

Skin deep

Artist Evan Penny explores the human body in all its unvarnished glory. SARAH MILROY catches up with him at his Toronto studio

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"They're not portraits," says Evan Penny, waving his hand in the direction of the monumental, startlingly lifelike sculptures in his Toronto studio. "They may look like portraits, but they're not. I'm more interested in exploring other kinds of relationships," he adds. "It's the question of observation, how we see, and what we expect to see."

My pencil is flying over the paper, I have barely taken my coat off and we are already deep into it. Penny is the kind of guy who doesn't need a lot of warming up. He is blessed with an utter incapacity for small talk, and one senses that the things he says have rattled around in his head for years, awaiting an outlet. These days, with a small retrospective of his work touring Canada (it is currently on show at Museum London, in London, Ont.), the struggles of his career are very much front of mind.

From his demeanour, you can tell he's an artist who has spent some time outside the gates of the art world, looking in. Almost 20 years, actually. When he exhibited his sculpture *Ali* in 1983 -- a smaller than life-sized standing female nude complete with body hair, cellulite, powder-blue eye shadow and sagging, yam-like breasts, the Toronto artist was unprepared for the hail of critical bullets that came his way.

"That was the mid-eighties," he remembers today, looking out at me carefully through his glasses. "It was in the midst of the crisis of representation. In a way, it was a very conservative time." If a likeness of a woman was unflattering, it was misogynistic and woman-hating. If the likeness was beautiful, it was misogynistic and objectifying. Figurative art, art that replicates the human body, was a lose-lose proposition. "There was no safe position," he recalls, "and I realized that I was working in territory that I did not completely understand."

Ali was one of a flock of figures Penny made in the early eighties, witheringly lifelike, painstakingly rendered nudes of men and women, roughly four-fifths life-sized. They were presented on plinths, like classical statuary, another sign, for some, of a reactionary anachronism. To make matters worse, unlike well-known American artists such as Duane Hanson or John de Andrea, Penny did not cast his figures from the living body. Rather, he fashioned his sculptures first in clay, working from live sitting models in the traditional way, and only later cast replicas from his handmade originals -- an artisan's approach that relegated him further into the netherworld of the terminally unhip.

For some observers, it wasn't just the traditional bent of Penny's art that raised eyebrows. There seemed to be something creepy about the project. Penny was Dr. Frankenstein, crafting artificial life in his studio. The work felt morbid, with the gradual entropy of human flesh so scrupulously recorded. "I was never trying to be cruel," he says today.

"I was just trying to be fastidious." Then he smiles the wan smile of the misunderstood.

The response to *Ali* drove Penny from his natural artistic habitat -- figuration -- into more than a decade of intellectually rigorous atonement. He would not make bodies any more, he decided, but rather sections of skin. Casting his own skin, he photographed the casts, blew them up, and incised the wrinkles on the flat beeswax surface, filling in the cracks with black oil stick. Penny also made a series of giant head fragments reminiscent of broken classical statuary.

In the current London show, Penny is showing a suite of thin, beeswax-and-cheesecloth castings taken from the surface of this giant head, the material cut up into sections and hung on the wall like flayed skins. You get a sense, looking at these works, of an artist treading water to keep afloat, or of someone circling anxiously around the perimeter of his core interests.

But Penny had found a sideline that would have an impact on his art; he started working in the film industry, in the rarified realm of prosthetics and special makeup. Starting in 1989 with the cult horror film *Jacob's Ladder* (for which he helped to create "bizarre, nightmarish apparitions"), Penny would go on to work on Oliver Stone's *JFK* (he made the corpse), *Nixon* (that famous nose) and *Natural Born Killers*, all of them projects with the Toronto company FX Smith.

His last assignment was *X-Men II* in 2002, for which he helped conceive the Night Crawler character. The film work gave him access to all the most current technology and materials, submerging him in the artifice of the film industry, where the art of simulation is executed on our culture's most exalted scale.

It was a chance encounter with the work of the British sculptor Ron Mueck, in the Saatchi's 1998 Sensation show, that brought the two parts of his work -- technique and content -- together again.

Mueck's now notorious work *Dead Dad* was a smaller-than-life-sized replica of the artist's father's corpse, in all its flaccid, mottled grey horror. Like Penny, Mueck was not a caster from life, but a modeller. "Seeing his work made me realize how much I had been pulling my punches," Penny says. "I decided that I wanted to make extraordinary objects again."

This he has accomplished in spades. "I had started with the Murray sculptures, back in 1995, just to see if I could still do it as well as I used to," he says, referring to the series of standing nudes in his earlier style, made before the Sensation show. After seeing Mueck, though, his work quickly found a new direction, prompted also by an exhibition in Barcelona

titled Artificial Contemporary Representation.

There, he was provoked by the enormous photographs by German photo-portraitist Thomas Ruff installed alongside the lifelike masks of Stefan Hablutzel. Each artist seemed to hold out the promise of veracity, offering a version of the human hyper-real. But the better their representations, the more jarring the revelation of artifice.

Penny was on to something, and he returned to Toronto with a cycle of work clearly in mind -- the *L. Faux* series of photographs and sculptures that are the triumph of the current touring show. Penny started by making a larger-than-life-sized sculpted clay head of a middle-aged friend named (no kidding) Libby Faux. But this was no straightforward undertaking; she sat for more than 400 hours, over a hundred or more sittings, as he committed every wrinkle, fold and blemish of her features to representation. Penny then cast the likeness in resin, painting the surface and implanting by hand every one of her hairs, eyelashes and brow hairs. As he describes it, "It's a kind of appearance that doesn't exist in lived experience. It's the kind of appearance that is the result of 400 hours of looking."

With the sculpture finished, the next step was to photograph it, making a large-scale portrait that looks very much like Ruff's portraits, except, of course, that the sitter is disturbingly inert.

There was something else odd about the Libby sculptures, and that was the artist's manipulation of space. Each of the sculptures is, in fact, severely flattened, though you don't realize it until you investigate the object from all angles. The confusion between the depth your eyes at first perceive and the shallowness they later find to be the truth is deeply shocking. Further iterations of Libby -- in photography and sculpture -- give us his muse in black-and-white, and pure white. The series culminated in an extraordinary "triple exposure" oversized portrait bust of Libby. In essence, it's a sculptural representation of a blur, an entirely optical phenomenon incarnated in material form.

The space between sculpture and photography was collapsing in the *L. Faux* series, but the more Penny thought about photography, the more he realized was still unsaid. His next series moved from the realm of the lens-based to the digital. The sculptures and photographs in the *No One -- In Particular* series were no longer sculpted from life but created from the imagination, cyborgs hatched in Penny's mind. (Like the *L. Faux* works, they too are shallow reliefs.) Next came his current series of ever more grotesque distortions of the head, rendered in three dimensions as sculpture and then photographed. This series, bearing titles like *Stretch* and *Compress*, manipulates the human features like Play-Doh. One particularly startling mega-head currently coming into being in Penny's studio stands about 2.7-metres tall.

Making extraordinary objects seems to be something that Penny has returned to without apology, armed this time with a state-of-the-art representational arsenal. In this enraptured return, he is developing work that seems to come directly out of one of our present moment's deepest traumas: our uncertainty about the things we take to be real, whether in cinema, in

photography, or on the evening news. It's territory he shares, of course, with Mueck, but also with American sculptor Charles Ray, and Italian Maurizio Cattelan. It's the territory of the uncanny, with its roots in hallucinatory distortions of medieval art, the visions of Hieronymus Bosch and El Greco, the surrealism of Man Ray, Hans Bellmer and Salvador Dali, the cubism of Picasso.

"Any shift in the representation of the body produces a deep anxiety," Penny says. "Today, the question of what is real and what is not is in such a constant state of flux. You can't look at the representation of a body without feeling its implications in your own sense of self. It relates to the very core of our being."

Evan Penny: Absolutely Unreal continues at Museum London in London, Ont., until March 14. It will then travel to the Glenbow Gallery in Calgary, the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon and the Art Gallery of Algoma in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.