



Are we there yet?

One is a figural artist, another abstract, a third makes connections. The glue that has held them together over the last two years is what I want to know about. They feel there's an Eastern element in their collaboration, a complementary yin-yang sort of thing. They do each take responsibility for one aspect of their joint work, the ceramic figures, the industrial, formal elements, or the spaces between things, the initiation and the response. One of them heard Scott Simon on NPR say "you have to decide which bridges to cross and which bridges to burn," that for her started it, now it feels like a voice from the past. **Mary Bernstein, Harriet Diamond, and Rebecca Muller** decided to relinquish some of their individuality in order to pursue new paths, trying to unearth the trajectory of their lives, as their conversation darts back and forth. One says, "I can't quite remember where I was when this began." Another: "It's like making a new artist out of the three of us." And another thinks it's important that they are three women (let's not hold our breath until we see if three male artists follow in their footsteps).

These women came of age in an activist era, and they are entering their later years at a troublingly different time, surrounded, we might say, by the effects of rampant capitalism (as well as by people who are uncomfortable if all their electronic devices are turned off). Earlier works by some of these artists were overtly political. In their new endeavor the imagery is still didactic, but not single-minded, gone the propagandistic fervor, replaced by self-reflection, and abstraction is freshly imbued with narrative potential. Memory is key here, what you can't see in front of you, as one of them phrases it. We try to create a life worth living, and memory helps map that at least in visual terms. Many states of feeling are elicited in the successive episodes of their installation, some humble, eating lunch for instance, others more grandiose, fear, yearning, resignation, revelation, love and regret, the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, solid accessible figures casting deceptive shadows onto the walls of our caves. The installation is a body, their bodies, our body, an eerie internal journey. But, one says, it's also fun, a Huck Finn-like adventure, an improvisation, definitely not a gloomy cortege.

Does the illusion of their art—precarious Styrofoam constructions that look like weathered concrete—spill over into what might be the illusion of their ideals? Tough question. To say it's like smoke and mirrors (which one of them did) is unsettling, perhaps intentionally so, considering the relativity of our perceptions. And then there's the Styrofoam that looks like crudely cut out pieces of Styrofoam, representing robots or drones, days or whole lives lived like that. Which elicits a further question (always questions): wherein lies beauty? To which they give the age-old answer: Beauty is truth, truth, beauty. There might also be at work here one aspect of an old age style—think late, sixty-year-old Rembrandt van Rijn—when the probing of deep human emotion can, in conventional terms, be described as ugly. Ugliness in such a case is surely in the mind of the beholder, not in an artist's search for meaning.

We could cite a stream of precedents for these artists' current work, such as Paul Gauguin's large brooding Tahitian canvas inscribed by the painter, "Where Do We Come From/ What Are We/ Where Are We Going." Better the succinct epitaph to E. M. Forster's novel, *Howards End*—"Only connect...." "I didn't do wrong, did I?" asks Mr. Wilcox at the close of that novel, his son in prison, his family estranged, and his second wife after all inheriting the house. And so in retrospect, from a new angle, we may begin to imagine that something has gone wrong in our life. More likely, it is the only way our journey to the present moment could have played out.