Transmogrifications: A Conversation with Bryan Crockett

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Bryan Crockett was born in Santa Barbara, California, in 1970 and grew up in a home attached to the family business; his father was the local mortician. He dropped out of high school in his junior year to attend Santa Barbara City College and graduated with a BA from Cooper Union in New York City in 1992 and an MFA from Yale University in 1994. Today, he lives and works in Brooklyn. His 400-square-foot studio is crammed from ground to gable: drawings are pinned to the wall, parts of sculptures rest on shelving that stretches from floor to ceiling. A work in progress sits on a lathe. In this diminutive environment, Crockett makes concrete in three dimensions a world that swirls in his mind. Crockett's body of sculpture is so diverse and complex, it is as if more than one artist were at work. His wildly divergent use of materials, formal properties, and styles suggests several hands. The artist—who is now 35 years old—has created abstract installations using balloons, chiseled away at polyester resin to create classical human form, and riffed on historical subject matter by using cultured marble to shape larger than-life mice. It is a wide range for a young artist. Crockett's work became visible in 1997, when he was chosen to produce an installation for the Whitney Biennial. He created a room-sized work, *Ignis Fatuus,* from long, stringy balloons of bilious grays, bloody pinks, and intestinal purples evoking human innards. By 2000, his human-scale mouse, *Ecce Homo*, was pictured in the *Science Times* section of the *New York Times* in a piece on genetics crashing up against art positioned before a longer essay about the genetic revolution. *Portrait of a Lifetime* (2004) is a self-portrait of the human life cycle composed as a wood relief. Critics may suggest that Crockett's work is so various that it is not of a piece,

that his contrary processes make his sculpture defy categorization. Ultimately, subject matter unifies Crockett's project into an evolving whole of discrete bodies of production. What sets his work apart is mastery of craftsmanship tied to the study of art historical precedents, specifically ancient, Renaissance, Baroque, and even contemporary art.

Brooke Kamin Rapaport: *You rely on traditional materials and historic subject matter. Aren't those characteristics opposed to much of today's vanguard art practice?*

Bryan Crockett: I don't think that any artist in modern art history—even if they were breaking tradition—was not going back into art history, scouring over the traditions. Being aware of art history is a necessity for the formation of an artist. What you're referring to are my stylistic references to classical figurative traditions. I ended up there because I had been interested in the figure, and there isn't a huge amount of figurative sculpture in modern art. Auguste Rodin, Alberto Giacametti, or Hans Bellmer come to mind, but the figure dissolves into abstraction after surrealism. We then see it emerge again with Post-Minimalism and Photo Realism. However, the new figurative sculpture became more tied to issues of photographic representation and body art as seen in body casting and performance. Basic concerns of material and form seemed neglected. In dealing with the figure or body sculpturally today one finds oneself going back to pre-modern history. I was also interested in religious sculpture, which is all but absent from modern figurative work. Right now, so many things are up in the air, it's almost more interesting to have a broad scope of reference.

BKR: *What do you mean by "up in the air"? Art historically? Worldwide?*
BC: What I mean is: What is art now? There isn't such a defined aesthetic right now. There are so many different types of work being done. It's not like when Minimalism was the dominant force. Artists are borrowing from many different sources and pulling together references and making their own narratives. I am not exclusively making references to Baroque sculpture or classical sculpture, I am also trying to update them and mix in things from my world.

BKR: *Did your undergraduate and graduate teachers influence your work? You studied during the l980s and 1990s, when the significance of Minimalism was waning and political art was waxing, yet your sculpture embraces neither of those movements and charts an independent course,*
BC: As far as my education, as an undergraduate, I studied under Hans Haacke at Cooper Union. This was between 1989 and 1992, when overtly political art was the trend. I was inspired by the rigorous discussions and readings that we were forced to follow, but the process of making that art was painfully clinical. When you showed a piece at a class critique, you were expected to give a talk to defend its meaning. These discussions usually focused on the deconstruction of semiotics—almost like one would try to take apart and analyze an advertisement. The didactic atmosphere of Haacke's classes felt defensive and negative. At that time, political art had become almost a movement and its tight-fisted agenda had squelched the complexities from art. From Cooper Union I moved on to Yale to study under Ron Jones and John Newman. I was inspired by Jones's work the first time I saw it in a 1990 show at the Whitney Museum called "Mind Over Matter." Jones's work (and his teaching) made you want to think rather than feel some kind of guilt. I always thought that if Marcel Duchamp had to make "political art" in the late '80s, he probably would have made

work a lot like Jones's. Although I grew to be much more inspired by the conceptual end of things while at Yale, I also realized that I liked to make things myself. I liked to walk a line between formalism and conceptualism. I wanted to explore conceptual narratives and philosophical ideas, but with my hands. John Newman was a very inspired Post-Minimalist whose work seemed to be drawn from his inner experiences. There was so much emphasis placed on content and controversy in the program that Newman's approach was refreshingly open. In retrospect, I think that his presence made it possible for me to explore the more formal side of my work.

BKR: *Did your parents encourage you to become an artist? Did their professions influence your work at all? You have mentioned that you were also considering work as a scientist,*

BC: My father was a mortician. When you're growing up you don't really think about how your life is different or about how your parents' professions might affect you in the future. But, obviously, they do. The most significant thing I have came to realize from growing up around death is that in and of itself death is not interesting. What is interesting is how the living come to terms with it in their mind and in their memory. I think that's why I have focused so much on preservation techniques and capturing my experience of life, and why I find myself drawn to materials that transform or seem to be growing. From a very young age, I was on track to become a biologist. My interest in science began with a collection of reptiles and amphibians in my basement and developed into a job at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History while I was still in junior high school. Mid-way through high school, I realized that I didn't want to be locked away in a lab, alienated from the world. However, it wasn't until I went to graduate school that I became conscious of using my interests in science and biology in my artwork. As a student, I had made several pieces featuring lab mice. I made a

video with them, took pictures of them, sculpted them, and even did a series of taxidermy lab mice. I took the archetypal hierarchies of domesticated animals and morphed them with their predators. There was *Swine Hound* (1995), a domesticated pig and wolf/dog, and *unknown* (1994), a cat/rat/dog hybrid. I fully realized my interest in the lab animals with the *Seven Deadly Sins* project (2001), a series of marble sculptures.

BKR: *In your work, there is a devotion to classical, Renaissance, and Baroque art in which materials were determinedly crafted to create human figures and recognizable forms from religious subjects and everyday life. You have mentioned your fascination with Bernini.*

BC: I suppose I started looking at more classical, Renaissance, and Baroque sculpture while in graduate school in the early 1990s, when I started working on my animal sculptures. At that time, figurative sculpture with clay and molds was the last thing you were supposed to do. Artists were doing a lot of multi-media installation and video. The closest thing to figurative sculpture in graduate school was performance art or some rare examples of body casting. The idea of actually sitting down and sculpting a figure in clay was uncool. But I was good at it and I liked it, so I set out to try to do it in a different way. I had always been attracted to the melodramatic narratives and finely crafted detail employed in Baroque sculpture, especially Bernini. One almost can't help but relate to them. Bernini's sculptures are not just static objects: they are highly choreographed to create a sense of theater. In that sense, they are installations. I love how the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647—52) is installed in such a way (in Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome) that natural light from a hidden window showers down to create a sense of divine light. His works seem to involve much more than just the representation of the figure in marble. They seem to

breathe. It's more than a matter of realism: they capture some kind of life force. There are definitely narrative layers to Bernini's work that are as important as the formal ones. *Apollo and Daphne* (1622—25) probably fascinates me the most. Bernini's version of the myth is so perfectly conceived and executed that no other sculptor could dare take it on. In my last show, "Drawn Out of My Mind," I attempted to play off this myth. Instead of depicting Apollo in the midst of the chase, I created a sculpture of a tree with a self-portrait. My head, embedded, was growing into a tree in *The Solipsist* (2004). I then made two figurative sculptures carved in faux logs depicting a male and female figure in a sort of time lapse called *Male Ghost* and *Female Ghost* (bath 2005). Both figures are sculpted in relief and depict a gradual shift from head to toe of the human body transforming from birth to death. The male figure stares at the female figure as his body transforms from the skeletal head and back at an old man into the body of an adolescent, into the legs and feet of a newborn, conversely, the woman is depicted aging from head to foot. She is represented with the head of a baby, her body aging by stages, until at last her skeletal foot is revealed, creating these works in wooden material. I was thinking about the tree and the material wood. And I was thinking of how wood, in the nature of its growth, is a record of the seasonal passage of time.

BKR: Portrait of a Lifetime *and the male and female* Ghost *works encapsulate the entire human life cycle. The best Baroque sculpture captured a fleeting instant in one work. By contrast, you have telescoped a long period into a visual flash. What is the basis for condensing a person's long life into one visual moment in an art object?*

BC: That's where you get to an interesting problem. There's been so much said and written about the fragmentation of the body, the destruction of the idealized whole entity of the representation of the body or gestalt. Whenever I sculpt a human figure, I

always tweak it in some way to get you to approach the figure with a different logic. I wanted, with the *Ghost* sculptures, to show a figure transforming through time. Our bodies age, but our mental self-image doesn't. I think we all mentally carry around the child we once were; we struggle to deal with the eventualities of death and physical breakdown. In this sense, the sculptures represent a fragmented body image. Similarly, when I sculpted *Somotosensory Humunculus* (2002), I was interested in representing the body re-proportioned in relation to a hierarchy of the sense of touch. As with the neurological model, each part of the body has a different degree of sensitivity. There is a difference between our perception of ourselves, the way we feel and think, and the way we actually look if we were to take a picture or look in a mirror. In addition, the two *Ghost* sculptures represent bodies in some kind of time lapse. They are not intended to be living likenesses; instead, they are figures stretched out in linear transformation.

BKR: *Are they made of wood?*

BC: The figure part is not wood, but it reads as a wood like material. There are two different versions of the sculpture—one all cast in resin, *Portrait of a Lifetime,* and the other has a real wood base that is incorporated into *Mole Ghost.* I also have certain material constraints due to money and time.

BKR: *It looks like wood.*

BC: Yes, what's important for me is that it "feels" like wood. It's my wood, from a tree that I created.

BKR: *That work is also about technology and pushing things along fast in life—trying to encapsulate an image into one moment, Conceptually, this parallels the*

promise of electronic innovation, but you are dealing with the human figure and making it the receiver of collapsed time.

BC: That body of work is really about philos*o*phy for me, In my previous show, "Cultured" (2002), the mice were about focusing on a token creature as a scientific model representing modernity. Mice represent mankind in a deep symbolic way, literally—every product we use is tested against the mouse. I became fascinated with the mouse/man metaphor and what is going on now in science. I wanted to a elaborate on that in a sculptural way by pulling classical, religious sculpture into it. Lab mice are used to test all medicines and products before they are tested in the human realm. This all happens out of the public eye, invisible yet also somehow present. I was interested in how, symbolically, the animal model also becomes a metaphor for us living in a kind of mass-consumer cultural experiment. I wanted to make these invisible little workers/prisoners more anthropomorphic or human. And the theme of the seven deadly sins was interesting to me because it was a way of merging religious ideas with scientific ones. The *Seven Deadly Sins* were based on mice specifically engineered for research into different diseases. For instance, *Gluttony* (2001) was based on the ob, or obese, mouse. Jackson Laboratory in Maine engineered the ob mouse to study obesity and diabetes, and scientists can buy these mice, which are genetically programmed to become obese. I was fascinated by what this implied in terms of the religious idea of free will and the cautionary notions of the seven deadly sins. I spent a lot of time finessing the sculptures, basing them on actual genetically engineered mice and mixing classical sculptural references into each piece. I wanted these works to lead to a twisted web of issues surrounding free will, identity, ethics, and creation.

BKR: *Are there living artists whose work you hove followed? Are there any particular*

artists who compel, or repel, you?

BC: I have always had a great respect for Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, and Bruce Nauman. When I review Nauman's work and career, I am mast inspired by how his work seems to evolve out of his messy studio. His work is very conceptual, yet it seems to grow partially out of a formal process with whatever materials he's working with at the time. I've always felt that artists who job-out or art direct their work from the sidelines miss out on a tremendous realm of possibility inherent in the process of making their work themselves. In science, discovery happens almost as pure process. There is no guarantee of discovery. It is almost arbitrary, however it does seem to came out of the minutiae and mistakes of process. I have a particular interest in artists who have approached formal issues but in a more conceptual way.

BKR: *There is a very complex narrative attached to your sculpture, which is tightly woven into your awn psyche and the evolution of your body of work. When you display your work in group museum exhibitions —for example, the 1997 Whitney Biennial, 'Open House: Working in Brooklyn'" (2004) at the Brooklyn Museum, or "Mike Kelley: The Uncanny" (2004) at the Tate—how do you expect a general audience to understand this plan? Do you believe that the work must be interpreted via your singular vision, or do you allow for viewers to craft their awn story around the work? What if they simply appreciate it formally?*

BC: In terms of an audience, I feel pretty alienated from the art world. I don't expect much from gallery-goers. I just want them to look, feel, and think. I certainly don't expect anyone to walk away with my long-winded, twisted ideas. My narratives are the conceptual framework that keeps me moving forward. Some of the most successful works of art elude rigorous analysis and the formation of a specific meaning. No matter how many theories I hear about Francis Bacon, I will always

return to look at his paintings simply because they capture the human condition so powerfully. All of his references to art history and narrative give way to paintings that can be nothing other than art.

BKR: *Where do you create your work? The various materials you hove used—resins, plastics, embalming liquids, metals, marble, wood—conjure images of a chemist or alchemist. Hove any of the materials disappointed or not realized your expectations for their inherent ability?*

BC: All of my work is made in my studio. Because much of my study has revolved around metaphysics and the roles of science and religion in Western culture the history of alchemy is also of interest to me. Historically, alchemy had roots in philosophy and religious mystical aspirations at a time when Western science and technology were burgeoning. I am interested in how modern science and technology challenged nations of our metaphysics, in an emergence of a new hubris. There are a lot of new technologies today that reflect a lot of old problems. This is a lot of big talk: in terms of my work, I try to address these ideas in the way I make things. I try to suggest a connection between ideas of alchemy and the technologies of today. Isn't the desire to turn base metals into gold similar to the desire driving scientists in the field of artificial intelligence?

BKR: *Figurative sculpture has seen a resurgence over the last few years. Yet some have spoken of an artificiality in the work and have even predicted its demise. Because it simultaneously refers to historical sculpture and looks into the future with blends of traditional and contemporary materials is it an optimistic gesture toward the field?*

BC: In 1992, I took out a loan at Yale through Macintosh and bought an expensive

new computer. I started taking classes in 3D animation and hoped to jump into this new technology in order to make art, and as a means of making money. After making a few models and pieces, I realized that there would soon be a huge onslaught of computer artists making digital art and that it had great potential. However, it was going to be very expensive, and I didn't have access to the high-tech capabilities of the day. Also, I had become skeptical of the hyper-utopian aura of the new technologies in the early '90s. Still interested in the possibilities of so-called "virtual"' sculpture, I decide to drop the computer and go low-tech. I began making sculptures using latex balloons. They seemed to have an ephemeral, almost virtual quality and could strongly evoke the body and biological forms. I began to focus on the processes of preserving ephemeral farms. I liked the balloon sculptures such as *Ignis Fatuus* (1997) because formally they were just skins of color. It was almost like making sculpture with inflatable paint. For instance, by putting an orange balloon inside a blue balloon and inflating it, I would end up with a gray-blue that looked very intestinal. I realized that by controlling the color, I could make farms evoking different body parts such as intestines, stomachs, brains, penises, breasts, and amniotic sacs. By choreographing these forms, I could make a polymorphous figurative sculpture loaded with sexuality and life but abstracted and eviscerated. But I ran into a problem: my sculptures would deflate, shrivel, and die. Thus, my focus on methods for preservation. I would photograph my sculptures before they shrank, and sometimes I would inject them with resin to embalm them or stuff them into an urn where they would turn to dust. Documenting and preserving the material of the sculptures became my obsession. They looked like bodies and viscera, and I treated them in a sacred way—either I would embalm them or cremate them. This was a kind of homage to my exposure to mortuary science.

BKR: *What is your next direction?*

BC: There are still a couple of pieces to came out of this last body of work, but the next material that I want to focus on is metal. With the balloons, I focused on the fragmented body and techniques of preserving bodies, art, and our ephemeral nature. When I worked with marble, I wanted to focus on its material history in relation to the act of creation, biologically and sculpturally, religious ideas, the flesh. Wood is so much about the fact that t was once living, a record of time, connoting structure and breakdown, life and death. I ended up focusing on nations of philosophy and time. With metal, I want to revisit aspects of alchemy and science and maybe touch on issues of man and war. Who knows where it will take me.