

A new perspective  
Sculptor Evan Penny plays with our perceptions of reality

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### Spotlight

L. Faux and Others: New Works by Evan Penny at TrepanierBaer through Feb. 16. Album: ACAD @ 75 at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Alberta College of Art and Design, through Feb. 16.

Evan Penny makes the kind of sculpture that is so realistic, so detailed and so obviously a display of skill that it literally stops people in their tracks.

But this alone isn't why the artist's work grabs a viewer, holds onto her gaze and then begins to choreograph her movements around the solid objects he has planted in her space.

Penny's standing nude figures and portrait heads invite you to stare, to examine every wrinkle, bump, fleshy imperfection and intimate crevasse. They stand still for it, after all. But the 48-year-old Toronto artist, who began his career in Calgary, has never tried to fool anyone into thinking his figures were real, even for a second.

He sends signals to a viewer's senses that telegraph "real" and "not real" at the same time. It's this continual flip-flop that makes the proposition of a five-foot-high human head or a four-fifths lifesize body so absorbing.

Penny only intensifies it in two groups of recent works, which have been influenced by photography and by his work in the movie industry on special makeup and effects. He has been carrying on two careers since 1990, but would not talk about his film work anywhere in the vicinity of his art until now.

After working on more than 25 movies by directors who include David Cronenberg, Oliver Stone, John Woo and Sidney Lumet, Penny has brought the techniques of this kind of illusion-making directly into his sculpture. He has exploited them to make a series of composite portraits he calls No One -- In Particular (2001-2002), on view at TrepanierBaer in the exhibition L. Faux and Others.

The head-and-shoulders portraits of No One -- In Particular are the "Others" of the show's title. Made of the silicone material used in special effects

to make animatronics and prostheses, the one-and-a-half times lifesize portraits are vividly realistic. They have hair and clothes. But they portray unreal persons, twentysomethings whose features have been put together, like Frankenstein, from various sources.

As in other portraits of unreal persons -- like Canadian painter Janet Werner's fictitious faces or the German photographer's Thomas Ruff's Other Portraits in which the features of many faces are superimposed digitally -- a sense of the uncanny permeates them. It's like an aroma or a draft whose source you can't quite put your finger on.

It is also present in Penny's new, monumental portraits of L. Faux, a real person, whose full name is Libby Faux (pronounced Fox). The connection between the two groups of works lies in Penny's interest in photography. He equates the uncanny combination of familiarity and otherness with the effects of the media on how we see, what we see, and what we will accept as "real."

Photography exerts a strong influence on how we see. In the image world of digital media, Penny says, features are blended, character is neutralized and faces are generalized. People begin to seem generic. The artist returns this mediated gaze so we can experience it in a different way and recognize what is happening. Penny has situated his new work in a conceptual space he describes as "between the way we see each other in real time and space and the way we've come to see each other in photographs."

Physically, both sets of portraits are actually busts sculpted in relief, not in the round. They float out from the wall. The faces contain the same amount of information as a full-frontal view.

But the volume of the heads, from the tip of the nose to the edge of the ear, is one half what it would be in life. The compression of the face is progressive, similar to what it would be in a photograph.

Penny calls it "forced perspective." When you shift your position from directly in front of a portrait to the side, the rapid compression of the face makes it seem to move away.

The Libby portraits were conceived first. They are huge, three times larger than life. Each of them is a five-foot high, painted, epoxy-resin face whose clear, urethane eyeballs, if removed, would be as big as tennis balls. Altogether, there are three -- a black-and-white head at TrepanierBaer, an all-white one at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery and one in full colour that isn't being shown here.

The Libbys' references to photography lie in the frontal, ID or passport photo pose and cropping of the busts, the frozen "moment," the spatial compression, the enlargement, the hyper-real details and the use of colour. The black-and-white Libby, monstrous in its lifelikeness, is mesmerizing as it vacillates between sculptural and photographic space, and between realness and artificiality.

Penny also makes a colour photograph of each of the Libbys and the No One -- In Particular portraits, returning the image to photography where it goes yet through another transformation and looks even more "real." He counts on our minds constantly readjusting, filling in what we know should be there, thus aiding and abetting the conundrum that the sculptures represent.

"The interesting thing is that (the sculpture) insists on remaining 3-D," says Penny. "It holds its illusion despite the extreme artificiality of the shape. The eye wants to make it up."

The simultaneous reality and artificiality of high realist sculpture has preoccupied Penny since the beginning of his career. At the time, he was making full-figure, standing nude portraits that caught the likeness of a face, the individual shape of a toenail, the ripples in a thigh, but were only four-fifths lifesize. They were the hard-won result of close observation and modelling in clay, not to be confused with the clothed body castings of Super Realist sculptors such as American Duane Hanson.

People would try to speak to Hanson in exhibitions, but no one would approach a Penny that way. He warned them off with the size, colours and nudity of the figures. His sculpture is never lifesize; it's always smaller or larger.

One of his early standing nudes, Ali (1983), is on view at the Illingworth Kerr with the white Libby in a group of works that spans 18 years of his practice.

Penny was born the son of a doctor in Elim, South Africa. His parents were missionaries who moved their family to Hay River on Great Slave Lake in 1962. He was 10.

"Hay River was the end of the highway, a one-doctor town," Penny recalls, but he loved the north.

Two years later, the family moved to Edmonton. Penny went to Calgary to attend the Alberta College of Art, as it was known then, where he studied sculpture with Katie Ohe. He graduated in 1975, stayed here and became part of an art community that supported his work.

In 1980, he packed everything he had, "which wasn't much," put it in a half-ton truck and drove to Toronto. Within only a year, he was lucky enough to land a place at Aggregation Gallery (now known as Wynick-Tuck), which showed realist art. There was resistance to his work elsewhere in Toronto, however. The art world was in the throes of the "crisis of representation" and the inability of words or images to represent objective truths about the world. Art that took representation at face value and did not engage it as an issue was simply seen as regressive.

The critical climate of Toronto forced Penny to take stock of what he was doing and it took him some time to feel settled. During a two-year teaching stint at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he audited classes on critical theory. If he had made high realist sculpture during the first 10 years of his career, for the next 10, he made sculpture about sculpture, its history, its figurative conventions and the ways in which it can be convincing.

Penny's success back in Toronto, after he returned in 1988, led to his film career. In 1990, Gordon Smith, a specialist in special makeup and effects, invited Penny to work with FXSmith. That experience has included making prosthetics and prosthetic makeup, body doubles, animals and fantasy creatures, such as the mutant cockroaches that attack New York in *Mimic*.

Penny has worked on Oliver Stone's *JFK* and transformed Anthony Hopkins into Richard Nixon, and Mary Steenbergen into his mother, for Stone's *Nixon*. Among his other films are *Natural Born Killers*, *Face Off*, *X-Men* and *eXistenZ*. In television, he shared an Emmy nomination for makeup on HBO's film *Truman* (1995). Under Smith, who pioneered its use, Penny got in on the beginning of using silicone to make prosthetics for film.

It wasn't until Penny saw the work of Ron Mueck, however, that he thought about using his knowledge of special makeup and effects in his own sculpture. The young British artist -- known for sculptures such as the perfect, naked, three-foot-long *Dead Dad* (1996-97) and the enormous crouching *Untitled (Boy)* (1998-2001) -- started out as puppet maker and puppeteer. Mueck's highly finished work was made of silicone. It raised the bar for Penny once again.

"It took Ron Mueck to make me realize I should use every resource I've got. He forced me to take another look at my work."

The result is big differences of approach, material and technique between the *L. Faux* and the *No One -- In Particular* series. But both shout their artifice. While the big *Libby's* in colour and black-and-white refer to the vocabulary of photographic reproduction, the all-white one, a *tabula rasa*, points to the conceptual conceit.

No One -- In Particular waves back at the media. After Penny's opening, this writer went home and turned on the television to watch the 11 o'clock news. Law & Order was still on. After a minute or two, the realization dawned that Jerry Orbach looked oddly like an Evan Penny sculpture. So did the newscasters.

The inherent artificiality of the media had suddenly been unmasked by a real thing.