

**Michael Byron: The Grisaille Series, 1997–2000**



**Clough-Hanson Gallery  
Rhodes College  
February 6 – March 22, 2001**

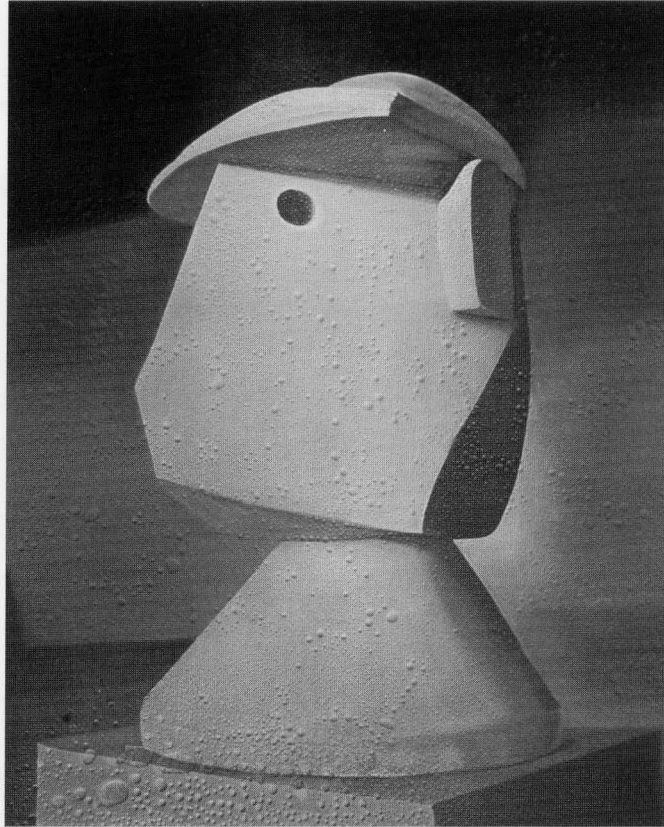
## Michael Byron: The Grisaille Series, 1997-2000

Michael Byron's grisaille paintings of sculpture deftly interweave memory with desire to reanimate a sculptural ideal whose moment seems as distant as that of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the 18th century. Most of the paintings in this exhibition depict modernist sculpture, or the non-Western objects that inspired artists such as Max Ernst and Albert Müller early in the 20th century. Functioning as portraits, the paintings seek to commemorate objects that were initially designed to hold our attention as though they were somehow animate. Yet the rub of Byron's series is that his images are, in fact, inspired by and allude to photographs. As such, the paintings commence a doubled act of remembrance, trading on the iconic and indexical nature of photography to promise both engagement and distance simultaneously.

Clearly the paintings mimic the aesthetic of documentary photographs found in many midcentury surveys of modern sculpture, such as Herbert Read's *The Art of Sculpture* (1954) and Eduard Trier's *Form and Space: The Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* (1961). The detail, uniform lighting, and empty space typically found in these photographic images work to place us before the actual object, reminding us that we are encountering a trace of the light reflected off the surface of the sculptures. In essence, the photograph provides the two-dimensional presence for the subject, which is always physically absent. Likewise, the paintings call our attention to the absence of the object, now doubled because the photographic source has been superseded by its hand-painted surrogate. What is present is Byron's handiwork, alluding to, while also replacing, the mediums of sculpture and photography.



*Voltaire*, 1999, oil on canvas,  
28" x 22"



*Big Brother, Ernst 1967,  
1999, oil on canvas,  
40" x 32"*

If this game playing seems typically postmodern in its self-conscious questioning of representation, it should not obscure the elements of desire that sustain what might otherwise become an academic exercise. Byron, who first gained critical recognition in the eighties, remains a student of conceptual art. Like so many artists of his generation, he is acutely aware of the languages of visual representation. While the investigation of photography as a signifying system some twenty years ago often seemed dryly pedantic, Byron's resort to the photographic is leavened with a fondness for the presence of these sculptures. It seems as though he wishes to rescue them from the rhetoric of art history surveys, and thereby return to them something of the wildness that supposedly resided in the physical objects.

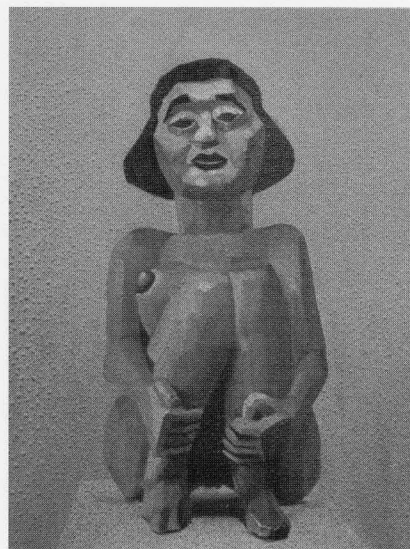
All of the photographic paintings are subjected to a unifying aesthetic that cuts across age and culture. Like the copy of Jean-Antoine Houdon's portrait bust of Voltaire, those of the African power object, Hans Arp's *Head of a Gnome*, and the other sculptures are marked by a series of illusionistic bubbles that ride across the surface of each canvas. The effect is reminiscent of specimens preserved in jars of formaldehyde. And in this sense, Byron performs the sorcerer's trick of keeping the dead with us. But the bubbles also mar the surface of the images. Instead of the pristine picture plane needed to confirm the illusion of transparency, the stained surface calls attention to its opacity. This emphasis on surface returns us to the modernist insistence that a painting is, before anything else, an arrangement of pigment on a canvas. Byron's interest in modernist sculpture is thereby reinforced through his homage to modern pictorial strategy.

The bubbles also suggest the passage of time. It is as if the photographs were casually stored in the nether regions of some archive, and were then accidentally damaged by water. The pretense, I think, is that the images have been rediscovered. In a sense, this transformation is analogous to the sculptural concept of a patina. The deliberate marking of the surface introduces a framing element that guides our response to the objects. We are in fact meant to see them as historical artifacts rescued from the dustbins of history.

This act of retrieval is central to the entire series because it reminds us that traditionally oil painting was often conceived as a surrogate for real things. Through the veristic rendering of texture and light, oil paintings allowed their owners to fantasize that the thing depicted could be possessed. For Byron, the possession encompasses both the sculptures and their photographs. Furthermore, the marking of the surface reminds us of process, one of the great painterly themes of the past century. Byron's series thereby acknowledges painting's different ambitions. Illusion and process are combined to evoke the past while retrieving it. The result is an act of reanimation, both sincere and calculating in its knowing manipulation of painterly codes.

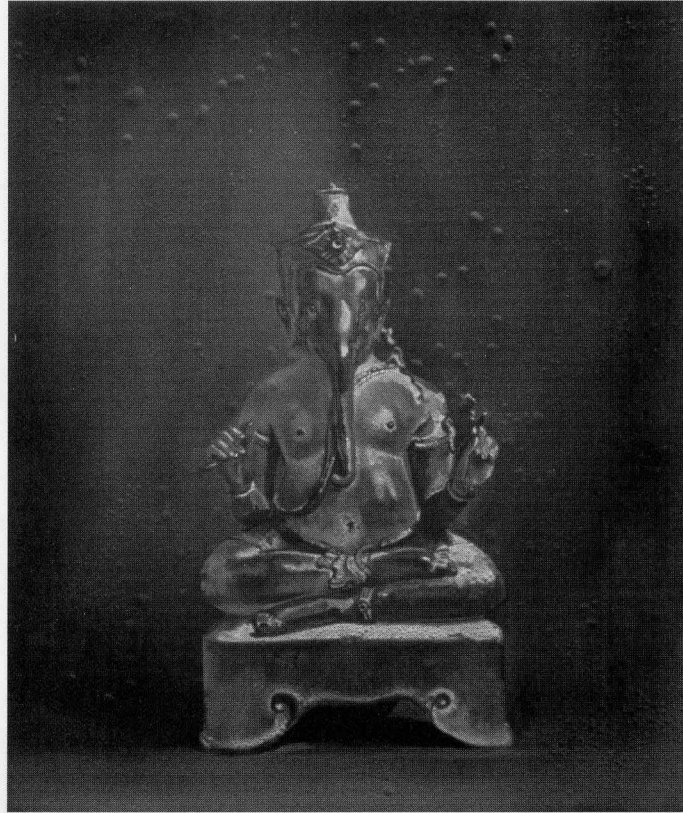
We are left with a postmodern assimilation of the modernist object, captured through the preeminent postmodernist medium, photography, which in turn is reassimilated to the medium of painting. Just as the tribal object, as well as its modernist surrogate, was to be the receptacle for a living force, so too is the painting to be the repository for a missing presence. The fetish, supposedly transferred from the tribal objects to the work of these European sculptors, is suddenly displaced into the realm of painterly illusion. In effect, Byron claims what the sculptors could not: the totemic presence of the fine art object. Yet he also recognizes that in the final accounting such presence is mere trickery.

David McCarthy  
Associate Professor of Art  
Rhodes College



*Portrait of Sculpture: Müller 1926,  
1997, oil on canvas, 14" x 11"*

*Portrait of Sculpture:  
Ganesha, 1998, oil on  
canvas, 24" x 20",  
Collection of Drew Elliott*



**Education**

- 1976 Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City,  
Missouri, B.F.A.
- 1981 Nova Scotia College of Art & Design,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, M.F.A.

**Selected Solo Exhibitions**

- 1983 White Columns, New York, New York  
Lawrence Oliver Gallery, Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania (1985, 1989, 1991)
- 1986 Lühring, Augustine & Hodes Gallery,  
New York, New York (1988)
- 1987 Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art,  
Ridgefield, Connecticut  
Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam, The  
Netherlands (1989, 1991)
- 1989 Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, Illinois  
Galerie Berini, Barcelona, Spain  
Baron/Boisante Gallery, New York,  
New York (1990, 1991, 1993, 1994,

1995, 1999)

- 1990 Galerie Gisela Capitain, Köln, Germany  
Lühring Augustine Hetzler, Santa Monica,  
California
- 1991 Anders Tornberg Gallery, Lund, Sweden  
Witte de With, Center for Contemporary  
Art, Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
Museum Boymans-van Beuningen,  
Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- 1993 Elga Wimmer Gallery, New York,  
New York  
Galerie Philippe Gravier, Paris, France
- 1994 Anders Tornberg Gallery, Lund, Sweden
- 1995 Olin Gallery, Roanoke College, Salem,  
Virginia
- 1996 St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri
- 1997 Flatlands Galerie, Utrecht, The  
Netherlands
- 1998 Schmidt Contemporary Art, St. Louis,  
Missouri (1999)

1999 Elias Fine Art, Alliston, Massachusetts  
2000 Gallery A, Chicago, Illinois  
2001 Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee

#### **Selected Group Exhibitions**

1983 Artist's Space, New York, New York  
1984 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
The Museum of Contemporary Art,  
New York, New York  
Museum of Modern Art, New York,  
New York  
Tyler School of Art, Temple University,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
The Clocktower, The Institute for Art and  
Urban Resources, New York, New York  
The New Museum, New York, New York  
1985 Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles,  
California  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The  
Netherlands (1993)  
1986 Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona  
(1992)  
1987 Museum Boymans-van Beuningen,  
Rotterdam, The Netherlands (1996)  
Tamayo Museum, Mexico City, Mexico  
1988 The Forum for Contemporary Art,  
St. Louis, Missouri

1989 Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York, New York (1990, 1992, 1993)  
Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn,  
New York  
1991 Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore,  
Maryland  
1992 Musée Départemental d'Art Ancien et  
Contemporain, Épinal, France  
1993 Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.  
1997 Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany  
2000 Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York

#### **Selected Public Collections**

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York  
City of Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
City of Lund, Sweden  
Musée Départemental d'Art Ancien et  
Contemporain, Épinal, France  
Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam,  
The Netherlands  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York  
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona  
St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri  
Tamayo Museum, Mexico City, Mexico  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,  
New York

*Marina Pacini, Curator & Catalog Production*  
*Larry Ahokas, Catalog Designer*  
*Carlisle Hacker, Catalog Editor*

Cover: *Head of a Gnome*, 1999, oil on canvas, 28" x 22"