

Art Review: Beauty in Decadence - Sculpture by Ronald Gonzalez

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by Esperanza Leon

“Soul Searching”— Sculpture by Ronald Gonzalez

Lear Gallery, Sag Harbor, NY

The recently opened Lear Gallery is an unexpected find. Situated behind Romany Kramoris in an alley next to the American Hotel, the tiny building was spruced up by gallery owner Jake Lear, who also planted the charming enclosed garden, a delightful spot for enjoying summer openings.

The transition from the quaint outdoor space to the current exhibition of sculpture by Ronald Gonzalez is equally unexpected. Peering into this no more than 200-square-foot space, a visitor encounters a row of rather ominous subjects lining each of the three walls: 46 two-foot figures composed of steel rods and myriad found objects, darkened and encrusted with paint, wax, and soot.



"Souls" by Ronald Gonzalez. Manipulated found objects, carbon, paint, wax, and wire over welded steel, 24 x 4 1/2 inches approximately.

This is not the Binghamton, NY native's first show on the East End. In 1989 and 1990, Gonzalez was included in two group exhibitions at the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art, and in 1994 he presented a solo show, "Ascending and Falling," in the gallery at Southampton College.

Gonzalez has an impressive exhibition history for an artist somewhat secluded in northern New York State. Evidently he has plugged away at his *oeuvre*, in addition to teaching sculpture at the State University of New York (his alma mater), and has drawn attention over the 30-plus years of his career for his consistent and compelling output of sculptures and installations that, according to the available biography, embody themes of death and loss.

First impressions being what they are, I was immediately struck by the number of seemingly gruesome figures lined up like a firing squad (or its targets), spot-lighted against the gallery's white walls. Following intellectual and aesthetic curiosity to enter and explore this intimate space crammed full of these creatures brings its rewards, not all grim, but perhaps not pleasurable in a conventional way.

Military, science fiction, and art historical associations arise immediately. *Specter* elicits images of World War I, especially as portrayed by Otto Dix or George Grosz. Futuristic/apocalyptic fantasy film

and television, from “Alien” to “Men in Black,” “The Twilight Zone” and “Edward Scissorhands” can be tied to works like *Bellows* and *Black Hook*. The thin, elongated quality of the work recalls Alberto Giacometti. A local, less broadly known parallel is Stephen Soreff, who composes similarly unsettling works with found objects.



“Black Hook” by Ronald Gonzalez.
Manipulated found objects, carbon, paint, wax,
and wire over welded steel, 24 x 4 1/2 inches
approximately.

Gonzalez mines his surroundings for foraged, used, and worn objects. He uses the term “mind objects” to refer to this refuse from all eras repurposed to evoke heads and torsos that stand erect, if with apparent fragility, upon a spindly steel rod armature forming legs and arms. A baseball glove, ballet slipper, bellows, shoes, audio speaker, golf club heads, keys, and belts are among the materials used in these figures whose titles often straightforwardly indicate the primary compositional element. Sometimes the names are also poetic or ironic. Tying, wrapping, entwining, and swathing in many instances enhance the jarring quality of the figures.

I wonder what additional effect might be produced if each structure were free of a base and smooth plinth, essential to maintaining uprightiness, but detracting from the literally and figuratively

precarious, corroded nature of each figure. Notably, many of the photos in catalogues and publicity material, including on the artist's website, focus on the figures from the torso up, and as such they are even more arresting.



"Portrait" by Ronald Gonzalez. Manipulated found objects, carbon, paint, wax, and wire over welded steel, 24 x 4 1/2 inches approximately.

The detracting experience of the bases is punctuated by the decision to exhibit such a large number of pieces (originally intended as 60) in this small gallery space. It is a conscious one by Gonzalez, however, and seems somewhat justified. Ever since his show at Southampton College, he has opted always to utilize installations in order to accentuate community rather than emphasize the individuality of each figure. Suffering and death, while experienced alone and distinctly by every individual, have historically provided moments for people to come together and form part of a whole.

Just as Tim Burton provides quirky humor in dark, gruesome films, Ronald Gonzalez offers up some comic relief amid the pathos, as in *Vertebrae*. As well, while Burton's characters might become beautiful in the eyes of fellow characters and the viewing public, Gonzalez's eroded, bound, and blackened accumulations -*Portrait* for instance—similarly evoke a sympathetic eye that appreciates

the Sublime in their being and, ultimately, the beauty of their decadence.

In a society where vampires, aliens, and other macabre characters apparently reign over the imaginations of many, it seems surprising that these works do not find a broader audience. Perhaps it is because they have infinitely more sentimental relevance. More than anything else, that may be what makes them “scary.”

BASIC FACTS: “Ronald Gonzalez” remains on view through July 14, 2013. Lear Gallery is located in the alley behind 41 Main Street, Sag Harbor, NY 11963. www.leargallery.com

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