

Art in America

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SARAH PETERS
Eleven Rivington

By Dennis Kardon

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They sat on tall gray pedestals, resembling five black holes with gravitational fields so strong that even light can't escape. The bronze heads that Sarah Peters recently showed at Eleven Rivington pulled passing viewers inexorably into their orbit.

Expert in traditional sculptural techniques and working in wax, clay and bronze for over a decade, Peters has been patiently forging a contemporary aesthetic linking her modestly scaled figural objects to the vast galaxy of art historical sculpture. She has taken figural references to classicism and modernist sculpture and mixed them with outsider art and popular culture, distilling everything slowly into the crucible of her fears and desires until finally arriving at this—five bronze heads (two men, two women and a boy), all patinated a light-sucking dark bitter chocolate.



Sarah Peters: *Portrait of a Bearded Man with Triangular Base*, 2015, bronze, 17½ by 7 by 13 inches; at Eleven Rivington.

Approached from the back, *Woman with Headdress* (2015) appears as a burnt-umber ziggurat of cascading curls that are cleaved by a central furrow, as if parted with an axe. The stability of this blank triangle is belied by the front: from the hair cave emerges a sharply featured face with cleanly scooped-out eye sockets and a gaping mouth that is screaming, retching or awaiting oral penetration.

In these sculptures, abstractions of facial details signify both emotions and art historical styles, with Peters adroitly navigating between the two. The way the wavering ellipsoid mouths of the two female heads suggest wailing, Greek tragedy masks and inflatable sex dolls is a mark of her subtle humor.

Peters is particularly deft in her portrayal of hair, which she uses as texture, pattern, support and framing device as well as to communicate cultural ideas of wildness and control. Scalloped

hair patterns provide textural contrast in all the sculptures but to different effects. For example, the tight curls of the long beards of two Assyrian-like heads project control, wisdom and authority in concert with the erect forward thrust of the heads' phallic forms. Details in *Portrait of a Bearded Man* (2014), such as incised brows, downturned mouth, sunken cheeks, curved neck and a gently cleft, buttocks-like forehead suggest the character of loyal elder. A more severe, authoritative leader is portrayed in *Portrait of a Bearded Man with Triangular Base* (2015), which features prominent cheeks, distended eyes, ventriloquist dummy-like lips, sharp nose, glossy bald pate and a stylized geometric substitute for a neck. In light of Peters's previous work invoking cults and extremist figures, we could easily view these two works as depictions of outsiders.

Why do Peters's heads feel so powerful? It's difficult to look at the overt references to Assyrian sculpture and not be reminded of ISIS's recent destruction of artifacts, to say nothing of the group's predilection for decapitation. But Peters's work is disturbing precisely because of the seamless way these references are intertwined with all the others. The implacability of male authority, the moralizing ferocity of female subjugation and the vulnerability of childhood are woven together to present an undercurrent of violence and horror, which becomes manifest upon reflection, but is obscured by Peters's absurdist humor and sly femininity.

—Dennis Kardon