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john monti: amatory bodies

by Roger Boyce

Dress Up
1997

Barnett Newman reportedly disparaged sculpture as something you bumped into when you backed up to look at painting. This Brobdingnagian dismissal is typical of the art world's valuation of visual over kinesthetic experience.

The human body -- not merely a slavish carriage for the eye -- plays a fundamental role in our sense relationship with the world. We respond physically to the weight, mass, form and tactility of sculpture; we measure ourselves against its scale, caress it, orbit around it -- responding to its gravitational pull.

John Monti's new sculpture, recently on view at Elizabeth Harris Gallery in New York, is alive with the possibility of responsive exchange. Large, Minimalist-inspired forms, with rounded edges and cushioned surfaces encased in rubber, they solicit touch. Visitors to the gallery are encouraged to walk on *Dress Up* (it's springy to the step), a site-specific tour de force that benignly dominates the main space.



Corner Bob
1997

A monumental, circular floor piece that rises in the center to form a kind of skirt around the gallery's central column, *Dress Up* provokes playful reciprocity. It's easy to imagine its heaving, rounded expanse populated by children or dancers, using its seductive curves and inclines as an arena for dynamic play.



Ruby Gel Extra Large
1997

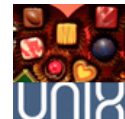
In an adjacent gallery are a number of smaller biomorphic forms, brightly hued and covered with pigmented skins. The works are imbued with an erotic charge and suggestive of amatory play. Sensual associations are further abetted by their handmade quality (pigment striations, pinholes, drips), which lends them a home-made fetishistic aura.

Angle Bob (Rose) is a pillow-sized conical nub. Hung above eye level, it strains out from the wall and seems to press at its flexible membrane of translucent rose madder. The form pushes into the shared space of the room with a pubescent tautness and appetite, suggestive of a heedless biological ambition to expand, inhabit and ultimately incorporate.



Yellow One
1997

By contrast, *Corner Bob* is an ode to satiation. The nougat-white sculpture wraps an outside corner of the room in a doughy embrace. Pendulous and of indeterminate gender, *Corner Bob* is most apparently



read as a slowly insinuating paunch.



Inside Out Mat
1997

Ruby Gel Extra Large and *Yellow One* are rounded, rectangular lozenge or chiclet shapes. Much too large to be accommodated by the human mouth, they nonetheless give rise to an irrational desire to taste. *Ruby Gel* is appetizingly red and shiny, just like an oversize Cherry cough drop. *Yellow One*, on the other hand, has the clinical opacity and medicinal yellow color of a prescription tablet, and promises pharmaceutical effects on a gigantic scale.



Yellow Bob II
1997

Among all the works in the show, *Inside Out Mat* is anomalous. Absolutely flat, measuring one-half inch high by 91 inches across, it is a circle of resilient red rubber and has the flawless look of industrial manufacture. The circle is quadrisected and its surface criss-crossed by a small, low relief diamond pattern (anti-skid?). At the center of the circle is a small, diamond shaped void. Viewers tend to circumambulate the work and then to stand at its center. While standing at the circle's axis I'm reminded that Plato described the world's axis as a diamond -- the image was one of the world turning on an axis of immutable perfection.

The human body, with all of its potential, contingency and imperfection, is at the center of John Monti's project. Every object in this exhibition is complete only when someone accepts the extended invitation to transact physically with the work in some way. John Monti makes sculpture that takes the body as its object, positing the body as sufficiently rich in possibility to place it at the very center of his dialogue.

John Monti at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, Dec. 6, 1997-Jan. 24, 1998, 529 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.

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