

## George Wallace: Sculpture and Graphics

### Bryce Kanbara, 2001

*George Wallace: Sculpture and Graphics (at the Art Gallery of Hamilton) is a retrospective exhibition spanning forty years of work. Wallace was professor of Fine Arts at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario (1960-85) and since then has lived and worked in Victoria, British Columbia. This examination of Wallace's wry and remarkably under-recognized contribution to Canadian art is comprised of welded steel male figures depicted in states varying from desolation to epiphany a new funnily tragic series of cast bronze heads set on red pedestals, monotypes based on photo-portraits from the business pages of the Globe & Mail, and a suite of etchings that reads as a suburban Book of Hours.*

Wallace was born in 1920 in Ireland, where he completed a degree in philosophy, married, and attended art school; he then immigrated to Canada, established a teaching career and a new home for his family, and produced an early body of paintings, prints, and sculpture. Meanwhile, a group of postwar artists in Britain called the Angry Young Sculptors was becoming internationally famous. In reaction to the dominating influence of Henry Moore, sculptors Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Kenneth Armitage, Bernard Meadows and Eduardo Paolozzi made rough, angular works with welded steel and cast bronze. Their brusque abstractions of the human figure amplified the anxiety of living at the mid-twentieth century, in a world chilled by the Cold War. They were from Wallace's generation - several years older, except for Paolozzi, who was four years younger.

Living in Canada, however, Wallace was buffered from the group's influence. Working at his own pace in sedate Dundas, Ontario, he produced life-sized, welded steel sculptures of naked men, most of which represented characters from the Bible and Greek mythology. He modified the prescriptive, angst-ridden message of the day to suit his purposes and remained unsusceptible to the shake-and-bake of art fashion. He proceeded in an intensely independent way. By adopting a naturalistic approach to portraying the human figure, he separated his work from that of the Angry Young Sculptors. This preference for realism - which was distinctly unpopular in the abstract 1960s - and the fact that he didn't seem much interested in pursuing exhibitions conspired to suppress his reputation.

#### *Hapless*

The life-sized figures made in Dundas (1960-83) are Wallace's meditations on death. They were produced in a period in which he achieved respectable social standing and a comfortable life, but it was also during this time that his parents died. He states that many of the figures were conceived out of grieving for them. Although they are titled after mythological characters whose stories are well known, they are not idealized allegorical depictions. They are painstakingly crafted, their skins formed by thousands of weld beads laid down on steel rod frameworks. They seem individualized, palpable and near real. What illumines our understanding of them is their ordinariness. Robert Yates, writing in a 1983 exhibition catalogue, describes them as having "flabby tummies, untuned limbs, and an unheroic stance. They are not extremely handsome and their awkward sense of balance suggests people who are not particularly competent at manipulating the material world around them." Their disarming vulnerability draws us in to contemplate the puzzles of death (the men on cots), resurrection (the Lazarus figures), and suffering (the legless man and the hanging man). Even the personification of death itself, *Death with Flowers*, is another naked and unspectacular male specimen who wears a helmet made from a bent car bumper. He is about to present a

bouquet with the ingratiating politeness of a gentleman arriving at his date's front door. Although there's a stark and hapless premise to these images, Wallace gives death surprising tenderness.

A culture is preserved by the old. This cliché usually means that the old guard the old ways, the old knowledge, the old stories; they are wise and give prudent counsel. Rather, I think culture is preserved by the old, because they enjoy the odd, study others for it, and locate the essence of character in what is peculiar to each phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

In the past fifteen years Wallace has made over 300 monotypes inspired by *Globe & Mail* head-shots of newly appointed or promoted business executives. He regards the portrait sitters as opportunistic and ideologically misguided. He exaggerates their features by enlarging noses, lowering foreheads and pinching or widening expressions. Still, we can't help sensing his compassion for them. Wallace's sustained compulsion to make these unflattering heads of people whose chief offence is dutifully climbing corporate and social ladders is a curious preoccupation that he carries into his recent bronze heads.

Cast by Ontario artist and Wallace's friend, John Miecznikowski, *Ten Characters From A Spanish Comedy* required an involved process of cross-country shipments of modeled wax forms and bronze castings over several years. We are aware that Wallace is invoking art history; these heads recollect examples of portrait sculpture in ancient Rome and the revival of that tradition in the Renaissance. However, his heads also seem to be send-ups teetering on the edge of caricature, and we might think they are unlikely subject matter for a senior artist who has engaged profounder themes. It's one thing for Wallace to depict mediocre people in the simple medium of monotype; it's quite another level of commitment to realize them three-dimensionally in bronze.

Wallace has a bent for artful derision. To his credit, he isn't quite capable of mustering the brutality required for outright lampooning. He's invested far too much in his characters to treat them perfunctorily. He's made them with such observant detail, recorded their flaws with such exquisite empathy that we are struck by his lingering affinity for them. And it doesn't require extraordinary perception to note Wallace's own physical features replicated here and there in the personages he's made. They resemble him - the cocked, bird-like head, wary eyes and delicate, wry mouth. Looking back, we can see this familiar physiognomy evident in many of his sculptures, right from the first beleaguered males of forty years ago. It appears somewhat backwards that from those life-sized Dundas figures Wallace has arrived at the ironic mirth of the cast-bronze heads. Those early sculptures are as loaded with doleful resignation as the Spanish heads seem to be puffed-up with self-conscious vivacity. While the Dundas figures are mostly enervated and alone, the Spanish heads seem sociable and on display. While the Dundas figures represent a kind of Everyman, confronting sin and death, the Spanish heads are the lively assortment of personalities we'd find in any coffee shop. While the themes of the Dundas figures are essential and big, the Spanish heads are fatuously eccentric, and somehow -through their idiosyncrasies - more human and true. Wallace affectionately adorns them with overstated headgear and fashion accessories - such as the lady's earrings that he made himself and attached to her ear lobes. The scarf/gag wrapping one man's mouth is a band of broderie anglaise, which Wallace provocatively suggests, may have been torn from a woman's petticoat. (He's also gone back to belatedly pin a bright medal

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<sup>1</sup> James Hillman, *The Force of Character* (New York: Random House, 1999)

and red ribbon on the chest of one of his Dundas figures - the legless man.) He identifies with his characters and helps make them attractive to themselves (it's a kind of vicarious narcissism) in preparation for their encounters with one another. Wallace is entirely complicit in their psychological make-up; we get the feeling he was energized in creating them. Where do they come from? What are their stories and what have they to do with one another?

And what does Wallace see in them? Is his indulgence a necessary diversion from the death theme? A fanciful prelude to senility? James Hillman, writing in *The Force of Character*, tells us that we need to age in order for our genuine characters to come forward, and he recommends that we reconsider our views on the behaviour and activity of aging people.

The old have gravitas when their insight reaches into the invisible core of things, into what is hidden and buried. These graver, pregnant meanings are not advertised in the daily round. The old hear into the gaps, smell what's not kosher, watch for small smiles that disguise the truth - all the necessary suppressions that make everyday possible, and nice. When the body begins to sag, it is abandoning sham and hypocrisy. The body leads the way down, deepening one's character. It doesn't know how to lie .... This may account for some of the nastiness of old people, their thriving on wicked stories and twisted gossip, tales of surgical mistakes and bad doctors, crooked relatives, scandals, accidents and ruined finances. The old are tuned in to the underworld, so they go to sleep reading crime novels and watching cop flicks. They enjoy the vicious psychopathy of the heroes and heroines of afternoon soaps and the bizarre pathologies exhibited on talk shows. They are more at home in the underworld of peculiarities than in the conventions of conformity? <sup>2</sup>

This exhibition, and particularly the recent works, is an old man's rumination on what perfect fools we are. Some of the prints deliver this message compellingly. They are sharply observed and executed pictures that make plentiful and piercing comment on our shortcomings (including the artist's own). They'll likely cause reappraisals of generally held perceptions of Wallace as an unapologetic traditionalist and unapproachable sophisticate. Wallace reveals a lot about himself; he is not afraid to appear silly in these prints, and that is their radical charm. If we are to believe Hillman, perhaps Wallace can't help himself. The *Summer Shadows; Summer Dreams* series of thirteen etchings is, ostensibly, an ode to the TV set. They're illustrations of how we seek ersatz romance in the glow of the cathode-ray tube, unfolding as a behavioural study of our private longings. The TV watchers, for the large part, are amiably naked and sitting or lying on familiar-looking cots, beds and chairs, in bedrooms and dens that are also strongly familiar - settings we live in, too. For Wallace, we suspect that the series is an exercise in late-life eroticism. They're wiry, vigorously drawn works, and they put the traditional medium of etching to bracing, upbeat use. Among the self-portraits are the two self-jibing monotypes that greet the visitors at the entrance (old Wallace dressed in pajamas and old Wallace naked). They're preposterous and charged with a fey glee. They reside in the exhibition with a cast of wonderfully unwitting characters to whom he's poured the potentially tragic ingredients of egocentricity and obliviousness. For Wallace, the act of creating them is a subliminal release of personal information, feelings and conclusions.

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<sup>2</sup> James Hillman, *The Force of Character* (New York: Random House, 1999)