

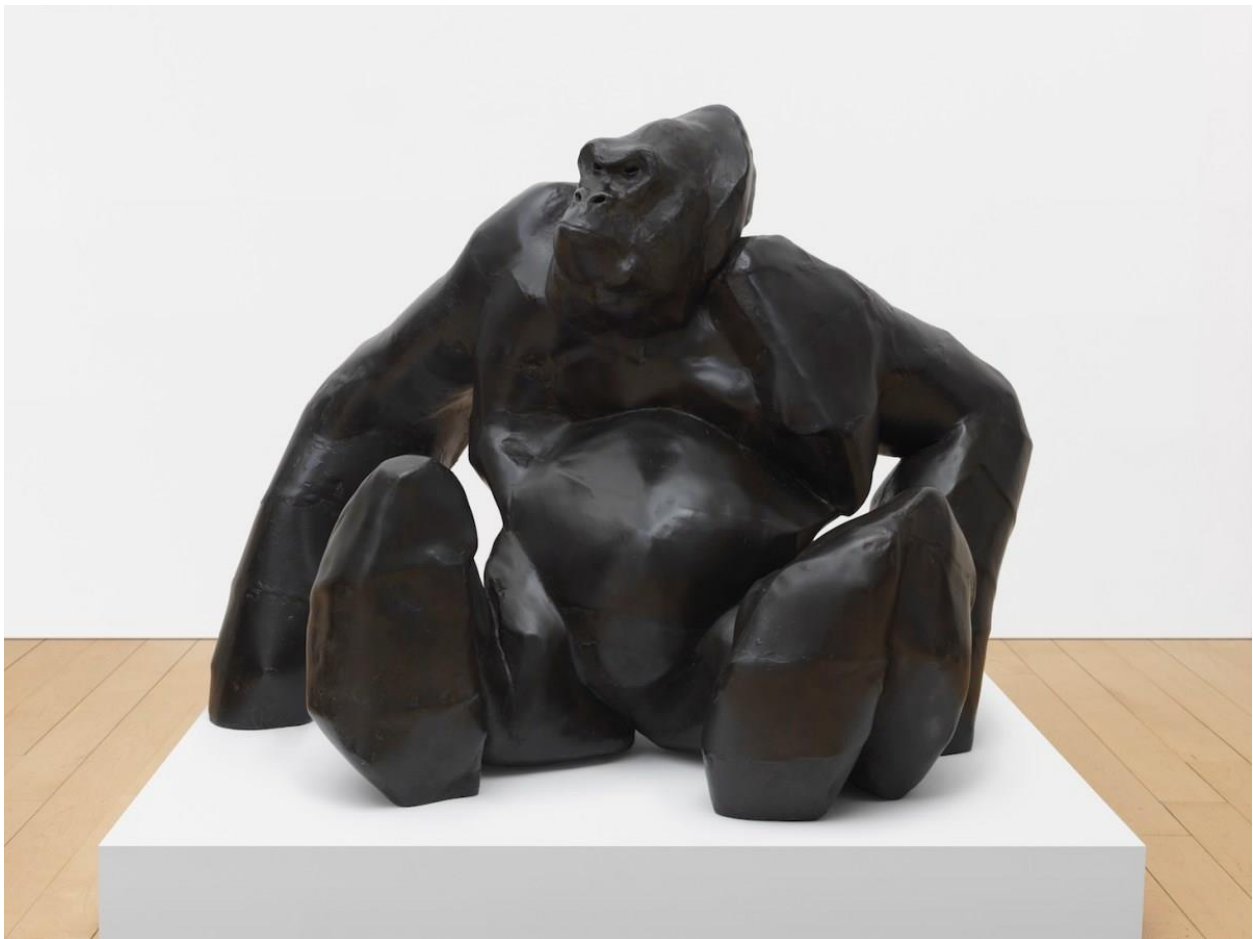
VAN DOREN
WAXTER

HYPERALLERGIC

An Unsentimental Sculptor Confronts Mortality

Daisy Youngblood is a portrait sculptor whose themes include the embracing of one's mortality.

by John Yau | Oct. 1, 2021



Daisy Youngblood, "Gorilla" (1996), bronze, 37 x 39 x 49 inches, AP 1 of 1, Edition of 4 (all images courtesy the artist and Van Doren Waxter)

Daisy Youngblood had her first solo exhibition in New York in 1979, when she was in her mid-30s. A figurative sculptor who works primarily with clay fired at low heat, she is not prolific and rarely shows. [Daisy Youngblood: Tender Mercy\(s\): Early and Late Works in Clay](#) at Van Doren Waxter (September 8–October 23, 2021) is her 10th exhibition since the late 1970s and her first with this gallery. It is not to be missed.

The exhibition includes seven works: six in one room of the gallery and the other, a large, smooth, deep black “Gorilla” (1996) made of bronze, seated on a pedestal in the lobby. A lot of artists make sculptures of animals, but the two who seem to me to fully recognize the otherness of their subject are Youngblood and Deborah Butterfield. This is something they achieve through their merging of subject and materials. Their animals are entities that are completely separate from us, no matter what our interaction may be.

This otherness is what comes through in the ashy gray sculpture “Little Gorilla” (2020), which is a shade over 12 inches high. Admittedly, I am using anthropomorphizing terms when I describe “Little Gorilla” as proud, stern, self-contained, fierce, strong, magisterial. At the same time — and this is part of what sets apart Youngblood’s work — the expression is also unreadable. At some point, while describing the feelings radiating from this shaped lump of fired clay, you may come up against the limitation of words and think you might begin by describing what the sculpture is not — warm or friendly — or you may focus on the ashy gray materiality of the piece and all that it stirs up in you.



Daisy Youngblood, “Head Crucifixion” (1977), low fired clay and sticks, 20 x 21 x 11 inches

The exhibition’s two earliest works, “Head Crucifixion” and “Wired Waitress” (both dated 1977), show the first signs of what makes Youngblood’s work so compelling, beginning with its immediacy.

“Head Crucifixion” is a smooth, hollow, off-white ovoid with an incised line to mark the lips meeting and teeth — or is it a mouth sewn shut, as is done with shrunken heads so that the soul cannot escape and haunt us? Piercing the head on either side of the incised lips and teeth is a long, thin stick. Is the mouth holding the stick or has it pierced through the eyeless face?

Two twigs stick out indicating the nostrils. A larger stick pierces the top of the skull and reappears below the chin, while another sharpened stick penetrates the side of the head until it extends out of the other side, hence the work's title.



Daisy Youngblood, "Wired Waitress" (1977), signed and dated on skull interior: DY 77, low fire clay and wire, 6 1/4 x 6 1/4 x 4 inches

What are we to make of this eyeless, featureless head pierced by five sticks of varying lengths and thicknesses? While the viewer might associate aspects of the work with different cultures and traditions, it escapes these categories to become both original and archetypal. This unlikely synthesis is what makes Youngblood such a powerful and engaging sculptor.

"Wired Waitress" is a simple, haunting work, at once delicate and blunt. An off-white skull-like form with incised lines indicating lips and teeth, and two holes for eye, hangs down from the wall. A metal wire has been inserted through the eyes, and knotted in the skull's interior, and then extended out from where the jawbone normally ends and looped around a screw inserted into the wall.

Mortality and vulnerability have rarely been so tenderly expressed without devolving into the sentimental. If anything, there is a no-nonsense toughness to the piece. "Wired Waitress" seems to be an object we might contemplate while thinking about our mortality; it is kin to the skull in Albrecht Dürer's painting "St. Jerome" (1521), which the saint touches with his forefinger, his other hand pressed to the side of his head. The surface of "Wired Waitress" is inviting. The materiality of the clay feels more vulnerable than an actual skull, while the faint touches of red make it appear as if it is blushing.



Daisy Youngblood, "Chandrika" (2014), low fire clay and stone, 7 1/8 x 6 1/8 x 9 5/8 inches

Earlier, I described Youngblood as a figurative sculptor, but perhaps it is more accurate to say that she is a portrait sculptor whose themes include the embracing of one's mortality.

"Kalu Rinpoche" (1999) and "Lama" (1996) are portraits whose subjects appear to be looking inward. Both seem specific to an individual and not in any way idealized or improved; it is that directness in Youngblood's work that I think viewers sense immediately. We see individuals without traces of a personality, which is unsettling and magnetic.

In "Chandrika" (2014), translated as "moonlight," Youngblood rests a face on a rounded stone, balanced against a smaller stone. The face, which tilts upward, conforms to part of the stone's shape, and a different-colored stone emerges from a hole where the nose would be, while the main stone is visible through the eyeholes.

Youngblood's notion of the spiritual does not reject materiality in favor of a soul and the transformation of the body into holy matter. The stone animates the face. The clay face is part of the stone and separate from it. It is also completely other, as the stone pupils convey.



Daisy Youngblood, "Little Gorilla" (2020), low fire clay, 12 1/4 x 11 1/2 x 6 3/4 inches

This is Youngblood's genius. The otherness evoked in her work is unmistakable. She transports viewers to a space occupied by a human face or skull that is not marked by Western thought, particularly Christianity and humanism. And yet, I don't feel that anything she does is citation.

There is something precise and specimen-like about each of Youngblood's sculptures, evidence taken from our unavoidable journey toward death and the indifferent universe. And one can see in all these works — in the tying of the wire or the stone that becomes a pointy nose — traces of humor and joy.

Daisy Youngblood: Tender Mercy(s): Early and Late Works in Clay continues at Van Doren Waxter (23 East 73rd Street, Manhattan) through October 23.