

BODIES OF WORK

Outside at the deCordova, sculptor Tory Fair explores the human form

By Cate McQuaid
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LINCOLN — As we trudge through our workdays, it's easy to forget what astounding instruments of perception, imagination, and expression our bodies are. Figurative sculptors such as Kiki Smith and Antony Gormley use the human form as a metaphor, the better to plumb the body's pitfalls and its possibilities. In a show at the deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Boston artist Tory Fair references both.

Fair's "Testing a World View (Again)" is part of the museum's "PLATFORM" series, for which artists are invited to create site-specific work. Fair has set up shop on a small outdoor terrace threaded with Boston ivy just outside the top of the deCordova's dramatic stairway. Gormley's "Reflection II" greets visitors at the museum's entrance, near the bottom of the staircase: Two iron casts of the sculptor's body stand facing each other through a glass wall. At first, it's easy to think one is merely the other's reflection, but they also play with ideas of inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

Gormley's focus has always been the body as a fleshly sheath for consciousness and identity, and how that sheath interacts with its environment. His "Testing a World View" (1993) features five iron casts of Gormley's form, each with the hips hinged at a perfect right angle between torso and legs. These he arrays

ART REVIEW

PLATFORM 7:

Tory Fair, Testing a World View (Again)
At: deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, 51 Sandy Pond Road, Lincoln, through April 29, 2012. 781-259-8355, www.decordova.org

around a gallery: One has its back braced against the ceiling; another stands with its torso jutting from the wall. The different postures suggest different attitudes toward the world, but the forms are also as rigidly architectural as they are figurative.

Out on the deCordova's terrace, Fair quotes Gormley directly. She has cast her own body, in pretty pink resin powdered with aluminum leaf, in a similar perpendicular posture. One forms a V on the ground. Another perches on the terrace wall. A third projects out from the museum beneath an archway where an entry was once bricked in, legs flush against the wall. The last lolls on the grass just below the terrace, legs propped up.

Their legs cross, ladylike, at the ankle. Their shoulders are rounded — they're not as stiff as Gormley's men — and they appear contemplative. Rainwater has collected in the lap of the V-shaped figure, and visitors have placed pebbles there.

Initially, it appears that the Gormley

echo gives Fair the opportunity to play directly against the older British artist. What metaphors does the female form carry that the male does not? This is material Smith is famous for: reclaiming the form of a woman's body from centuries of male artists who portrayed it as an object of desire. In the 1990s, she conveyed in her work a woman's experience from the inside, and the bodily fluids that go along with that.

Fair had a show at LaMontagne Gallery last year in which her cast figures engaged with the architecture. They stuck their heads through walls and peered down into the floor. One ducked, one crouched, another lay on her belly, and the results were charming — they came across as shy, yet Fair also set the perimeters of the gallery as the proverbial box that her sculptures were thinking their way out of. Those intersections of sculpture and wall were surrounded with cast flowers.

Here is where this artist delightfully veers into her own territory, and the work deepens beyond the derivative. Fair has scattered her figures with cast daisies, mostly around their heads. The blooms are visionary. They represent ideas and imagination flowering out from individuals, with the potential to break down walls or build bridges. Amid the creeping ivy on the deCordova's terrace, the link between personal imagination and the natural world is palpable.

Gormley's outdoor works pit man against nature. Smith, for her part, claims the natural world as feminine. Fair doesn't see the opposition. By positioning her sculptures in a liminal area between the built environment and nature, framed by trees and sitting on the lawn, she artfully weaves architecture and the natural world into a whole, generated by the spark of creation denoted by her flowers.

I found myself thinking back to 19th-century photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. When she wasn't photographing the celebrities of the day, such as Tennyson and Darwin, Cameron would shoot young women adorned with flowers, like wood nymphs. Fair's women are more dynamic than Cameron's, but her works are transported by a similar hopeful romanticism.

Fair was in a group show in 2009, "And the fair Moon rejoices: contemporary visionaries in the wake of Blake," at the Mills Gallery at the Boston Center for the Arts. There, flowers surrounded Fair's women as they drove, or slept — the imagination stirring during mundane chores, and even unconsciousness. Fair is a champion of William Blake's view of the power of the imagination to ignite reality. Her sculptures on the deCordova's terrace are both metaphors and manifestations of that.

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PHOTOS BY TONY LUONG

Figures in Tory Fair's "Testing a World View (Again)" installation at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum.

