



Michael Creger,
*House of
Chained
Angel*

The Hardest Medium

Karin Clarke Gallery brings stone sculptures into relief

Ancient Greece made statues and temples out of it. The mysterious moai heads-and-torsos on Easter Island were worshipped for it. Michelangelo, perhaps, mastered it. And now eleven Oregon stone sculpture artists present the very best of their recent work in an exhibit entitled "Stone: Recent Sculpture from the Oldest Material," up at the Karin Clarke Gallery through May 31. Curated by UO art professor Tom Urban, the show is a spectacular nod to the past and a sly wink at the present, showcasing the best of the region's contemporary stone carvings.

David P. Miller, *On Many A Day*



But there is hardly anything new about the medium. Stone has been an artist's blank slate since the dawn of civilization. Discovered in Austria, the *Woman of Willendorf*, carved of limestone about 24,000 years ago, depicts a rotund, fertile female with augmented breasts and belly (a precursor to the ubiquitous sexualized female figures in art and culture through the 2000s). Human likenesses have been the carved-stone mainstay for some time, but it is perhaps due to the resurgence of neo-modern theories of art ("The *thing*, not the image, is what's important!") that sculpture artists have turned inward, projecting their own thought patterns (literally) into their hunk of marble, limestone or alabaster.

Take David P. Miller's *On Many A Day*, for example. He turns a huge alabaster monolith into the neurological equivalent of Rodin's *The Thinker* simply by methodically chiseling, scraping, sanding and polishing the rock into a tense, slightly slouching brain on a pedestal. It's perhaps the most visually overwhelming

piece in the show, and it should be: The mind in motion is a force to be felt, and Miller pulls it off beautifully.

UO art professor emeritus Laura Alpert contributes *The Meadow*, a wavy, layered trapezoidal piece on Coloradan Yule marble. Focusing on the qualities of the Yule (noted for its consistency and lack of gray streaking), Alpert sanded the stone down to a thin transparency, allowing natural light to shimmer through in key areas. The effect is haunting.

Similarly, M.J. Anderson, who quarries his marble from Carrara, Italy (the same area Michelangelo quarried for his masterpieces), lets the abstract-expressionist texture and color variations in his selected stone speak for itself, polishing his *Sextant for Clouds* into a two-faced pyramid. Like a prehistoric crystal ball, Anderson's piece forecasts foul weather.

But the bragging rights for the most-jaw-droppingly-enchanted piece go to Michael Creger for his *House of Chained Angel*. A sensuous, fleshy piece of pink marble hangs from a welded-steel cage by a chain, like a trophy fish (or, in this case, a wild salmon carcass) in a meat locker. The feminine pink meat-like stone contrasted with the rusted, masculine steel leads to too many fruitful conclusions to list here, but let me just say that, like a snuff film or horror show, I could not bring my eyes away from it, as much as I tried. Subtlety, here, speaks volumes.

And, as is usually the case, the weaker pieces in the show suffer from letting subtleties fly out the door. Stuart Jacobson's *Nurture* has a large granite cupola sheltering a small ball of diorite, but the message is too overt (a Madonna and Child for the amateur geologist). Marie Sivak constructs a delicious display of stone artifacts but lets verbiage ruin the dream; the letters L-I-E-S in the stone spoon is a dead giveaway and a minor distraction at that.

Two paintings also hang, unremarkably, with the show. Ignore them for the exquisite three-dimensional works in stone, more and more a rarity in today's world of instant gratification.

Karin Clarke Gallery is open 10 am to 5:30 pm Tuesday through Saturday. A reception for the artists is set for 2 pm Saturday.

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