

# 'Model Behavior' sculpture, photography at Deborah Colton Gallery

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For fear of not "getting it" and feeling dumb, we non-artsy types approach postmodern sculpture reluctantly. Besides causing visual and psychic discomfort, confounding forms and gross materials can be intellectually intimidating. That said, such art when talented, is time worthy. Engage it earnestly, better put by his nibs Schjeldahl (New Yorker), "pay open-hearted attention," and there are treasures to be discovered.

This is most true with art that addresses our mortal predicament in which death rules. Weirdness granted, a sculpture shaped like genitalia, intestines

or plumbing pipe and crowned with a foot, better probes existential concerns than a traditionally carved dolorosa Madonna with Child. The non-traditional piece, along with humor, packs affinities and contradictions.

So don't be afraid to view Michael Rees' art at the Deborah Colton Gallery in the exhibition "Michael Rees: Model Behavior" through Nov. 7. Sculptural works are accompanied by a photographic series capturing a 1990s performance in which Rees clamped objects to his body. No need to worry though, his performance lacks the nudity and elimination references of friend Matthew Barney and teacher Vito Acconci. Cumulatively the works in "Model Be-

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havior" reflect on bodies, consciousness and death.

The art is precisely like Barney's in its emphasis on transformation and evolution of form. Rees perceives his oeuvre as a mutating creativity in which one work incubates the next. Each sculpture exhibited has a source in past performance, photography or 3-D digital modeling. A plucky example is the bronze "Foot and Blob," an ankle high monster foot topped

with a bulbous testicle-like form. That foot is a sculptural reincarnation of Big Foot costume props worn by Rees in a 2007 performance piece "Live Life."

"Live Life" included a narrating Greek chorus, a cornball but penetrating symbol of life's transience.

Rees assesses his art's fracturing generative quality as energy metaphysically transfigured by action, at the expense of conceptualization. This interpretation

accords with the semi-mystical constructs of Joseph Beuys, with whom Rees studied in Europe. Beuys, who extended sculpture to shamanistic performance and materials such as animal fat and the invisible, theorized creativity, indeed consciousness, as action oriented.

The Menil's magnificent 2004 Beuys exhibition helped us to understand the action theory: meaning stems from action and experience, and art can be a conjuring tool to dissect death. "There's no way not to engage death," Rees said at the gallery.

But don't expect goon-like death-haunted content. Rees' work is fun, like early Surrealism, with the pungency of old-timey post-minimalism, that of Bruce Nauman and Eva Hesse.

It also seems affiliated with Vendantic philosophy. According to Hindu scripture, transcendental understanding cannot be ascertained by imperfect speculation and contemplation. Enlightenment comes only through action. Being and consciousness are the essence of reality. In the way Shiva's cosmic dance patterns cycles of death and renewal, Rees' erotically charged mutations signal incomparable search.

Make sure to see Jason Villegas's garment sculptures at Contemporary Arts Museum, goofy objects mocking designer label luxury goods. Villegas was a student of Rees.

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