

The End of Modernism and the Reflection of Human Condition in Figurative Sculpture

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Abstract

This descriptive-analytical paper aimed at analyzing contemporary human condition in figurative sculpture during the end of modernism. It aims at identifying the origins of major and recurrent patterns in the works of contemporary figurative sculptors. The major patterns stem from feeling of being lost and the gap in personal identity, which in turn, stem from the unrepeatable events during the decades of late 20th century; challenges, such as the hasty life in the age of technology, expeditions, illness, poverty, and so on. Unlike bygone artists, contemporary artists no longer see human beings as a beautiful, powerful, and different creature. Rather they consider him as a product of pain, suffering from personal and social wounds. Since works of art reflect the zeitgeist and dominant thoughts of an era, this paper briefly reviews the elements affecting earlier figurative works of art, such as mythology and religion, which also appeared in the humanism of modernity. Then, it analyzes and criticizes the founding concepts of contemporary figurative sculpture as one of the various expressions of modern art.

Keywords: Sculpture, figurative sculpture, contemporary human, end of modernism

Introduction

This paper aims at analyzing human condition as reflected in figurative sculpture during an era referred to as the end of modernism. Throughout history, a large number of volumetric works of art reflect the form and shape of human body. These sculptures of humans reflected the zeitgeist. In other words, they reflected what considered valuable in an era. The large number of such figurative works of art in different eras, lands which were far from one another, and various cultures reflects the fact that human image per se was superior to any other form. This was the case when humans were seeking for something to guarantee their survival, and hence made effigies for liturgical purposes. This was again the case when people made ideal human forms as a sign of respect for supernatural forces or what was beyond their imagination. Human body sculptures were always used for portraying spiritual and religious concepts, the unique tales of the winners of major historical and political events, and identity. Western perception of human body images owes much to ancient Greece. Greek thinking was founded on reasoning and experience and dissociated from mythology. Renaissance, which is considered as the European flourishing era, reproduced Greek culture and art. It marks the beginning of contemporary Western art and civilization. Renaissance rationalism fundamentally changed Europe and lead into the Enlightenment. The Age of Enlightenment considered man as a social being who is based on reason and wisdom. This modern humanism dominated figurative works of art. The Thinker sculpture by Rodin expresses the beginning of modern era, which is based on personal awareness and the thinking of the genius man of the century seeking to understand laws of nature.

Artists had no chance against their precise and fine opponent, camera, which registered every real moment at an amazing pace. Therefore, in line with the increasing innovations in all aspects of

life, they also ventured new experiences. They set aesthetics as the core of their art studies and promoted the concept of art for art's sake. Although giving up the concept of human, which dominated volumetric works of art, seemed difficult, modern art ventured changing the dominance of human figure for half a century and achieved brilliant solutions in abstraction. Finally, in 1960s, with the rise of minimalist movement, human figure lost its dominance over art and gave place to abstraction.

With the failure of human reason, the occurrence of World War I and World War II, and man's failure to address environmental issues, illnesses, and global threats, having taken a new form, human figure returned to the realm of art. First, artists did not feel any necessity in making 3-dimensional representations of human body. Rather, they held live performances and artistic events with their own bodies. Later, in the 70s and 80s, with the spread of this condition and postmodern concepts, which challenged all dominant modernist theories, human body also emerged differently in volumetric works of art. It was no longer considered as a dominant subject in modern art, but as merely an option among hundreds of other options a modern artist had.

This time, human body is portrayed with all its reality. His body no longer seemed powerful, heroic, divine, and ideal, rather is a real human being with all its natural changes; a human being who falls victim to illnesses, discriminations, crimes, and wars of the modern world.

Julia Kristeva, contemporary philosopher and psychoanalyst, believes that human beings suffer from weakness and fear in the face of natural processes of their body. Modern human seeks to find his lost identity. Feeble, grotesque, and chopped-down representations of human body express man's fragility and identity disorder. The major concern and criticism of human figure artists is the intervention of technology and genetics in human nature and reproducing living creatures and the direction this post-body situation may take.

Human figure throughout Art History

Human figure has attracted the attention of many artists as one of the oldest and most significant motives in the art of many cultures.

It was also of interest to many sculptors throughout history. They represented their own bodies either nude or clothed.

Before the rise of urbanization, humans expressed their survival needs through painting and carving. They depicted humans and animals, individual human beings as well as people in groups, as they were engaged in activities, such as hunting, war, magical dances, and rituals.

Since ancient times, human figure in its ideal form has been of concern as a way of respecting Gods. Based on their climate and the civilization in which they lived as well as the beliefs and dominance of their rulers, artists made various representation of human figure. Despite their explicit differences had some features in common. Their major subject is war, battle, and rituals.

Throughout art history, human figure sculptors expressed divine concepts and specific narratives under the dominance of religion, myths, ideology, politics, and national identity.(Callins, 2007). Humans had to aspire to the idealism in which the Greeks believed. Since Renaissance, ancient Greek ideals of physical beauty made its way into Europe.(Robertson-McDaniel,2010).

While during the Middle Ages, the sinful nature of human beings was of concern, during Renaissance, human beings were believed to be capable and competent. The firm acceptance of reality and processes, understanding the world as an object (abjectology), and the focus on exploring, understanding, and ordering the world characterize this important historical era. These changes are also reflected in Renaissance sculpture and painting. Attending to nature, human body, and exact representations were the outcomes of such changes. While artistic representation also existed in preceding eras, Renaissance representations no longer maintained their holy and symbolic

character, rather, they were more concerned with simulating the material world. This was followed by the mathematical discoveries and the curiosity regarding human anatomy (Bocola, 2008: 23). This humanist view emerged in central perspective. Human beings used to be the main subject of art. Similarly human eye became the creative focal point of this art (Bocola, 2008). This attitude fundamentally changed Europe and lead into the Enlightenment.

Modern human being

The achievements and changes of Renaissance, which started from the 14th century, encompassed various fields. This, once again, made human beings the center of study after Greek classicism. This, in turn, prepared the ground for the spread of rationalism and science.

The approach, which started in Renaissance, reached its peak during the Enlightenment. This approach involves considering human beings as a social creature or social being. While it attracted attention since the beginning of Renaissance and rise of humanism, it was strengthened by the philosophers of the 18th century (Nozari, 2006).

Modern humanism was also reflected in works of art. Having experienced a halt during the 19th century, sculpture became a prominent art on the eve of the 20th century. Its prominence rose even higher during the 20th century. The sculptor who almost redesigned the future of sculpture in the early 20th century was Auguste Rodin. Having studied the nature and Renaissance art, especially the works of Michelangelo and Donatello, discovered significant solutions in sculpture. Rodin reviewed his models in change and motion. Most of his research is concurrent with Freud's discoveries regarding the unconscious and understanding human differences, in contrast to logical body proportions. He believed that what distinguished him from Greeks is his search for individual mentalities, rather than mere physical logic. Therefore, ancient Rome and Greece took form with human awakening, while primitive modern era was defined by considering human as a divine being who sought to understand natural laws and use them to rule the world.(Bocola, 2006: 205).

Relying on his reason and science, the modern genius man made a large number of discoveries and invented new things. On the eve of the 20th century, European economic and social structures changed drastically. Modernity was one of the major achievements of the Industrial Revolution. The introduction of machinery to people's life leads into extensive changes in the modern world to the extent that changed the overall conditions of human life. A new kind of human being was being formed.

The long-lasting relationship between industry and agriculture changed drastically due to the gradual replacement of traditional production techniques by industrial capitalist ones. This profoundly affected people's perception of their lives, themselves, and the world (Nozari, 2006). On the other hand, the spread of education and free education made science and knowledge available for everyone. This freed people from illusions, superstitions, and myths. Therefore, evolution was reconstructed in its truest sense; the consistent transition from the realm of necessities to that of freedom.

Towards abstraction

Artists were no exception in experiencing increasing changes in all aspects of life. With their various experiences and avant-garde tendencies in the early 20th century, artists raised modern art to its peak.

In 20th-century modern art, where representation was no longer dominant in art, famous artists, including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, and so on, continued figurative art. In fact, giving up human figure, which was the main subject of expression in art for more than 6000 years, did not seem to be easy. Picasso's research concerning the mutual

relationship between space and volume continued by sculptors, such as Alexander Archipenko and Henry Moore.

Modern artists simplified human form. By making cavities inside the body, they allowed the space to be surrounded by the material, rather than being enclosed by it. Henry Moore separated body form by various pieces to distinguish between human body anatomy and landscape (Collins, 2007). Therefore, the historical concept of sculpture as a solid mass surrounded by the space was reversed. Greenberg, the art critic of the 20th century, believes that modern art continued with an explicit divergence from Renaissance perspective and finally, abstraction, which is the most prominent achievement of modernism in art, dominated art during 60s. (Bocola, 2008). 205). The significance of this achievement is compared to that of technological and industrial revolution. Abstract art clearly marked the beginning of a new era in aesthetics.

The tried to play the role of a superhero who ventured to rediscover human nature. In this way, aesthetics emerged as the center of a world that had no center and the concept of art for art's sake promoted (Nozari, 2006). Hence, visual arts moved towards absolute abstraction. Rosalind Krauss, contemporary critic, believes Monument to Balzac by Rodin to be the closest example to the abstract symbol of the 19th century. Clive Bell, a modern formalist critic, says: In order to understand a work of art, no information regarding the life, issues, and emotions of the work is needed. The only thing that is required is to identify form, color, and the three-dimensional space (Hanfling, 1999).

Burnham believes that 20th-century sculptor's motivation by juxtaposing naturalism and human figure is not to annihilate biological reconstruction. In fact, their motivation is to contribute to understand the fact that reviving lifeless material is in vain, as well as reconstructing human being. Therefore, man turns to machines, despite their inefficiency. However, they were the only way to reconstruct life with understanding or what could be considered as lively constructs. Consequently, modern sculpture's concern is to produce machines, which randomly get closer to motivating life (Burnham, 1973).

Modern Man and Re-emergence of Human Figure in the 70s

Modern man is a different man; different from what he used to be. He is limited in a body, which has been wounded numerous by social, political, and cultural pressures. He could be considered as merely a combination of skin, bone, and various types of liquids, which occasionally remind him of his weak points. He has lost his identity, which used to be considered as his natural reality. How is he going to reconstruct this lost identity in the new realm? How is the identity of contemporary man defined? More importantly, what is its meaning? Modern human is surrounded by questions of this type. One may ask "Why should we see it?" and "What is its position in the modern art?" Answering these questions requires a deeper study, which should be carried out as a research in modern art and the role of body in it. Through a review of modern art, essentially figurative art and comparing it to its preceding era, various changes and interpretations will be made explicit. Displaying an incomplete or fragmented body, exploiting it as a medium of art for displaying pressures, wounds, and social and cultural violence, which in turn, lead into grotesque bodies, and finally displaying bodies equipped with modern technologies, in which humans are gradually immersed, are of the issues studied in this area.

Human figure as the dominant subject of contemporary sculpture was removed from works of art in the 60s by the artists of that decade. Later, the proliferation of nuclear missiles by two superpowers, Russia and the U.S., brought with it extensive concerns among all people, especially artists. These concerns lead into a new trend in art. Artists no longer felt the need to make three-dimensional masses. Rather, they exploited their own live organs and physical motions in their

performances and art events. In this way, they endeavored to express new concepts, such as nuclear war, global domination, gender, identity, illness, and racial discrimination,

The late 70s and early 80s marked the return to figurative art in both painting and sculpture in Europe. A number of German artists, including Georgg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, and Marcus Lupertz, with a reference to recent German art, started their art activity, under neo-expressionism. A group of Italian artists, such as Enzo Cucchi, Sandro Chia, and Mimmo Paladino, taking their past legacy into consideration, created figurative sculptures with an archaic quality.

Hence, human body became the subject of study and research in sculpture. However, art collector's interest in figurative art had an effect on the return. Following its renewed commencement in the 70s, human figure was no longer the major subject that dominated Western art. It was merely an option among many expression options in contemporary art. According to Zygmunt Bauman, this plurality of art expression, which is one of the characteristics of post 70s world, is in contrast to the homogeneous and seemingly consistent modern world. He considers postmodernism as a culture, which is subject to plurality. (Nozari, 2000).

Contemporary Man, the Victim of Science and Reason Failure

World War I, which was shortly followed by World War II, revealed the latent destructive potential of modern science and highlighted the failure of reason and science. This, in itself, led into various theories and schools of thought, especially in humanities and social sciences during 60s and 70s.

According to many thinkers, including Theodor Adorno, following the extensive mass killings and other catastrophic events, progress could not be taken seriously any longer. During the last three decades of the 20th century, by distancing from modernism and becoming a reaction against it, postmodernism came to include various fields, such as art, economics, and social society. Postmodernists did not consider postmodernism as a mental or absurd intellectual game, rather a reaction against the most serious spiritual and philosophical crises of modern era, which resulted from rationality and enlightenment.

War casualties, environmental pollution, and the pervasive spread of AIDS made human body, which used to be considered as a hero or a symbolic realization of virtue since then, seem the victim of illnesses and global threats. The fate of contemporary man, his struggles with his identity and finally, his new definitions of values attributed to him, made up a large portion of the concerns of contemporary artists. Contemporary art considers human body as a powerful tool to display natural or unnatural changes, such as delivery, cosmetic surgery, and even pains that are caused by violence. Figurative art displays such images in the form of violent and agonizing scenes or in the form of humorous bodies.

Kristeva uses the term "abjection" in this regard. Abjection, in contemporary art, refers to feelings of extreme fear and weakness caused by changes, natural body processes, or the injuries they bring with themselves. In 1980, she wrote "Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection." In her book, she explores the meaning and resonance of object as well as the ways through social objectivity tried to limit human subjectivity. (Pooke, Newall, 2013) 201).

Louise Borgeois, Robert Gober, and Kiki Smith held an exhibition at Whitney Museum of American Art under the title "Abjection Art," in which body was portrayed as injured, wretched, and disturbed with a focus on political aspects related to gender and ethnic identity.

The works of the American artist, Kiki Smith, was the true example of abject in art. Until 1988, his works included a portrayal of the inner contents of body, like guts, or cut organs which are placed beside one another. The relationship between the outer part and the inner liquid is as if the artist portrayed both together. His audience was shocked by his early works. In 1985, he cooperated

with New York's Emergency Medical Service, where his idea of mutilated body was formed (Causey, 1998).

Following the death of his sister in 1988 due to AIDS, he produced many works portraying human being and its vulnerabilities. The existence of fine material, such as paper, wax, porcelain, and glass in the building strengthened this concept of instability and weakness (Finger, 2013).

Mutilated Body and Grotesque Body

Contemporary figurative artists were highly concerned with displaying mutilated body. These artists had a living experience and memory full of war, violence, and injustice. Mutilated body in contemporary art is, in a way, the image the artist has of contemporary man and does not consider him as the capable, beautiful, and ideal being he used to be. This approach stemmed from 20th-century history of art. Linda Nochlin, in her lecture titled "The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity" gives a review of 19th-century history of art and analyzes this issue: In the history of modern representation, there are eras where mutilated body is not only a metaphor in the eyes of the spectator, rather a historical truth (Nochlin, 2007)

Mutilated body can be considered as grotesque body, which has lost its integrity. The critic, Sally Banes, says: Classical body, which is closed and perfect, has now come to an end, in contrast to grotesque body, which is solid, unbalanced, incomplete, open, and full of cavities.

Robert Gober uses wax to portray various parts of body, which are directly molded by corresponding organs. His works refer to the concern of destruction of man by AIDS. At times, he emphasizes some body parts by putting candles on them, as a metaphor of vow. Separated parts of body in his works and the works of his contemporary artists are based on an important period in history, known as post-Lacanian period. It is related to fragility and identity disorder, rather than integrity. Lacan says: Ego is always an agent, lacking originality, whose responsibility and function is to hide a disturbing fragmentation. (Leader-Groz, 2009: 26). In contrast to what is seen in public media, such as TV and movies, in contemporary art, the humorous use of human body and distancing from showing beauty in human body is observed.

Contemporary artists hold that in order to understand modern man's condition, his body should be shown in its natural form, with all its changes. Conditions, such as old age, disability, pain, illness, and death, which remind us of our weakness and mortality, should not be concealed. It is due to the fact that there are many people all around the world who live with scars due to surgery, disability, and old age, but are full of vitality. This way of thinking in art and sculpture led into various forms of human figure, while the common stereotype of ideal body was questioned.

Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian critic, uses "carnival" and grotesque body in similar situations. What is meant by "integrity," "beauty," and "health" and who can define them. (Moszynska, 2013).

Women and Body Reconstruction

The late 60s and 70s and the end of modern era marked the beginning of a new era, which is called postmodernism. More than any other era, there are a women artists in postmodernism. This coincides with feminist movement, which is one of the major approaches in postmodernism. Early feminist artists, used women experiences, feelings, dreams, and objectives, as their topic for creating new works of art. They continued this path to raise awareness against traditional patriarchy. In the early 70s, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro held an art installation, called Womanhouse, in which sexual violence, mental confinement, the traditional role of women, and the social norms limiting women beauty, were exhibited. (Robertson-MacDaniel, 2010: 82).

On the other hand, women undergo much pressure in Western societies to achieve ideals of beauty, which are false ideals. Propaganda, films, and other visual media try to dominate certain

models of beauty, as if other parts of body are abominable. Moreover, the importance controlling natural body processes, such as physical process, aging, weight, and fertility, is also portrayed.

Various artists, including Marta Wilson and Maureen Connor studied the effects of such disorders, excessive plastic surgeries and self-punishing endeavors to keep up with social ideals. Women legend of thin body is portrayed in one of Maureen Connor's works, in which a stretched tight dress is displayed with no body in it. It is a metaphor to striving to show women as excessively thin. (Robertson-MacDaniel, 2010).

Body Convergence and Identity

Kristeva, in her book, *Strangers to Ourselves*, refers to a stranger that lives in every one of us. She believes that every one of us is constituted from a Self and an Other, which is stranger to us and this internal conflict, which constitutes identity, is like an incurable wound. She holds that the stranger, who strangely lives in us, is our veiled identity (Kristeva, 2010: 32).

Unlike ancient man, contemporary man is confined in a body filled with scars from social, cultural, and political pressures. He has lost his identity, which was considered to be due to his wisdom. The question is how to reconstruct it in the new context.

On the other hand, general management and of jobs and managing almost all social relations with the huge bureaucratic system, leaves no room for growth and individual creativity. People have few opportunities for their specific experiences and cannot reflect their individuality in interaction with the environment (Bocola, 2008). In fact, the need for identity and self-motivation for most people is satisfied through consumption.

The contemporary art of body representation mostly overlaps with the theme of identity. Moreover, our body has the responsibility of showing visual characteristics, which reflect our own identity and that of others. It shows characteristics, such as age, gender, race, and so on. (In fact, body could be viewed under the lens of typology. Umberto Eco defines body as a "communication machine" which is intermingled with culture. In fact, body has the main position in expressing culture and cultural identity through its shape, clothes, jewelry and other decorations that by which it is covered. (Edgar-Secvik, 2008: 68). Therefore, artists who aim at showing a wide variety of identity, involve themselves with representing body. Contemporary artists show human form as a real creature, which is a combination of skin and bone. They also represent body in the various forms it can take as a cultural product, such as identity. (Robertson-MacDaniel, 2010).

Body and Technology

Representing the weakness and failure of modern man is not limited to this. Other forms include equipping it with technology and using reinforcing artificial organs. Other concerns of contemporary man include bodies equipped with contemporary technology, various shapes decorated by plastic surgery, and artificial reproduction. In the late 20th century, with the increasing developments in medicine, technological facilities, and the discoveries of genetics, great changes are made in human body. Plastic surgeries, robots, and mechanical arms are as capable as, if not stronger, than those of man.

The use of the term "post-human," Jeffery Deitch shows that man has entered a new phase of evolution, in which technology and computers science can reconstruct and add to human body in artificial form and take it to levels beyond its biotechnological evolution. (MacDaniel-Robertson, 2010)

Some artists consider this new world attractive and exciting. They venture to create works of art, which are considered disgusting by others. The audience may find themselves reluctant in accepting them.

Influenced by genetics and stem cells, Patricia Pccinini makes the coexistence of children and strange creatures possible. In her lecture in 2003, in the college of fine arts in Tokyo, she describes her works as follows: Whether we like these creatures or not, we are responsible for keeping them and caring form them. We have created them and it is important to take care of them. They satisfy the feeling of providence we have. (Bagrina,2011).

Orlan, French artist, changed her face with 9 plastic surgeries from 1990 to 1993 and considers them artistic performances. She has displayed scenes of the surgeries in galleries around the world. Each surgery is based on examples from the history of art selected by the artist which have changed her face: The forehead of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa or the chin of Sandro Botticelli's Venus. Her bloody and bruised images during surgeries and her modified faces has resulted in several debates on whether she is creating works of art and also the relationship between sculptures and plastic surgery and the relationship between identity and physical appearance (Robertson-MacDaniel, 2010).

Wim Delvoye's Cloaca project was launched in 2000. It includes the installation of large cars which mechanically reconstruct a function similar to the human body's digestion system. This project, which was created with the help of biologists, chemists and engineers, refers to the concept of consumerism in today's world.

Stelarc is one of the artists who support the development of technology. He suggests making a stronger, more invincible body with higher brain capacity and fewer organs and also supports implanting small robots in the body to improve auditory, visual and other senses. He believes that technological redesigning of the body is not merely an exciting experience but it is also essential for the survival of the human being. (Robertson-MacDaniel, 2010).

He has transplanted technologically-complex artificial organs in his body and he has had a variety of performances. He is in fact trying to create a kind of cyborg.

Conclusion

Considering what has been mentioned, the following conclusions have been made: Undoubtedly, the representation of the human figure has been the most common subject throughout the history which has been used in the works of many artists. These works, which are always considered as a reflection of the human condition and the beliefs governing his era, have been presented in different forms: whether, in the past, when the artist created statuette of worship based on mythological beliefs, or when, filled with joy and human pride, he made figurines which represented the ideal man who was full of wisdom; a wisdom which faced failure at the end of modernism and abandoned the contemporary Western man alone with anxiety and threats of wars, diseases and natural disasters, the influx of technology and, ultimately, environmental pollution.

The contemporary Western man is a damaged man portrayed by modern artists with all his reality away from perfectionism and symbolism. From the 1960s onward, the condition governing the human life seems pluralist; a condition which results in the reconsideration of many general concepts such as ideal beauty. Contemporary art finds the human body a powerful media for displaying these changes; changes that would sometimes diminish the contemporary man's identity as well. In search of his identity, contemporary man represents an alien who, according to Kristeva, lives inside us and is the hidden face of our identity. The display of mutilated body pieces that have lost their integrity, grotesque bodies that are not as beautiful and ideal as before, or technology-dependent bodies which evoke the image of future man are the products of the human condition in today's contemporary figurative art.

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