

Interview with Dennis Potami
January 2002

Dennis Potami, an artist, was in residence at Sculpture Space during November and December, 2001. During this time, he developed a new work based on the *Laocoon and His Sons*, a classical Roman sculpture dating from the first century, B.C.

Potami currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He received his MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and his BFA from Maryland Institute, College of Art. His work has been shown at The Bronx River Art Center, Spaces Gallery in Cleveland, and at Bowling Green State University. The piece he worked on at Sculpture Space will be in the exhibition Postmodern Classical: Transforming Tradition at City College of New York in the Olympic Tower lobby where Parthenon casts from CCNY collection are on long term loan.

In your work, you have explored the transformation of an object through materials, which play a referential and metaphorical role. Could you talk about the importance materials take in your work?

Materials play a changing role in my work; a metaphoric role, a narrative role, or simply a functional role. When the material is playing a metaphorical role, it is most successful if the material can multiply or tie together the references in the piece.

For example, in "Boxing Matrix" (1995), the pinned raw hide boxing gloves reference the hide of a body, an empty shell, an exoskeleton, a beetle collection, molting, and transformation. Besides the history of an animal, raw hide has been used in many applications such as lamp shades, parchment, and drums. These references begin to extend narratives about boxing and the boxer. No materials are neutral but some are more neutral than others. If it's not playing a central role in the idea of the piece, it is important that it does not distract from the idea.

Your recent work has focused on the body, and the materials seem more neutral, such as smooth, white plaster. In "BodyCam" (2000), the form of the body is translated into an action: breathing. In this piece, a cast of the body hangs from a drive shaft that runs through its chest, from outstretched left arm to the opposite shoulder. As the figure rotates, a series of cam followers read the cross-section of the arm, which are then translated into a pattern for the rhythms of a breathing machine, which occupies the same space.

True, there is a focus on the body but that focus is also a diversion from the body. The sculpture has a built-in, self-examining mechanism--so the sculptural object is monitoring a cross-section of the sculptural body. It is made out of a very hard and strong type of plaster that can appear "stone like" but it retains a slightly unfinished, cast quality that I prefer to the historical authority associated with stone. Plaster certainly stretches deep into the canon of art history but, it was a second class material to stone.

Because the figure is mechanized, it compromises the authority of the viewers' Gaze. The viewer can not just sit and stare; instead, the body is seen as what it is, what it is doing and how it works. I'm more interested in the physiology of the body than the image of it.

There is a performative aspect to your work. In "Layers of Resistance" and "BodyCam", the pieces performed through mechanical motion. In the piece you worked on at Sculpture Space, you are more directly the performer--you cast your body in pieces to re-create the Laocoon, and later you will photograph yourself performing the sculpture, dressed wearing cast hair pieces and fig leaves based on the original sculpture. You are, in a sense performing history--then and now. Can you describe how you arrived at this? How does the temporal and spatial interact?

The thought was to cast myself into history and then take myself back out. In the photograph, I want to balance the image between staging the event of the sculpture, a staged sculpture, and the live version of the sculpture. The photo will suggest a reality that the sculpture may have come from. As a real human character, I can walk out of the photo, rather than be broken off in time. So it's a play on time in the history of art. I like to think about time as a material.

The sculpture Laocoon is fairly loaded, historically and culturally. Also, the fragmentary structure of your piece is reminiscent of remains of sculpture which are displayed in museums. Is it intimidating or difficult to be referring so directly to Art History?

My project is intentionally engaged in the history of the Laocoon Group which has gone through a long history of interpretation and reinterpretation. It narrates a Greek myth: Laocoon was a priest of Apollo at Troy who warned the Trojans against the Trojan Horse. As punishment, he and his two sons were killed by serpents sent by the gods. The sculpture is widely accepted to have been sculpted by three Rhodian sculptors, and was written about by Pliny as the great work of art of it's time. More recently, the sculpture has been called the pathos formula for pain by Nigel Spivey in "Enduring Creation: Art, Pain and Fortitude," in which he writes the whole notion of pain ascribed to the piece has changed through time.

It seems more deconstructed than fractured. By taking the figure out of the sculpture, the context changes. Although the human figures are absent, the snakes have become anthropomorphized in composition. So you see the figures in their absence through the shape of the snakes. Without the figures, there is also a relationship built between the two snakes. These two muscular lines drawn in space begin a battle or dance with each other.

So I think it sets up a series of questions. How did the form come to be? Is the body out of pain? Are the snakes in pain? How does it affect the mythology? Are the snakes metaphorically engaged in a larger mythical struggle?

Describe how you survive as an artist: What do you do? What has helped you? What has influenced you?

Whenever I'm not working on a project I reconsider what to do to survive; when I am Making, I don't think about it. Prioritizing "Making" is the most important part. Residencies help.

It's hard to say what influences me now. I consume so many different things. But there is a real lag time between what interests me to read or learn and what goes into a new idea. A year ago I was reading about string theory and now I think the rubber junctions between the snakes and figures are an illustration of string theory.