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Lost and Found

Two recent sets of multiple castings by Allan McCollum show the artist reaching beyond his familiar theme of mechanical replication to address issues of memory, history, and death.

BY RICHARD KALINA



Installation view of Allan McCollum's Lost Objects, 1991; at John Weber Gallery, New York. Photo: Fred Scruton.

In McCollum's earlier work – the blank plaster paintings, the blurred photographs of television scenes with paintings in the background, the sealed vases, the casts of small, grenadelike objects, the flat, black, symmetrical silhouette drawings – were all meditations on that most persistent of modernist topics, the machine. Artists have given consideration to the machine as both the means of fabrication and the object of it, just as they have pondered its effect on society at large and its effect on themselves as creators. Central to this concern

has been the problematic relation of mechanical reproduction to originality. What happens to the object of esthetic contemplation when it is deprived, at birth, so to speak, of its singularity?

We live at a remove, in a world of objects hatched out from casts, molds and templates, a world overrun with dimensionless electronic images. This would seem to imply inauthenticity and dislocation, and yet the mass-produced objects and images that we bring into our lives and imbue with emotional value are imprinted with uniqueness by their very contact with us. Allan McCollum seems to take this paradoxical situation into account. Neutered, multiple and deactivated, his work nonetheless has always had a certain quirky warmth and individuality, a feeling, albeit muted, of the hand. He has consistently opted for a comfortable domesticity of scale and, within pre-set limits, enough variation in form, surface and color to thaw out the conceptual ice. His exhibitions this spring at New York's John Weber Gallery (*Lost Objects*) and at Madrid's Galeria Weber, Alexander, y Cobo (*The Dog from Pompei*) dealt with his earlier concerns – multiplicity and the diminished artistic aura, the charged yet ambiguous relation of the work of art to its model – but they also moved into a new and more challenging territory, one that is very distant from the world of the machine.

Lost Objects, a variation of his installation at the 1991 Carnegie International, consisted of over 400 painted concrete casts of fossilized dinosaur bones. With the assistance of the vertebrate paleontology section of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, he made casts of 15 different bones from five dinosaur species. Each cast was painted with one of 75 earth tones, so that no two objects were the same: either the form or the color differed. Set out on low tablelike pedestals in groups of 15 to 120, they filled the gallery, creating not so much an installation as a topography, a dry landscape that called to mind the kind of terrain where bones such as these were probably unearthed. The desert colors were a Smithsonian-like metaphor – the mapping of a geographic site onto an object. By painting and thus differentiating them, rather than leaving them white, McCollum rejected the impulse for a theatrical unity, a flood of accumulation and display, choosing instead a cooler, quasiscientific approach that invited contemplation.

This was a show that dealt with scale in a complex way. McCollum altered the scale of the gallery, not literally but perceptually. The platforms were all at the same height, and in their accumulative mass they created, visually at least, a new and higher floor level. I was reminded of Walter De Maria's *Earth Room* with its raised floor plane of soil – a heavy and vertically compressed space, a room with the breath squeezed out of it. In McCollum's installation, the gallery floor was



Installation View of Allan McCollum's The Dog From Pompei, 1991; at the Galeria Weber, Alexander, y Cobo, Madrid, Spain.

not only effectively pushed up, but also stretched out. The lined-up rows of bones seemed to carry our eyes out to some sort of imaginary horizon. There was a kind of Alice in Wonderland quality to the room, a sense of dislocation and changeability: this was a place where size would always be in doubt.

The subject matter too was clearly a musing on scale. Dinosaurs were big. This is something we know, but having the bones – thought to be from the forelimbs, hindlimbs and feet of the reptiles – laid out on a slab and not reassembled as recognizable skeletons brings it home sharply to us. Seeing them this way makes them seem more thinglike, more independent and inscrutable. They become harder to assimilate into the world of the known and familiar. They are no longer the dinosaurs we fantasized about in childhood, reflections of that 20th-century convergence of the scary, the awesome and the cute – the Disney Sublime – and as a result they feel even larger, deader and far more alien.

Skeletons are the most straightforward examples we have of the whole expressed as the sum of its parts. They speak of the grammar of evolution, of linear, causal, purposeful time, of the slow burnishing and refinement of function. Break that reading, dismantle the skeleton, and we are confronted with time that is not on

our scale, time we have no intuitive measure of: deep, geological time, duration calibrated in tens of millions of years.

McCollum has spoken in a recent interview of time so vastly scaled as to be beyond time, to be beyond the possibility of direct knowledge. For him this order of time expresses enormous loss, the disappearance not just of a species, but of an entire world. McCollum is preoccupied with absence and death, and the final loss, the ultimate un-thereness, is the incomprehensible rupture of all that is ordinary.

Since excavation began, Pompeii has served as a metaphor for the sudden cessation of the quotidian, of everyday life stopped in mid-stride. There is one relic of Pompeii that particularly captured McCollum's imagination – a plaster cast of a dog, caught by the volcano's eruption somewhere between sleep and agony. The dog was a hound, a household pet complete with a buckled collar. The excavators found, of course, no mummified creature. It had disappeared, leaving only a hollow mold formed by the hardened ash. The cast animal is thus a strange amalgam of presence and absence, not dissimilar to the fossilized dinosaur bones, which are not bones at all, but mineralized copies slowly developed by nature over the millennia.

After much, much difficulty, McCollum managed to obtain a cast of the dog from the Vesuvius Museum, and proceeded to make his own replicas of it. In his Madrid show, these casts were placed on long, narrow platforms in rows of ten, with each cast turned in a different direction. The result was powerful, dirgelike, and stately. It was, more than anything, an invocation of the dead, with each animal functioning like a note in a larger composition of mourning.

With these two exhibitions McCollum has opened new areas of exploration for himself. While still dealing with the play between the elusive original and the assertive copy, he has taken his speculation beyond modern cultural mechanics. He is doing something that is more difficult and, I think, more rewarding than reexamining the norms of contemporary society. He is dealing with history, memory and time. This work treads a fine line. It could easily be sentimental, academic, pretentious or slick. It's not, and it is to McCollum's credit that he was able to let go of the spark that made his earlier work so engaging. There is no wittiness to be found here. In dealing with death, McCollum has become dead serious.

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