1987

Seven dyads

Donovan Peterson
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds

Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Peterson, Donovan, "Seven dyads" (1987). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 3466.
<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.5350>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ART:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Donovan Peterson presented February 19, 1987.

James Lee Hansen, Chairman

Byron Gardner

Claire C. Kelly

Michihiro Kosuge

APPROVED:

Robert Kasal, Head, Department of Art

SEVEN DYADS

by

DONOVAN PETERSON

**A Thesis Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of**

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
SCULPTURE**

**Portland State University
1987**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	iv
----------------------	----

CHAPTER

I. Introduction	1
II. Description of Process.....	2
III. Review of Selected Sculptures	7
IV. Synthesis.....	13
Bibliography	15

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE

1. Nodite Wedding, cast silicon bronze, 32" high.....6
2. Sahasrara: Seated Couple, cast silicon bronze, 30" high7
3. Eve and Serapatatia: Hidden Agenda, cast silicon bronze, 31" high8, 9
4. Priest and Priestess: Evolutionary Totems, cast silicon bronze, 38" high10
5. An Offering I: Anima-Aniwoo, cast silicon bronze, 41" high11
6. An Offering II: Mr. and Mrs. God, cast silicon bronze, 60" high12
7. Faithful Sojourners: Interstellar Rest Stop, cast silicon bronze, 37" high13

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The theme of male and female forms in juxtaposition is one that has persisted in my sculpture since the first woodcarvings I produced as a teenager. A passion for the creative potential housed in this conceptual context drove me to continue this exploration into my graduate thesis work.

Prior to the time I entered the masters program, my sculpture addressing this theme, distilled and simplified what I conceived to be masculine and feminine essences into a singular image. Using a kind of curvilinear lyricism, my goal had been to infuse each work with a feeling of unity and serenity. These works resulted in highly polished wood and stone forms that indeed communicated serenity, and did effectively homogenize male and female polarities into a unified field. However, I found that as I persisted in simplifying and polishing, something vital was being abraded away -- and not simply surface texture. I had to discover what was missing from these works.

My personal life was changing. My relationships were far from serene or idyllic. There were so many aspects of my psyche that these earlier sculptures were not attending: emotional complexity, sexual tension, a sense of humor, and especially that mysterious dimension wherein dwell my death-fear-survival instincts.

The old works represented a former self; but this new journey would require taking up the task of communicating my maturing psychic structure in sculptural language.

CHAPTER II

DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS

Since the completion of my undergraduate work 12 years ago, I conceived my figurative pieces exclusively from my imagination. To initiate a change, I enrolled in Life Sculpture, Life Drawing, and Anatomy in an effort to reacquaint myself with the actual figure.

As I worked in these classes, I was constantly experiencing a conflict between my mental imaging, (what I conceived the figure to be) and what I optically "saw". I felt I had a good sense for the figure -- or at least for gesture -- but it was a painfully slow process supplanting my timeworn symbolic figural conceptions with new visual data. Developing a new way of seeing proved frustrating but ultimately gratifying.

Life Sculpture enhanced my awareness of organic design. In Anatomy Class, I found that drawing from the skeleton increased my knowledge of the geometric structural principles underlying the figure. Drawing bone forms greatly influenced my abstract sensibilities.

Practically the entire first year, my thesis investigation involved working on a series of figurative compositions that attempted to combine the new insight I was gaining in Life Sculpture and Anatomy, with my previous lyrical design aesthetic and peculiar spiritual leanings. While producing this group of figures, I turned for inspiration not only to western religious art but to eastern as well; particularly Tantric Buddhist and Hindu imagery. Compositionally, with this new group of figures, I was experimenting with a seated meditative postural logic as a design armature.

The struggle of my first year produced seven clay compositions that ultimately, seemed stiff and overworked -- far from resolved. I knew I had wanted to combine my personal spiritual feelings with the more literal figurative element, but the two forces were not as yet finding harmony.

I kept working, and slowly some of the principles learned in Life Class began to sink deeper, becoming a bit more unconscious. It was towards the end of the first year that my thesis proposal was drafted as follows:

Thesis Proposal

"Between Man and Woman; Towards the Universal"

It is my intention to develop a series of figurative abstractions exploring the synergistic physical-spiritual nexus between man and woman.

I consider the human unique in nature; the fabric of his being having a warp; physical and touchable; and a woof; in essence spirit, transcendent and mysterious. As a result, my works will find human forms attending this quest for wholeness in outreach; as man to woman, parent to child, and ultimately within the circuit of the family.

I seek to express with my figures a gesture towards wholeness; a keynote of harmony and faith amidst ardent longing.

Because my primary concern is to communicate by virtue of quality of form, I have chosen to resolve my images utilizing the exploratory and plastic medium of clay.

Subsequent selection of the most suitable final material; be it stone, wood, plaster, or bronze; will be made to complement formal and emotional sensibilities peculiar to each work.

Although the clay pieces I produced during this time fell short of realizing the goals I had set for myself in this proposal, there were elements within these works that pointed me in a direction I would eventually follow.

As the first year ended, most of three terms' worth of hard work went back into the old clay bin. I was tired and frustrated, something was still amiss, and I had only another year to produce work that was meaningful to me.

That summer, I worked at a carpentry job in California. This kept me away from sculpture for a while, but gave me a chance to think, dream, and consider how I would proceed. My dream life was particularly rich that summer, and some of those dreams provided the impetus for the new work. Another significant step in self discovery was inspired by this passage from Ralph

Waldo Emerson:

"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Insist on yourself; never imitate.

That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him.

"There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion.

"The power which resides in him is new in Nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried."¹

Emerson's words reached my core, shattering the dead center of my indecision. It was time to stop seeking over-much inspiration outside myself. I was ready to climb out from under my bushel basket and let my light shine.

The Second Year

One of the pivotal points on my road to developing a more personal abstract language began by writing an Art History research paper exploring the origin and evolution of the halo as it appeared in Christian iconography. This enquiry wound down an ethereal trail into ancient Persia, Egypt, and Sumeria. In each of these cultures, I encountered figures adorned with elaborate headpieces. These forms caused me to consider how I might express sculpturally, the physical counterpart for the radiant and yet subtle fields of power illuminating the human head -- the "crown of creation".

I had returned to school after the summer ready to try a new tack. I began work on two seated figure groups, "Nodite Wedding" and "Sahasrara". These figures were somewhat compositionally similar to those from the previous year but had one important distinction: I decided to lift the figures off the ground by introducing a bench into the composition. Suddenly the spaces

¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Essay on Self-Reliance" in *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York, Wm. H. Wise Co., 1929, pp. 138-139.

between the figures became much more animated; the compositions opened up. The bench added a throne connotation which provided a certain majesty, and the figures now seemed less specifically eastern and more universal. The majestic posture predicated an abstract play that began with the headpieces.

My work strategy was also changing. Unlike the previous year when I often found myself belaboring an unresolved piece into the wee hours of the morning, now if I got stuck, I would leave a piece alone for awhile and begin a new project. Experimenting with form was now more important than trying to produce masterpieces.

Studies in Life Sculpture were reinforcing both the figurative and abstract elements in my thesis experimentation. It was during the first term of the second year that "Eve and Serapatatia", "Anima-Aniwoo", and "Priest and Priestess" began their evolution. As these images evolved, it became clear to me that bronze was to be my material of choice. The ancient, timeless quality I had associated with bronze was perfect for these works.

I developed these new pieces only to a certain stage of completion in clay and then made plaster molds, cast them in wax, and proceeded to work on the pieces in wax. I wanted both the properties of clay and wax to remain with the pieces into the bronze state.

Winter term almost meant disaster when the burn-out kiln overheated and two terms worth of investment molds were dangerously weakened. Not wanting to see nineteen molds give way to molten metal, the foundry crew and I worked furiously to reinforce them. Fortunately, they withstood the pressure, and to my delight, all the components of "Priest and Priestess", "Eve", and "Anima-Aniwoo" were cast in bronze.

I decided to continue to subtly change these pieces, even after they were cast in metal, by cutting and moving things slightly, and adding the calligraphic marks of the welded bead. I wanted not only the evidence of clay and wax, but the welding as well, to appear in the finished pieces.

In the spring "Sahasrara" and "An Offering II" were successfully cast and that left only two pieces yet to be resolved in wax and cast the following fall.

"Nodite Wedding" was the first piece begun my second year. Although my subsequent work had evolved away from the literal figure, this piece, despite repeated reworkings, maintained a certain compositional integrity, and I wanted very much for it to survive. Though it was begun first, it was cast last. During that time I also produced "Rest Stop" which was modelled directly in wax and cast along with "Nodite Wedding". Toward the end of fall, the seven pieces selected for my exhibition were cast in metal; remaining were the studio processes essential to completing these works. After grinding, welding, and sand blasting, I did extensive patina experimentation, utilizing this final process to enhance the uniqueness of each piece.

Nodite Wedding
32" high

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF SELECTED SCULPTURES

Sahasrara: Seated Couple
The Figurative Challenge
30" high

Sahasrara proved to be satisfying. Its naturalistic gesture communicated the feeling of intimacy and grace accompanied by an alertness and attention I was seeking. The attenuation of the male figure lent an abstract identity to the torso and yet maintained its natural gesture. I had to be careful not to push this work too much towards anatomical specificity (fingers, toes, etc.), but I had to maintain a certain anatomical credibility. I think this piece was successful in achieving this balance.

The headpieces marked the beginning of a playful exploration of forms surrounding the head. Sahasrara, meaning the "jeweled crown", is traditionally associated with spiritual awakening. Sahasrara kept me working with the figure, but the headpieces opened the door to abstract invention.

Eve and Serapatatia: Hidden Agenda
31" high
Stepping Out

Eve was my next step toward communicating the gesture of the pose with more abstract lyrical forms.

These figures, when viewed frontally, are essentially naturalistic, but as one moves around the figures to the sides and back, the bony geometry and line begin to transmute the figures' more "literal" bodies into forms expressing my personal gestural language. The title, "Hidden Agenda" suggests that I was hiding the abstraction in back, afraid to come totally "out front" with it. The headpieces continue exploration (begun with "Nodite Wedding" and "Sahasrara") of the super-sensory, intimate interplay between these figures' psyches.

Eve and Serapatatia: Hidden Agenda
back view

Vertical Evolution

"Priest and Priestess" and "Anima-Aniwoo" mark the beginning of a theme within my primary theme: my sculptural interpretation of the concept of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny. Metaphorically translated, this means that the planetary evolution of mankind is reflected in the developmental growth cycles of a singular human being. I believe that these archetypal growth cycles intensify for an individual in the context of relationship. Therefore, the theme of vertical evolutionary development emerged as an essential compliment to my primary sculptural theme.

Priest and Priestess: Evolutionary Totems
38" high

"Priest and Priestess", to me, represents a vertical evolutionary struggle to survive spiritually. These forms have a "south pole" suggesting oceanic fins, animal bones, and eddying primal forces with "man, the two armed form" making his appearance at the upper torso and heart

region. The formal contributions above the head descend from the creative super-conscious realms and are held precious at the level of the heart.

An Offering I: Anima-Aniwoo
41" high

"Anima-Aniwoo", like "Priest and Priestess", is still essentially rooted in an animal heritage. As these beings dance for each other, they reveal the primal-survival-genital level of their existence but above this level each has forming within the chest region an offering to reveal to the other (not unlike the Egyptian Ka illustrating the miniature soul self).

An Offering II: Mr. & Mrs. God
60" high

"An Offering II" was inspired by the poem, "We are transmitters" by D. H. Lawrence.² "An Offering II" gets farther from specific anatomical reference and attempts to communicate primarily with form and space. Like "Priest and Priestess", this work moves in stages on the vertical axis. The "offering" is communicated by virtue of form as the torso region of each figure comes together to a single point, creating a nest shape suitable for gift bearing. This gesture is the offering of the self to another. The heads and headpieces of "Offering II" evolve from my earlier headdress inventions with extensions becoming more like giant ear forms, extrasensory probes, satellite dishes, etc. I utilized these forms to suggest that these beings were creatively transmitting and receiving each other's signals.

² Lawrence, D. H., *Selected Poems*. New York, Viking Press, 1972, p. 105.

Synthesis

Faithful Sojourners: Interstellar Rest Stop
37" high

The final piece of the group, "Interstellar Rest Stop", is a good piece with which to initiate a discussion of synthesis.

"Rest Stop", I feel, combines some of the intimate emotional elements of "Eve and Serapatia" and "Sahasrara" with the evolutionary totemic motif of "Priest and Priestess". This sculpture is about taking time out from the vertical ascent to recharge one's batteries, and from a posture of "dynamic peace", share one's life journey with another.

It is now about two and one half years since I set out on this path of self discovery. Along

the way, I had to find more authentic ways of communicating a theme I had long ago taken deep into my marrow. When I compare my older works with the new, I see myself reflected in both; but, in the new my growth is visible. My sculptures now have more tension; they are more complex, enigmatic, and humorous. My work has become more honest. My *Basic Laws of Good Sculpture*³ had to be drastically updated and revised.

Some of what I set out to do, as stated in my thesis proposal, I have achieved. Happily, I haven't grown weary of the theme I chose to explore; inversely, my passion has intensified. I see now within its context even greater freedom to invent.

Someone at my opening asked me which piece most effectively represented my present sculptural direction, to which I replied, "All of them!" With this response, I needed to affirm that I do intend to continue my study of life sculpture, as well as continue to expand my personal abstract vocabulary.

I find the figure teaches me about abstraction. I enjoy the regenerative contact with humanity figurative work brings me, and especially the potential it holds for expressing the rhythms of my heart.

³ Peterson, Donovan, *Basic Laws of Good Sculpture*, Impermanent Press, 1973

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Essay on Self-Reliance" in *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York, Wm. H. Wise Co., 1929.

Lawrence, D. H., *Selected Poems*. New York, The Viking Press, 1972.