of thought, which seems to incorporate an eclectic mix of understood iconography juxtaposed with a determined, controlled sculptural order. Rainey, himself a voyager, uses mythology and symbolism from many ancient cultures as well as from the heritage of widely separate continents to formulate his imagery. His mixed palette allows each viewer a chance to peer within the layered patterns of his thoughts and emotions, while experiencing a sequence of precisely altered forms.

His manipulated surfaces and carefully studied details have produced a body of unified images. One certainly feels this sculptural spectrum within the African heads, as he sliced and assembled the elements of each head back into a readable whole. Using glass spacers and a variety of surface treatments, each newly conceived head was then placed upon a piling resulting in a sequence of refined totems. Seen as a group the heads are a powerful unit of variations. They become the representation of questions asked by the sculptor, or the fragment found by the archeologist. This collection of heads works as a reference to the idea of the found object, the fragmented shard. Rainey's applied surface treatments on the heads, unlike true fragments, often dominate the statement. Using gold leaf or platinum leaf or oil paint he begins a process of altering and transporting the luminosity and transparent qualities of each cast head into opaque skins—new surface that reflect light instead of absorbing it. He produces a density of form and an articulated dominance of design to the individual heads. These surface changes challenge the experiencing of each head as the glass medium moves from an understood condition to one that is totally devoid of the basic material.

In some instances a head will combine a number of elements producing a collage of textures and a vitality of energy. Each of the heads becomes reminders of the classical fragment. Transcending a specific culture, these totems arrive at their present state as symbolic references to the concept of continuum. The real strength of Rainey's sequence of male is not how each head was altered but how he has manipulated the form, place it on the column, and articulated the entire relationship into a subtle sculptural whole. His control over these pieces is obviously the result of

a sure hand. The historic reference within his iconography is one of familiarity, yet nothing seems concrete. There is an overriding sense that each element within this exhibition is only temporarily at rest, that the artist will bring change to each form, that everything is in a state of flux. This change is one of sculptural exploration.

The force that stills a piece, that provides the essence that assures one that this piece is finished is not what dominated this work. Instead, it is the power to move, to explore and to uncover, to become a part of the voyage.

Richard Kollath