

SEAN HENRY – (1965 -)

In his essay written for the Osborne Samuel Gallery exhibition *Sean Henry: New Sculpture and Drawing*, Tom Flynn writes, "Sculpture is implicitly collaborative. It occupies the same volume of air that we occupy. It can trigger in the viewer a sense of having trespassed across an invisible boundary as we enter a sculpted figure's personal space, a realm that in human interactions is subject to rules governing social behavior."¹ English artist Sean Henry's sculptures invite exactly that interaction with the viewer. Realistic looking but not life-like, usually less than life-size but sometimes much larger than life, Henry's heroes are not the ones of history or myth but the everyman, the average individual into whose pensive, enigmatic presentation the viewer is drawn and at some level sees his own reflection. His figures are sculpted of clay, working from the feet up, and are finished in oil or acrylic paints, the matte finish preventing them from crossing the line of realism. Henry's love of the figure extends to drawing and painting as well, the mediums complementing each other, and he has described his sculptures as "drawing in space." His work is included in a number of private and public collections and is featured in a number of public installations as well. At present Henry has a studio on the Wilton estate near Salisbury in Wiltshire, England.

1. Tom Flynn. *Sean Henry: New Sculpture and Drawing*. London: Osborne Samuel, 2008.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT – SEAN HENRY

"In figurative sculpture the narrative is always there whether you like it or not, so people will read things into the figures...Any figure I make will have things that mean the most to me but aren't necessarily immediately obvious to anybody else. There will be my own private motivation for making them. How the work fits together is integral to how it is perceived at that time. I don't think I can control it completely, but I want to be aware of it...I quite like the idea of hinting at a narrative but not giving it away completely."¹

1. "Sean Henry in Conversation with Tom Flynn." Quoted in Sean Henry Artist Biography on Osborne Samuel Gallery web site: <http://www.osbornesamuel.com/pages/biography/27018.html>

RESUME – SEAN HENRY

1965	Born, England
1987	B.A., Ceramics, Bristol Art School, Bristol, England
1987	Gane Charitable Trust Travel Scholarship to U.S.A.
1988, 1989	British Craft Council Grant
1998	The Villiers David Foundation Prize
Present	Studio Artist, London

BIOGRAPHY – SEAN HENRY

English native Sean Henry received his art education at Bristol Art School in Bristol, England, earning his B.A. degree in 1987. Unlike the more conservative faculty of the department, Henry was influenced by the Funk Art movement in the US and artists such as Robert Arneson and Jack Earl. His thesis topic underscored his interest in the new direction of ceramic art: “This is Not a Teapot: a Need for Self-Expression.” During a stay in the United States between 1989 and 1991 he was able to meet and to work with some of these same artists, specifically in Ohio and California.

Henry was drawn to work in sculpture after a visit to Italy at the age of 18, and was especially drawn by the sculptures of the Italian Renaissance. His figures are constructed from the feet up, made first of clay and fired or cast in bronze. The figures are hollow but thick, and wooden supports aid the growing figure. But while the construction has echoes of historic Italian sculpture, the subjects are very different. Sean Henry’s heroes are not figures of history or legend but the everyday people of modern times, often the working class of London. As such they reflect the contradictions and ambiguities of the average person, his ambitions, concerns, strengths, and fears. Many are modeled from specific individuals, but in the creation they lose their specific identity and represent a more generalized individual. His people do not express emotion; they do not laugh, cry, or frown, leaving the viewer to write his own narrative. Occasionally there are hints - an item of clothing, a symbol or an object – but in general, they remain elusive, their stories a mystery. The role of clothing also plays a subtle part in Henry’s figures, the clothing everyday wear but also a uniform, of a sort, that ties in with a particular identity.

Scale is significant in the sculptures, both the individual ones and the ones in groupings. Many are not quite life-size because, Henry states, life-size figures can be threatening: “It’s just a totally instinctive thing that human beings have, I think – a slight repulsion towards their exact replicas and certainly by reducing the scale of the sculpture you get much more empathy for the objects.”¹ However, he continues, “But life-size is a broad-brush term because people come in many sizes. I work from my own scale and on the almost life-size figures I’m scaling it up.”² And indeed sometimes the scale becomes very large indeed, such as the larger-than-life *Catafalque*. Henry also makes use of scale to indicate relationships between figures in groupings or, in the case of multiple images of the same individual, to suggest the figure growing smaller or larger over time whether physically or psychologically.

Henry’s figures are polychrome, painted with oil paints or acrylics, a tradition also seen in art over the centuries. Commenting on why he does not leave his figures with the patinated finish Henry states: “...the traditional brown is just a repulsive, repellent kind of shininess which doesn’t invite you into the humanity of the person.”³ His surface finishes are generally matte, the painting detailed but stopping short of life-like. “There’s a generality to my figures, although...they seem very alive to me. They seem to be doing enough,” he said. “At the end of the day it’s an object. There’s a point in sculpting when you start to lose that sense of weight and gravity if you put buttons on or start sculpting shoelaces. At some point you just have to stop and there’s enough.”⁴

Although Henry’s enigmatic figures give few hints of their stories, there are some general themes which encompass them. Their contemplative or pensive presentations focus the emphasis not on the outer realistic appearance but on the inner humanity shared by all, the “everyman.” The figures are caught in a moment in time, completely absorbed in their own

thoughts. In the catalog accompanying the exhibition *Sean Henry: a Pilgrimage*, Ann Elliott states: "...it is concept and humanity that holds centre stage in this work, articulated with precision and mastery over materials. In this regard, Sean Henry follows the path taken by Henry Moore, Elisabeth Frink, John Davies and Antony Gormley, all of whom have confronted humanity face on."⁵ It is this engagement that Henry seeks with his work, that the viewer be drawn into the figure's space and form a connection. "I like sculpture to be ambiguous..." he has said. "So in my own work I hope that there's a degree of openness...openness for people to interpret and to see themselves in it, I suppose."⁶ This aspect of connection is magnified for the public works because not only will many people engage with the piece during the course of a day, the piece itself is also affected by its site, the weather, change of seasons – and each change in the environment of the piece also changes the perception or meaning for the viewer.

In addition to his sculptural work, Henry continues to explore his love of drawing and painting. In 2008 an exhibition of his works in both mediums, *Sean Henry: New Sculpture and Drawing*, was shown at the Osborne Samuel Gallery in London. He does not make drawings of his sculptural works before construction although he does usually make maquettes. However, he sees drawing and sculpture as being intertwined: "Sculpting is drawing, in a way. The way that I work is really drawing in space."⁷

Henry presently works in a studio on the Wilton estate near Salisbury in Wiltshire. It is a very fitting location as Wilton House, the ancestral seat of the Earls of Pembroke, is noted for its sculpture collection. His work is widely exhibited and has been honored with two British Craft Council Grants and most recently the Villiers David Foundation Prize. His work is included in the collections of the University of Virginia Art Museum; the Frisia Museum, Spanbroekerweg, Holland; the Cass Sculpture Foundation, Goodwood, Sussex, UK; Holland Park, Kensington, London, UK; in addition to other public and private collections.

1. "Sean Henry in Conversation with Tom Flynn." Quoted in Osborne Samuel web site: <http://www.osbornesamuel.com/pages/biography/27018.html>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Sean Henry. *Sean Henry: A Pilgrimage*. London: Davies & Tooth at Air Gallery, 1999.
6. "Sean Henry in Conversation with Tom Flynn." op. cit.
7. Ibid.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY – SEAN HENRY

Books and Catalogs

Cooper, Emmanuel. *10,000 Years of Pottery*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

CorpoRealities: Contemporary Figurative Painting. Winter Park, FL: Rollins College, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, 2002.

Dempsey, Amy. *Destination Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2006.

Elliot, Ann, and Norbert Lynton. *Bronze: Contemporary British Sculpture-Holland Park*. London: The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries and Arts Service, 2000.

Flynn, Michael. *Ceramic Figures*. Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Flynn, Tom. *Sean Henry*. London: Scala Publishers, 2008.

Henry, Sean. *Sean Henry: Here and Now*. London: Berkeley Square Gallery, 2004.

_____. *Sean Henry: A Pilgrimage*. London: Davies & Tooth at Air Gallery, 1999.

_____. *Sean Henry: Sculpture and Drawings*. London: Berkeley Square Gallery, 2001

Henry, Sean and Tom Flynn. *Sean Henry: You're Not the Same*. New York: Forum Gallery, 2006.

_____. *Sean Henry: New Sculpture and Drawings*. London: Osborne Samuel Gallery, 2008.

Montcrieff, Elspeth. *Éigse Carlow Visual Art Catalogue 2005*. Carlow, Ireland: Éigse Carlow Arts Festival, 2005.

Segal, Richard D. and Monica M. Segal. *Contemporary Realism: The Seavest Collection*. Portland, OR: Collectors Press, 2007.

Periodicals

Adams, Alexander. "Solitary Figures in a Landscape." *Art Newspaper* 17 (September 2008): 43.

Brown, Neal. "The Great Outdoors." *Art Review (London, England)* 53 (June 2002): 46-53.

Cooper, Emmanuel. "Sean Henry: Up Against It." *Crafts (London, England)* no. 149 (November/December 1997): 58-59.

Frank, Peter. "Sean Henry: Forum." *ARTnews* 101 no. 8 (September 2002): 157.

Frost, Abigail. "Inner Visions: Ceramics by Sean Henry and George Walker." *Arts Review (London, England)* 40 (September 23 1988): 659.

Harrod, Tanya. "A Form of Funk." *Crafts (London, England)* no. 94 (September/October 1988): 48-51.

Moncrieff, Elspeth. "Moore's Madonna and Pissarro's Paints." *Art Newspaper* 10 no. 95 (September 1999): 70.

Tipton, Gemma. "Stepping off the Plinth." *Irish Arts Review (Dublin, Ireland)* 22 no 1 (Spring 2005): 80-83.

GALLERY REPRESENTATION – SEAN HENRY

Osborne Samuel LLP, 23a Bruton Street, Mayfair, London, W1J 6QG, England

Galerie Von Braunbehrens, Ainmillerstrasse 2, D-80801, Munchen, Germany

Forum Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue at 57th Street, New York, NY 10151

Forum Gallery, 8069 Beverley Blvd., Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, CA 90048

Kunsthandel Frans Jacobs, Veembroederhof 119, 1019 HD Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Galerie Andersson Sandstrom, Aktrisgr. 34, 90364 Umea, Sweden

WEB SITES – SEAN HENRY

<http://www.seanhenry.com>

Web site of Sean Henry

http://www.forumgallery.com/current_off1.php?id=78

Sean Henry: Sculptures & Drawings

http://www.forumgallery.com/current_off1.php?id=161

Sean Henry: You're Not the Same

<http://www.vimeo.com/4059371>

Video of Sean Henry – Catafalque (Lying Man)

<http://canarywharf.yourwebserver.co.uk/Lifestyle/events/visual/foyer.htm>

Foyer Exhibition – Sean Henry

<http://www.artnet.com/artist/145857/sean-henry.html>

Biography and photos – Sean Henry

<http://www.natsoulas.com/html/artists/seanHenry/seanHenry.html>

Sean Henry at John Natsoulas Center for the Arts

<http://www.osbornesamuel.com/pages/biography/27018.html>

Biography/resume of Sean Henry on Osborne Samuel Gallery site

April 2009