

PHOTO BY MICHEL PILON

EVAN PENNY

Figurative sculpture made strange and new: Evan Penny's long journey into the mystery of essential form

By GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Evan Penny is building his career as an artist upon one central and absorbing problem: how to Make It New when you're making figurative sculpture. Figurative sculpture, moreover, of a particularly high mimetic cast. That he is succeeding in keeping traditional sculptural forms meaningfully alive and continually inventive is a tribute to his tenacity as an artist. That he is bringing to ground (indeed to their grass roots) some perennially useful questions about the nature of sculpture itself keeps him, at this late time in the bedazzling history of postmodernism, authentic.

His authenticity as a maker of genuinely new works tends to steal over viewers of Penny's sculptures even as they are preparing to relegate them all to the trash-bin of academic figuration. Painter John Scott told me recently how impressed he had been with the fate of Penny's sculpture *Ali* (1982-84) at the hands of his class of hard-to-please determinedly avant-garde students of the Ontario College of Art. Scott was escorting them through the six-gallery progress of the great sprawling *New City of Sculpture* exhibition held in Toronto in the summer of 1984. When they fetched up at Gallery 76, *Ali* stood out from the welter of nervous constructions in papier-mâché and plywood and neon and cast-off clothing like a Ming vase at a jumble sale. As one voice the students condemned it to the shades of the retrogressive. It was only after an hour with the frangible fashionability of the rest of the work, Scott pointed out, that all the students came back to Penny's compelling little figurative piece, as the sculpture that seemed to all of them the hardest to crack, the least exhaustible, the most fulfilling.

Why this should be is an absorbing story.

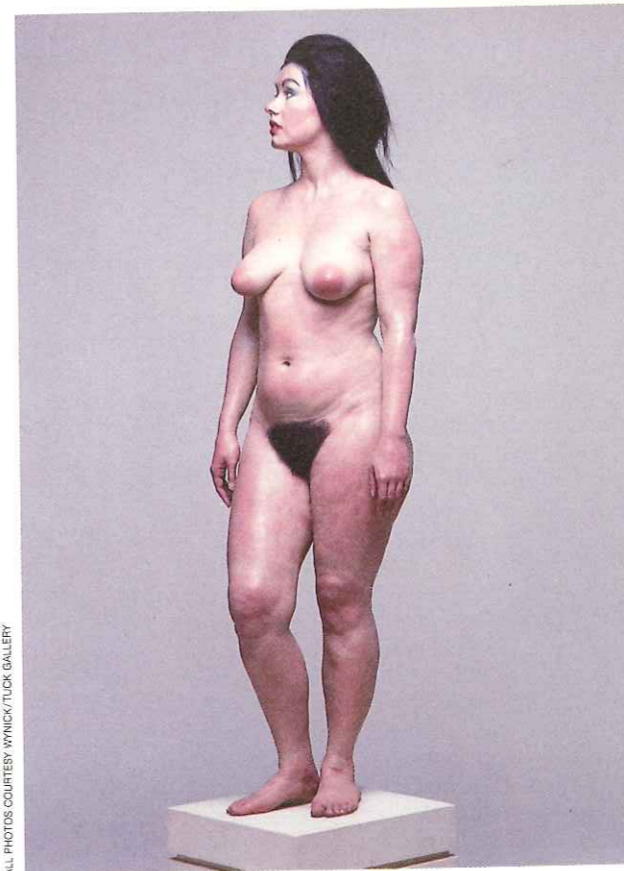
Ali was the first Evan Penny I remember paying respectful attention to. *Ali* is uncanny because she is over-real. It's as if *Ali* were a 35mm slide you had slipped into your projector and were trying to focus. You twist the lens and bring her detailing up into a state of reasonable crispness. Then — if it were possible — you

twist the lens still further and somehow bring *Ali* into a precision no real woman could carry in life. Her flesh, for example, is too breathlessly coloured, too hot. Her skin crawls with too much direction. Her lines and crevasses are too diagrammatic, too grammatical. Her hands are too jewel-like or nut-like or creaturish. Gravity appears to pull at her with the mercilessness of a command. Her hair is real. You keep your eyes on her, trying to catch her drawing a breath. She is, as Penny himself puts it, "hyper-articulated".

That she is assuredly more than real links her — at least linguistically — with surrealism. If it is true that, as Mies van der Rohe put it, God is in the details, then *Ali* is on her way to canonization. The oddness of *Ali*'s detailing, however, lies in the way it is smoothed down into the figure's entire body, the way Penny rubs it into the figure's form so that it functions as incident (narrative, almost) but never merely as ornamentation. Detail, in *Ali*, is a structural element. Essence, not embellishment.

This is important because it helps point up something of Penny's method as a sculptor and assists in isolating some of his ambitions for form. For if *Ali*'s prodigious journey through sculptural hyper-reality is discomfiting to witness, it springs from a rock-steady understanding, on Penny's part, of the way *Ali* got where she is and what that might mean as a sculptural procedure.

One of the reasons *Ali* is as worked up as she is stems from the fact that she has first been modelled from life — in clay. When Penny has cut and shaped and pushed and pummeled his clay sculpture as close to life as he wants it, he dismisses the model, takes a plaster mold of the clay (a so-called "waste mold" that is later broken up), casts the sculpture in polyester resin, and then continues to shape the hard but workable resin into something that — while it continues to echo (or quote) the biological givens of the original model — now enters the realm of pure form, directed and modulated by the sculptor. This sculptural extrapola-



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Ali (1982-84), POLYESTER RESIN, OIL PAINT, MIXED MEDIA, HEIGHT 132cm (HEIGHT 52"). PHOTO BY JOHN STRUTHERS.

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tion from the model is both the means by which the work achieves its sometimes hallucinatory over-reality, and is also the working time during which Penny is able to depart from the tense imperatives of the work's closure upon verisimilitude.

You'd wonder — given the eerie likenesses Penny gets — how much room there would be left over for any decision-making on his part. According to him, there is a lot. In the first place, Penny points out, his method of paring down a block of clay into the semblance of somebody real involves a procedure not unrelated to what Cézanne spent a lifetime doing to Mont Sainte-Victoire: rasping it down from undifferentiated bulk to a faceted sort of life stroke by stroke by stroke. I confessed to Penny that the thought of making sculptures like his, with their uncanny realism, utterly exhausted me. He assured me it wasn't that difficult. For while each piece took an alarming number of hours to complete (about 400 to 600 for a major work), it was really a matter of cutting slice after slice of clay away from the figure's emerging shape. Beginning from broad flat passages of uninflected body surface, Penny endlessly refines the sculpture's mass by progressively breaking up these large areas into smaller and smaller areas. If you do this a sufficient number of times (a huge number of times) you get detail — or information, as Penny prefers to think of it. Enough information, and you arrive at a likeness. More information than that, and you arrive at the over-achievement, formally speaking, of a work like *Ali*.

Fundamental to Penny's way of working is his concern not to

project onto an emerging form a three-dimensional vision of the completed sculpture (this being the case even with the live model standing before him). Rather, he says he maintains a rigorous two-dimensional idea of the work — as if he were contour-drawing. Gradually the spatial relationships within the sculpture come into focus, and are fine-tuned: the wedge of space between the arm and the body, the scoop of space between the legs, all of these subordinate clauses of the growing paragraph that is the sculpture's final form are now written into the work. As the work advances steadily towards what appears to be realism, Penny refines the ever-smaller planes of the sculpture's mass until, like a Cézannesque membrane of individual strokes of paint, the work becomes a shimmering network of tiny scraped and rubbed planes. It is as if Penny progressively focuses the movement of his hands until — with highly particularized moments of formal incident like the model's nipples or eyes or fingernails — he is working on planes as small as passages of pointillism. Realism is thus born out of a languorous implosion from the unformed realm of pure plastic possibility to the carefully controlled birth of form. The emergence of an ideal.

It is this adherence to the progress of personal expression within his figures that keeps Penny sculpting from the model and that separates him so dramatically from artists who produce their figurative sculptures by casting them directly from the model's body. Although startlingly lifelike in some respects, the cast sculptures of such artists as Duane Hanson and (of more direct

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importance to Penny because of his concentration on the nude) John De Andrea, for example, are of necessity reproductions of the model, duplications rather than representations. As far as Evan Penny is concerned, the detailing you get from duplication (i.e. casting) is essentially uninflected, undistinguished in narrative density from the rest of the work. For Penny, detail is the route to the mystery of essential form, the signposting of the work's structural verities. Body-casting, Penny believes, almost always results in a sculpture that looks and feels hollow, that is inevitably something less than life. Modelling, by contrast, allows him to add to his works something more than life itself has provided as a guide. It is, after all, Penny feels, in the manipulation of information that the presence of the artist is indelibly made known.

With the exception of a number of earlier works — like the startling and ghostly-grey full-size *Norma* of 1979-80 — Penny's sculptures are invariably smaller than lifesize. Most of them are either three-quarters lifesize (about 122cm or — like *Ali* — four-fifths lifesize, about 132cm). There are a number of reasons for this, the most elegant being that constructing a highly mimetic figure that is smaller than life is an excellent way to head off anyone's assumption that you've body cast it and not modelled it. It results, furthermore, in a sometimes unsettling confrontation with the viewer who frequently finds the sculpture standing closer to him than he'd first imagined it to be. All of Penny's reduced figures appear to be small initially because you imagine them to be farther away than they are. Except that the insistent detailing militates against their recession. The figures may be reduced, but they do not blur away. On the contrary, they challenge you with the heightened syntax of their articulation, forcing themselves into an intimacy that can become, if you're not ready to accept it, quite aggressive. On the other hand, Penny's sculptures sometimes seem touchingly vulnerable — both because of their delicacy and because of (the two go hand in hand) this same small scale. Their scale gives the viewer, as Penny himself puts it, "a quick way of entering" the sculptures' field of influence — sometimes too quick a way.

Evan Penny's sculptural originality is to some degree the product of the surprising amount of training in minimalism and neo-constructivist sculpture he absorbed and transmuted while attending the Alberta College of Art, both as an undergraduate (1971-75), a graduate student (1977-78) and as an instructor (1978-79 and 1982-83). While the school taught a certain orthodox brand of figurative sculpture as well, Penny was soon making sculptures in the vaguely organic mode of Arp and, following that, flat open constructivist works in the manner of Anthony Caro and Douglas Bentham. It was while Penny was attending the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop in 1977 that Caro, who was teaching there that summer, saw both his figurative pieces and his Caro-esque works. "He encouraged me to push vigorously into the figurative," Penny, who now lives in Toronto, told me. He also suspects that Caro was not greatly interested in the appearance in the world of a plague of near-Caros.

And besides, Penny was more and more feeling the need to attach himself somehow — meaningfully and not just slavishly — to the long and powerful tradition of figurative sculpture. He also felt, he says, the need to annex a greater realism. The trouble was the more he felt the desire to align himself with sculptural tradition, the more substantially alienated he felt from it. The pieces he made during this time (like the profoundly disturbing *Norma*) are — while highly finished and lavishly detailed —

minimal, too, in the very specialized sense that whatever presence they have, whatever rhythm or implied movement the figure has, whatever pose they assume, is derived entirely from the givens of the model herself (almost all of Penny's sculptures at this time were of women). "I saw myself as utterly vulnerable," Penny told me, "without a legitimate place anywhere within the history of figurative sculpture. I saw myself as standing entirely alone, not as a function of pride but rather as a result of isolation, exclusion. That is what accounts for the sculptural neutrality of my pieces at that time and the degree to which each of them was invariably isolated statement about a particular individual [as with *Norma*, whose sinuous stance derives from an osteological affliction of the model's and not some decision on Penny's part about gracefulness]. So determined was I, at this point, to rid my sculptures of any trace of gratuitous gesture or narrative," Penny explained, "that I couldn't even listen to classical music while I worked. Classical music was full of the stuff of gesture and allusion, and I was working very hard to keep contemporary. The later pieces, like *Ali*, for example, are more legitimately connected to the figurative tradition." In these more recent pieces, Penny allows (indeed welcomes) gestures, allusions, leitmotifs, paraphrases of traditional sculptural moments and methods. In his latest works, he goes more than half-way to meet the classical tradition head-on, embracing it with the unembarrassed vigour and resolve of an artist who has spent a profitable apprenticeship mapping a carefully conceived sculptural territory he can now inhabit with authority.

Penny's newest sculpture is almost entirely devoted to the limning of the male body — the male body as it has perambulated through history, accumulating the visions of everyone from the ancient Greeks through Michelangelo to Rodin and Giacometti. The new Pennys have been based on a solitary male figure named Jim. *Jim* the sculpture — the ur-sculpture from which have come the rest of the new male works — is a four-fifths lifesize figure (140cm) in polychromed polyester resin made in 1985. Once Penny has made a fully finished figure in polyester resin, he makes a high-quality rubber mold from which he can then fashion variants of the existing sculpture. Out of the protean *Jim*, for example, have come a number of additional works: Jim has turned up recently as a torso, classically bereft of his head, his arms, his legs, and (as if somebody in the fullness of time had knocked it off) his penis. By far the most provocative and satisfying of the variant Jims, however, are the double sculptures: complex works usually involving a realistically presented Jim (replete with naturalistic colour) and, in addition, a derivative Jim in natural bronze. What makes these double sculptures so powerful is the fact that the bronze "shadow" is in fact *not* merely a shadow of the naturalistic Jim, but rather a simplified, idealized, rather classically Greek-appearing figure. In Penny's *Male Shadow Grouping* (1985), for example, the casually positioned fully coloured figure of the man Jim stands next to (but facing away from) the shadow Jim. The shadow Jim has the blandly lovely features of an idealized ancient Greek athlete. Where Jim's hair is cropped close, the shadow's flows in bronze ringlets. The shadow's stance is musical, conventionalized, its right arm languidly raised. Jim's arms dangle at his sides. The shadow Jim is Penny's rereading of art history. Jim himself is the guy next door.

The dichotomy is a powerful trope. It bristles with associations, all of them productive, none of them merely trivial. The two-ness of the Jim-shadow sculptures sets up a long double-list



MALE SHADOW GROUPING (1985). BRONZE, POLYESTER RESIN, OIL PAINT, HEIGHT 139.7cm (HEIGHT 55"). PHOTO BY JOHN STRUTHERS.

NORMA (1979-80),
POLYESTER RESIN AND OIL
PAINT, HEIGHT 180cm
(HEIGHT 71"). PHOTO BY
JOHN DEAN.



In his latest works, Penny meets the classical tradition head-on, embracing it with the unembarrassed vigour and resolve of an artist inhabiting his sculptural territory with authority.

of potential readings. Obviously, the shadow figure is not a simple literal shadow. He is, however, potentially a heroic projection of the sublunary Jim, a timeless Jim to counter the fleshly Jim's vulnerability. Because the bronze is dark and the painted resin is bright and ordinary, the shadow can also be read as a sinister shadow—the shadow half of the poet Blake's astonishingly pre-Freudian, pre-Jungian vision of the split within Man into Shadow (a destructive force) and Emanation (a constructive force). He can be a doppelgänger, the reflection of Narcissus, a manifestation of the fleshly Jim's unconscious, Jim's past, a monument to his future, the pure Jungian Shadow ("the essence of that which has to be realized and assimilated" — without which psychic wholeness is not possible).

Penny points out that the work did not derive from his reading of Jung, but that his reading of Jung did "substantiate the work" for him. Certainly, there can be little doubt that the work is a comparison, a testing of congruency and difference between states we may as well call the real and the ideal. "As individuals," Penny says, "we have two needs as part of a complete identity. We need to validate ourselves as unique unrepeatable individuals and, at the same time, we need to see ourselves in collective terms, as a dignified and fully participating part of a whole. These two needs are, I think, always at war. What I'm doing in the Jim/Shadow pieces is merely objectifying this dual need, making the implicit explicit. Because the two figures together seem to represent the war between what we are and what we want to be,

between the non-heroic and the heroic, the figure grouping as a whole takes its place as a broader portrait of a single individual."

The Jim/Shadow Torsos are perhaps even more enigmatic than the fully articulated figure groupings. In the first place, while the bronze shadow looks appropriately classical and art-historically at home as a torso alone, the lopped-off Jim (still in flesh tones and possessed of very unhallowed sags and billows) looks mutilated indeed. It's as if, in Jim's case, the historicizing process had begun so precipitously that the result reads as violence as opposed to the slow settling down of time over matter.

Perhaps the strangest of the Jim/Shadow works is the eccentric *Shadow Torso* (1985). Here — presented as a single figure — is the bronze shadow, cracked, mutilated, for the most part convincing. What is so chilling about it, however, is that as your eyes ascend the sculpture, its rich greenish bronze begins to turn watery and thin and you realize, with a not entirely pleasant start, that while the shadow has its arm raised as always, that arm is Jim's arm — white and ghostly, its hand no longer sculpturally idealized but horrifyingly particularized with creased palm and detailed fingers and personalized fingernails. It's as if Jim (who exists here as a condensing of detail and an area of flesh-coloured paint applied over the bronze) is in there somewhere trying to get out. As if the shadow is a nightmare of cultural history from which Jim is trying to awaken.

GARY MICHAEL DAULT IS A TORONTO ART CRITIC.

SHADOW TORSO (1985),
BRONZE AND OIL PAINT,
HEIGHT 96cm (HEIGHT 38").
PHOTO BY JOHN
STRUTHERS.

