

Michael Minelli: Both/And
–Megan Hoetger

A pair of men's briefs that fit on a pinky finger; that quintessential comedic prop, the banana peel; a little bust of the cartoon character Olive Oyl mounted on a spindly wire; the still-shocking hooded figures from the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal; a miniature car battery rigged for electrocutions; the small frame of eleven year old Kim Phuc burned by napalm; naked devil men; a minute vignette of two men in a life raft; a mini Michael Jackson striking his well-known moonwalk pose.

This is only a sampling of the subjects that Los Angeles-based artist Michael Minelli has included in his most recent body of work, *Souvenirs* (2011). All miniaturized and able to fit in the palm of your hand, these objects are hand-modelled from a colorful array of Sculpey brand polymer clay and evoke a range of emotional responses. From the serious to the comical, the sacred to the profane—what do Minelli's objects even mean? Are they ironic or genuine? Funny or tragic? Pathetic or profound? The answer lies, perhaps, not in trying to determine the status of Minelli's objects as either/or, ironic/genuine, funny/tragic or pathetic/profound, but instead, in the open-ended possibilities of both/and.

Devoted to a practice of making objects, Minelli orients his work conceptually around the logic of the selected material, such as its physical properties or scale. It is through this exploration of materiality that he opens up an investigation into the possibilities of and for communication. The materials, thus, play a key role in unpacking the both/and relation embedded in the intimately scaled figures of the *Souvenirs* series.

As in his 2004 series *cannibals & christians*, in which he used the format of bust portraiture to evocatively describe "types" of people in contemporary society, Minelli employs Sculpey clay, a low-budget, oven-baked material reminiscent of childhood arts and crafts, as well as beloved clay-animation figures such as Gumby and Pokey. The material associations are whimsical ones, and yet much of the culled imagery in *Souvenirs* (and in the previous series) is disruptive because of the topical political references (torture and war) indiscriminately mixed with banal cultural sources (the banana peel and Olive Oyl). Moreover, their miniature size alludes to the scale of 18th and 19th century folk figurines, which were famously described as the "rearguard" by Clement Greenberg in his essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."¹

Minelli's objects are not created as kitsch though. Lacking the sentimentality embedded in that popular middle-class aesthetic, the objects in the *Souvenirs* series derive from the excessive array of media imagery and information that circulates at dizzying speeds in today's culture and through the contemporary psyche. By employing a "low" material like Sculpey in a small, un-heroic scale, is Minelli suggesting that such media-derived imagery is kitsch for the information age? Or that the saccharin attitude traditionally coded as kitsch is perhaps more complex than we understand it to be? Again, in attempting to pin down meaning in Minelli's objects in terms of an either/or relation, we arrive at the perplexing position of both/and.

The slippage between traditional contexts and present-day re-contextualizations, at the level of both material and form, is analyzed at length in Martha Buskirk's *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (2003). In her examination, Buskirk describes two sets of choices facing the contemporary artist: first, selecting the material, and, second, navigating the conventions associated with that medium. These two choices, she continues, may fail to coincide as artistic production moves increasingly away from a medium specificity in the Greenbergian sense to a contextual engagement of medium as one element among many in the production of meaning.²

In other words, as these sets of decisions become more explicit and intentional the site of meaning production becomes dislodged from its conventional locations.

Buskirk's words resonate in Minelli's body of work, which through his material choices consciously references public and private space, play and work, low and high culture. In playing these traditionally understood opposites against each other in this both/and relation, Minelli deflates sculpture's still-expected sense of monumentality. Instead, the tiny objects of *Souvenirs* perform this monumentality through a weightiness of a different, more symbolic sort, proposing that through the small we may get at the large. In the unassuming space of Minelli's miniature figures, there lies the potential for an experience of both illogical humor (the tiny underwear) and intense empathy (Kim Phuc), which can co-exist in a continuum. Thus, although miniaturized, many of these representations carry a psychological and intellectual gravity, referencing events, scandals, and iconic figures with which we are still culturally and ethically grappling—from the Vietnam War to Abu Ghraib and the King of Pop.

In a conversation in his studio last September, Minelli explained that each material offers a proposition, demanding or suggesting a certain use.³ What he looks for in materials is the resistance that their physical qualities offer and, in many cases, the counter-intuitive associations that they may evoke. Minelli's approach orders the logic of several series. For example, in *not by everybody* (2006), the artist crafted twelve small porcelain composite figurines engaged in familiar scenes of both leisure activities and moralizing tales from history. Working against the now-common production model of outsourced fabrication, Minelli cast the figurines on his own, contending with the extreme laboriousness and volatility of the material, which lead to numerous but interestingly charged imperfections.

Minelli used a similar tactic in his installation, *I Know Where You L* (2009), which included objects constructed of rolled paper, ranging from microphone stands to partially obscured text signs reminiscent of activist posters. In that work, it was the inability of the fragile paper materials to hold a sturdy, sculptural form that attracted the artist. The installation transformed the gallery space into something like a disengaged recording studio—*cum*—activist tent. There, Minelli introduced ideas about hindered communication directly in the representation of the mic stand, a ubiquitous signifier of speech and debate in our media culture, missing its microphone.²

In the *Souvenirs* series, what has engaged Minelli is the immediacy offered by the Sculpey clay, its ability to be molded with only a few squeezes of the thumb and forefinger, and its resistance to conventional notions of the monumental. The small pieces require anywhere from just a few minutes to a day to construct. This quickness of making aligns his sculptural process with that of drawing. If we understand the latter to function as a problem-solving space within artistic practice, then these objects operate for Minelli like sketches, wherein he can quickly work through visual imagery that resonates at certain moments, both private and public.⁴

The confrontations and conflicts within Minelli's choice of material metaphorically extends outward for the artist, representing the conditions within social space. In a culture whose contours and subjects are defined by information exchange including a continuous flow of visual imagery from the media, attempts to resist the dominant discourse and communicate alternative attitudes are easily lost. One can think here of the many voices simultaneously struggling to be heard on various virtual platforms, from YouTube and Flickr, to Facebook and Twitter. On all of these sites, as the artist suggested in conversation, it is the desire to speak and be "seen and heard," rather than the specifics of what is being said that becomes most important.

What drives Minelli's inquiries in the *Souvenirs* series is this collective desire to be paid attention to in the face of an overwhelming media landscape—despite the speakers' lack of anything particularly significant to say. How and where can we have meaningful, politicized exchange today? Asking questions such as this, the artist uses his form of "drawing," the modelling of small figures and objects, as both a deeply personal and publicly engaged problem-solving tactic and course of intellectual work.

Asserting a both/and logic at multiple levels, Minelli's objects represent, perhaps more than any one single image, the inability to fix meaning. If one extrapolates further to the artist's metaphorical social proposition, they also signify the lack of possibilities for substantial exchange in contemporary social space, recalling the well-known phrase from the movie *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), "What we have here is a failure to communicate." The artist's body of work shares with that classic film an exploration of social alienation and the fleeting spaces or isolated instances that the individual can inhabit to counter dominant systems of power.

The poetics of Minelli's resistance appear to us as a quiet reminder of our collective situation at a turbulent time in the United States, when the limits of resistance and politicized exchange are being tested by thousands of citizens in the Occupy Together movement. What began with Occupy Wall Street quickly spread to numerous cities across the country and revealed the many, long-running cracks in the foundation of the American Dream. The questions Minelli raises are perhaps questions we should all be considering as we look toward the future. Where can both our sense of activism and our insatiable desire to be "seen and heard" go once the protests, as public interventions, come to an end?

1 Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 539-549.

2 Martha Buskirk, "Medium and Materiality" in *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 107-158.

3 This idea as well as all other references to the artist's process are drawn from a conversation with the artist, which took place at his studio on September 19, 2011.

4 The disconnect between the props around communication and the actuality of exchange is also present in Minelli's *Black Boxes* (2011), another recent body of work, which was recently on view at WPA, a gallery space run by an artists' collective in Los Angeles of which Minelli is a member.

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