

Wednesday, December 29, 2010

Making Modern Golems

Sculptor finds satisfaction in commercial sector

By Stephen Carter-Novotni



Justin Poole deals in body parts: arms, legs and full torsos. He handles heads or complete specimens only rarely.

"It's kind of unusual to do a body from head to toe," Poole says.

The Walnut Hills artist designs and builds mannequins and, occasionally, wax sculptures for curiosity museums. The mannequins end up showcasing the newest fashions in department stores. Many of the orders he receives are for spare parts to modify existing effigies.

Often, he's presented with a page ripped from a fashion magazine and asked to give form and depth to photos of models.

The mannequin business is "just like the fashion or automotive industries. They feel like they have to come up with something new all the time," Poole says.

Poole speaks plainly and admits the ironies that come packaged with his work. He's the most successful that he's ever been in his career as an artist, and yet he's working as an industrial designer, which is a far cry from the romantic career he once envisioned. And the studies of

anatomy that in centuries past might have led him to sculpt work that expressed emotions and ideas through the symbolism of the body are now purposed to essentially be fancy racks to sell clothing.

Developing figures for wax museums makes up a smaller part of Poole's business. He has formed replicas of the cast of *Twilight* as well as several dead U.S. presidents. Arnold Schwarzenegger's headless body is currently under construction in Poole's studio.

"I'm more known for my anatomical work and less known for my portraiture," says Poole, who is fabricating only the body of California's governor. "Another artist is developing Arnold's head. We'll put the whole thing together and, hopefully, it will look fabulous."

Poole, who studied to be a fine artist, first dabbled in mannequin design as a side gig in the late 1990s and has pursued it full time since 2004.

"What's strange to me is that I didn't take mannequins seriously for four or five years because I was going to be a 'real sculptor,' " Poole says. "But having positioned myself as a mannequin guy, all of a sudden I'm kind of interesting to people I would not have been interesting to before."

The projects are labor intensive and it takes weeks to complete a single work; Poole crafts about 20 every year.

The process requires him to bolt together a metal skeleton and build gritty clay on top of that to make the basic form. Skin is finished with a smoother variety of clay and then a plaster negative is made from the sculpture. The negative is used to form a polyurethane prototype that can be shipped off to the buyers.

Poole describes commercial art as "art with a purpose"; he expresses distaste for the popular ideal of the starving artist.

Also, he's interested in "things that take on a certain beauty that aren't supposed to be beautiful."

"If you set out to make a fine art object, I feel like it doesn't work," he says. "At least it doesn't work for me. It seems to me there has to be a void you're filling. Maybe I'm just a pessimist deep down inside, (but otherwise) you're going to make this thing that nobody asked for. I don't like it because I feel the object lacks a certain authority or authenticity."

Fine art has a dubious role in the world today because most of the heavy lifting, creatively speaking, has already been done, Poole says.

"I say that half jokingly and half seriously," he adds.

Poole happens to do quite a bit of fine art anyway. These pieces involve bodies swept into wide arcs of motion. The limbs are sometimes elongated and the figures stretch and merge like taffy into their environments. The work has tension and obvious sculptural attributes that keep the observer focused on the medium.

"I do dream of being a rich and famous fine artist who changes the sculptural world forever," Poole says. "If I'm ever going to get there, there's something I'm learning about mannequins that's crucial."

{Island}