

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

A Sculptor Cuts an Uncanny Figure

By John Yau | June 9, 2018

Everything in the work of sculptor Sarah Peters is an act of reimagining and melding together disparate sources into something that becomes curiously and curiously.



Installation view, *Sarah Peters: Figureheads* at Van Doren Waxter, New York (all images courtesy of the Artist and Van Doren Waxter)

There is something uncanny about Sarah Peters's brass-colored bronze busts of men, their hollow sockets and exquisitely coiffed hair and beards. Compressing a wide range of inspirations — from Assyrian busts to Constantin Brancusi's idealized heads to life-sized sex dolls to sci-fi humanoid countenances — Peters's otherworldly stylizations pull her work into unsettling places, where many different and even conflicting associations are stirred up. The disquieting oddness of her heads held my attention as I circled around them, recognizing their chilly, opaque presence, at the exhibition, *Sarah Peters: Figureheads* at Van Doren Waxter.

Along with the six large busts sitting on pedestals in the main gallery, two shelves on each side of the entryway display eleven black bronze figures and heads, the tallest of which is around a foot high. Radically different in scale, execution, and subject matter, these two bodies of work establish Peters, born in 1973, as one of the most ambitious and interesting sculptors of her generation.

The figures come from mythology, the artist's imagination, and her knowledge of the history of sculpture — ranging from works in museums to monuments in cemeteries. Peters can be a naturalist when she feels it is called for, or devote herself to meticulously stylized waves of cascading hair and impossibly long and rigid beards. At this moment in history, when so much art is easily seen and researched, she recognizes that she can absorb whatever sources she chooses, work in whatever style seems necessary, and go wherever a particular preoccupation takes her. There is a freedom to what she does that transcends style and the use of appropriation — the application of lazy thinking — in favor of complex subjects. Everything in her work is an act of reimagining and melding together disparate sources into something that becomes curiouiser and curiouiser. This is most evident in the busts, but manifests throughout her oeuvre.



Sarah Peters, "Floating Head" (2016), bronze, 11 x 19 x 9 inches (27.9 x 48.3 x 22.9 cm), edition 3 of 5

Peter's work can be whimsical, sharp, bizarre, vulnerable, tender, and stern. She is at the forefront of artists exploring the porous line between human and android. Her focus on the relationship between the head and body often results in busts and headless bodies. Her concern with this connection can be understood as a philosophical rumination on the mind-body problem as well as a metaphysical inquiry into the relationship between essence and existence, as explored by the Persian philosopher and physician Avicenna. Such theoretical currents running through her work separate Peters from her contemporaries. Like Ludwig Wittgenstein, she possesses a dry, pointed wit.

The awkward pose of the headless “Satyr” (2013), who appears to be trying to check the size of his penis, brought a smile to my face, while “Untitled (Herma 2)” (2018), with its waterfall of a beard, had me considering the signs of male authority. (Doesn’t the current male resident of the White House want a military parade to prove his might?)

The artist’s close attention to clothing, pose, facial characteristics, hair, and beards is forensic; each detail is revealing. She seems aware of what women wore in the 19th century and the expressive poses one assumes in private, revealing much about themselves.

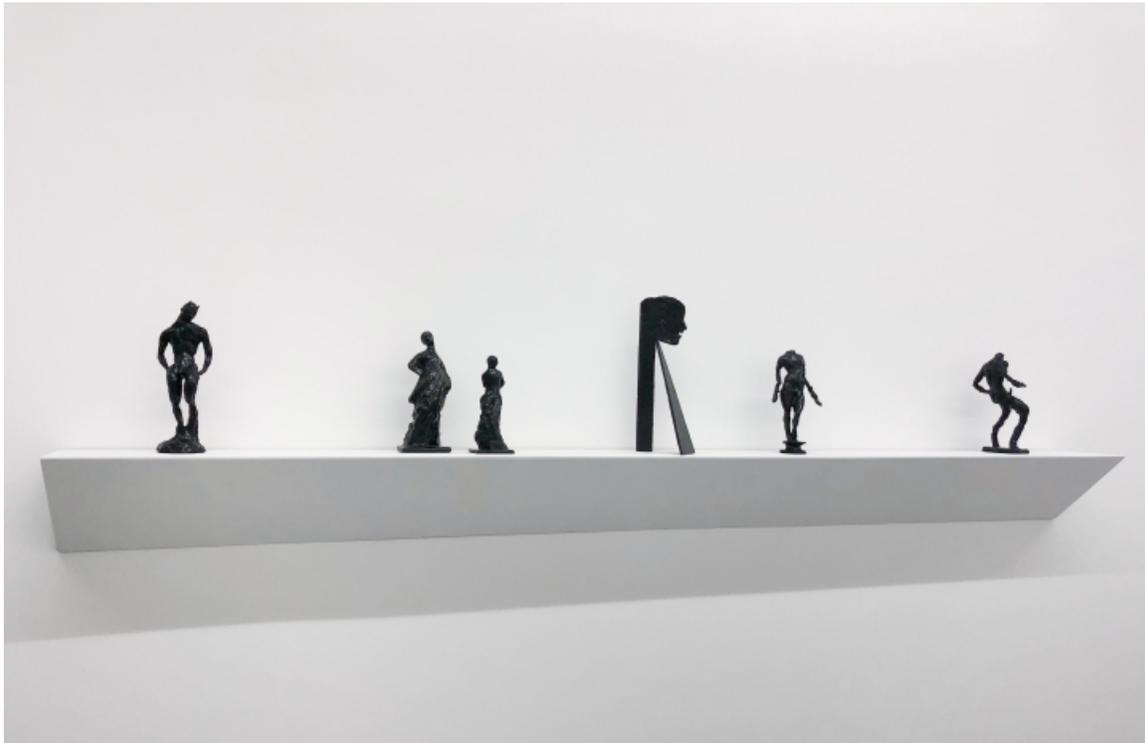


Sarah Peters, “Untitled (Herma 2)” (2018), bronze, 30 x 8 x 8 inches (76.2 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm), edition 1 of 5

The two busts of men are phallic columns where the head caps a perfectly coiffed, scrupulously rendered, cascading beard. The beard is a sign of the man’s authority, which Peters underscores by having it literally lift him higher, as well as support his rather silly elevation. She underscores the phallic association by making him bald, while his socket-less eyes convey his inhumanity: he is not blind like Justice, but unseeing and closed-off from the world around him. His body is his beard (or authority). Without it, he is undistinguished, a nothing. In a very poignant sense, Peters shows us how pathetic we are without ever becoming shrill or didactic.

In “Untitled (Herma 2),” the beard frames a deep inset beneath the mouth. The inset is shaped like an inverted T, which reminded me of a stylized penis. Is the inset where the worshipper would place this venerated object? Or is the empty space a reminder of his lost or absent authority? Doesn’t the solemnity of his expression seem

comical? What about the oddly open mouth? Doesn't the perfect cascade of his beard suggest an equation between authority and vanity? Peters packs so much into her sculptures that no single reading excavates all the possible meanings. That is the real pleasure they deliver.



Installation view, *Sarah Peters: Figureheads* at Van Doren Waxter, New York

In “Charioteer” (2018), the woman’s hairdo becomes a circle or a wheel on each side of her head, the vehicle that enables her to move through the world. The grooved waves of hair extend down from the head and becomes its support. The woman’s smooth face, with a slightly open mouth (a horizontal crevice) and socket-less eyes, is both flesh and skull. At the same time, it does not seem like a representation of life, as in a portrait, or death — however idealized the face/skull appears. Was Peters inspired by the death’s head seen on many 17th-century New England gravestones?

The wide groove running between the two sections of hair is creepy, weird, and off-putting. Details such as this and the deep niche in “Untitled (Herma 2)” add another dimension of meaning to the artist’s work and give them an inhuman presence. Juxtaposed with the smaller pieces, and combined with their tenderness and humor, she conveys a wide range of feelings and states of consciousness, from awkward vulnerability to grim terror. Simply and plainly put, these are brilliant works. And I have the irrepressible feeling that Peters will just keep getting better.

[Sarah Peters: Figureheads](#) continues at *Van Doren Waxter* (195 Chrystie Street, Manhattan) through June 16.