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Philip Monk on recent works by Roland Brener

Aside from the fact that Roland Brener sometimes employs his boat builder to craft his art, there is an analogy between the boat he sails and the sculptures he designs with the aid of a computer. Both the work of art and the well-crafted sailboat have responded to the forces that brought them into being — forces whose confluence and balance they embody. But balance is precarious, and these lines of force could easily lead to a crack-up. Brener's sculptures explore such subjective, subterranean elements.

navigator

Brener has relied on basic computer animation and three-dimensional modelling programmes in planning the large plywood sculptures in his current exhibition. He takes over ready-made the stock types offered by these programmes – as when he starts off with a suited, standing businessman for his *Swinger* (1999) – then distorts the figure laterally, expanding horizontal sections while the computer maintains the illusion of an organic whole, however distorted. The distortion can only be pushed so far; there is a limit to recognizability.

The sectioning used in the design is reinforced in the finished sculpture by the laminated plywood from which the sculpture is made. In fact, the contoured, laminated construction might make us think that a computer is used in making the works as well, but they are hand built, though not by the artist. In its sculptural form, the original figure has become a swinging Tweedledum. (A Tweedledee is in the process of being designed.) That the figure looks human or appears as a solid body is the illusion of a topographic surface (*Swinger* is actually hollow). No interior genetic code guides resemblance here.

The Alice-in-Wonderland world reappears in *Houses of Digital* (1997–99). An architectural drawing of a bare-bones house has been subjected to different distortion filters that pinch or bloat the form. In the realized models – hung on the wall as sculptural reliefs – computer commands, Mondrianesque modernism and boat-building materials have been combined to comic effect. Applying the pinch function that distorted *House of Pinch* to an otherwise-distorted *House of Bloat* (as if their titles named their fantasy-world inhabitants) did not return the "bloat" to normal. Rather, it produced *House of Blinch*. I suspect Brener welcomes this creative unpredictability and deviation from normativity.

Brener's *Swinger* reminds me of the perversely caricatured self-portrait busts by the Viennese neoclassical sculptor Franz Xavier Messerschmidt. As Messerschmidt's mad expressions shattered the rational mien of neoclassical ideals, so Brener's morphed businessmen contaminate the rational basis of digital virtuality. Although this digital world orders itself on the realist model of traditional perspective, there are no inherent limits to how a body inhabiting this realm might be transformed past the boundaries of recognizability, where the species form begins to disintegrate or evolve into something new. As we move around *Swinger*, we see that the figure's back metamorphoses into an insect form.

Push the envelope: how infinitely plastic and elastic are these figures? Take the iris print *The Dance of Four* (1999), which depicts a group of jostling businessmen who have been cloned from the same stock image as *Swinger*. In the process of manipulating individual figures, surface sections of their bodies have split off like plates of armour and the bodies have merged into one mass. In this commingling of individuals, the species type begins to break down.

Imitating the reanimators of the Romantic era, whose Dr. Frankensteins were limited to producing misshapen monsters,

Brener chooses to tinker with species representation. His figures deviate from the classical norm based on the idealized human body. Closer to the disorder of cartoons and monsters, they are misbegotten caricatures that are out of proportion. And in Western rationalism, where there is no measure, there is madness.

Perhaps this explains the unnerving if comical character of *Swinger* with its own pinch and bloat of madness. Similarly, the sculpture *Wolf and Cat* (1999) expresses the mad forces of animal aggression, now lockjawed in an exhausted stalemate. (Brener tells me that the sculpture was a response to nightly news reports on Kosovo.)Like *Swinger*, *Wolf and Cat* has been designed and exaggerated by computer and built in contoured layers of laminated plywood. With its hollow interior visible from behind, the intertwined sculpture seems all a sinuous surface. This surface is one with its lines of force, visible as plywood striations, so that the material that brings the sculpture into three-dimensional appearance also manifests its violent content.

This subject appears again in a two-dimensional version (also called *Wolf and Cat*), computer-printed on canvas. While the sculpture rose landscape-like from the floor, here the image emerges from its patterned background solely through a topographic illusion. Although a computer is used to design Brener's artwork, his sculptures and images manifest other dynamic forces. Such is the difference between charting the location of a boat on the ocean using a map and actually building a boat that will withstand the forces of wind and water. The former makes navigation possible, but the latter allows us to move through and withstand the forces of the sea.

The sculptures and drawings in this exhibition were accompanied by three sound pieces that reveal Brener's ear for absurdist dialogue. An air of quizzical detachment is the fundamental feeling derived from the digitally delivered, disembodied voices that address us from a language-universe we do not quite seem to inhabit. The soundtrack of *Searay Talks* (1999) is a paranoid-schizophrenic rambling (based on a text by Brener's former student, the sculptor Charles Ray). *Three of Us* (1999) presents a colloquy of obsequiousness, surrounding us with artificial chatter: "sorry to bother you," "thank you very much," "I'm really sorry," etc. Part of this text is incorporated in the most ambitious of the sound sculptures, *Hello Mister Roland* (1999), begun while Brener was being treated for cancer and completed after a seizure. Coloured light, sound effects and a hospital dialogue are randomly combined inside a darkened wardrobe, giving the effect of a depthless void, a sculptural no-place that the mind, not the body, seems to experience.

Although we are in no conversation with the sound works, Brener communicates through them feelings of displacement and delusion. In the uncertain space between life and death, sense and nonsense, reality and virtuality, is it the voices that are disconnected and disembodied, or are we?