

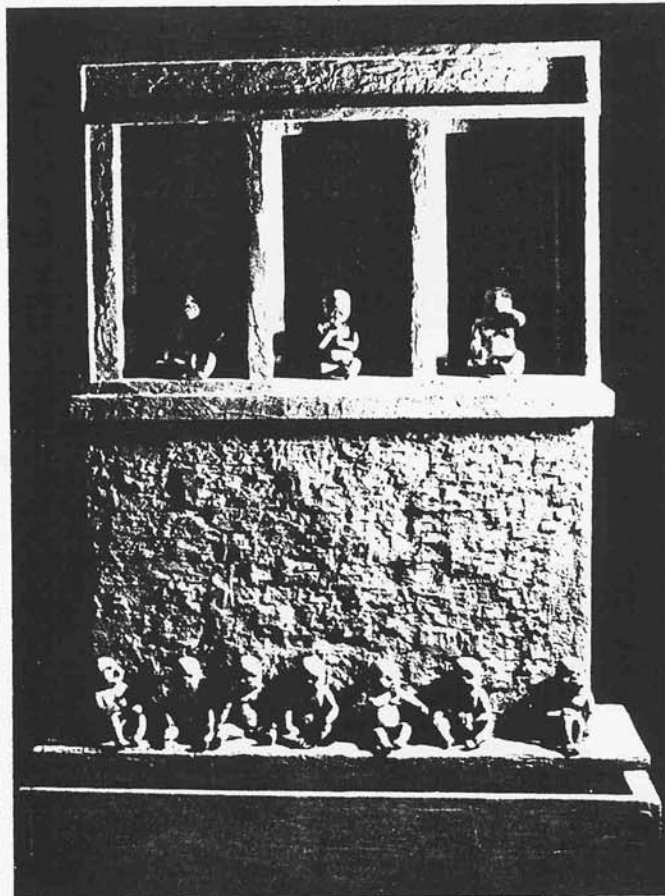
## CAPS SCULPTORS

Ursula Meyer, *Baby Gods* (2):  
The Palace Wall, 1982.  
Mixed media. Courtesy City Gallery.

Because the history of Western sculpture is in so many ways identical with the history of public monuments, sculpture has never been too successfully adapted to the scale and intimacy required by the typical gallery space. What might be called "salon sculpture" often ends up looking trivial while larger productions usually overwhelm the gallery context. Despite 19th-century attempts to mass produce genre sculpture, and despite the endless proliferation of porcelain birds, figurines, etc., in more recent times, sculpture has pretty much resisted integration into what Walter Benjamin called "the phantasmagorias of the [bourgeois] interior." Today a handful of sculptors create public monuments and works for museum spaces. Most sculptors, however, must make do with whatever space they can lay claim to. The dilemma this group faces can be seen at almost any sculpture exhibition: either the artists risk sculptural insignificance by adjusting their ambitions to the dimensions of a gallery space, or they ignore the context and show works that usually appear cramped by their surroundings.

This dilemma was especially in evidence at a recent exhibition held at the City Gallery under the auspices of New York's Department of Cultural Affairs. Works by eighteen artists were shown. Because the artists had almost nothing in common save for the fact they were CAPS grant recipients, the exhibition inevitably turned into a cacophony of styles and subjects in which the effect of any one work was diminished by its surroundings.

The smaller works in the show were for the most part the less successful, and not only because they were frequently overpowered by the larger pieces. Often these smaller works reduced aesthetically to the status of what I would call "sculptural vignette." The sculptural vignette proceeds from an accommodation to the scale of a gallery or domestic space. It can be clever or humorous but it rarely asks much of the



viewer. In many cases it depends upon a gimmick, and with surprising frequency the gimmick plays off the aesthetics of sculpture against the aesthetics of painting.

For example, Justen Ladda's *Someone with Remote in a Mirror* required the viewer to stand at a precise point along the wall of the gallery in order to see the foreshortened form of a woman in proper perspective. Similarly, Ann Knutson's *Lightbulb* and *Tightrope* projected shadow-images into frames. Gary Perkins did something along the same lines in *Full Moon*, where a wire mesh dog bayed at a "moon" which the dog itself projected onto the ceiling.

Of the smaller works, only Haim Steinbach's two *Shelf* pieces managed to transcend somewhat the vignette category. The artist's wooden shelves, resembling some fragments of 1920s German Expressionist architecture, supported everyday objects: a dimestore shopping cart and pitcher in one work, commer-

cially made plaster figurines in the other. Steinbach's juxtapositions wryly commented on the predicament of contemporary sculpture, its apparent uselessness in a world that fetishizes commodities.

In several instances larger works appeared to be little more than sculptural vignettes striving for monumentality. Hank De Rico's *Old Black Magic*, in which 24 identically shaped cylinders were spread across a gallery wall in a symmetrical pattern, struck me as diffuse. So too Nancy Clark's flag piece *Local Color*, which didn't effectively hold the territory it literally staked out for itself in the center of the gallery space. Linda Peer's *Summer Heat*, an Art Deco-influenced meditation on sexual and other forms of frustration, further illustrated the problem of size outstripping inspiration.

On the other hand, three works of very different scale and ambition managed to achieve a monumental presence. Barry Ledoux's melodra-

matic *No. 1 with Spleen* combined punk and surrealist aesthetics: a jacket made of black metal draped over a chair, a pair of pants of the same material standing behind it, both decorated with powder paint and stenciled words (SPLEEN, RANDOM, THE FOOL), along with locusts and a spider. Ledoux's deliberately garish work mixed fairly obvious symbols. Walter Jackson's *S5-G8-H4* was far less literal in its symbolism. Made of laminated wood and plastic and appearing as if it were lying on its side, it dominated its surroundings with the sheer force of its quasi-abstract forms.

As much architecture as sculpture, J. Britain Bunkley's brick and plywood *Old Saint in the Forest* turned the gallery space into an outdoors, thus altering entirely the usual relation between the work and its gallery context. Combining the forms of closet and pyramid, Bunkley's building appeared entirely closed off from the viewer save for two window-like openings covered with heavy wire mesh. These openings underscored the inaccessibility of the structure's interior. As sculpture Bunkley's *Saint* forced the viewer to think of architecture, but as architecture it was pure sculptural symbolism, a monument to alienation and exclusion.

Of all the works, Ursula Meyer's showed the greatest awareness of the history and the function of monumental sculpture: what monumentality can finally mean in terms of the relation between monument and viewer. Meyer's *Baby Gods*, small clay figures painted a chalky gray and placed in a spare architectural setting reminiscent of ancient Rome, recapitulated the historical link between artistic ambition and political power. These sullen, imperious "babies" suggested the insatiable egoism, the fantasy of infantile omnipotence that lies at the center of the totalitarian psyche. *Baby Gods* demanded nothing less than complete spiritual subordination to the ruler and the state. They went to the heart of the problem of monumentality since the tradition of monumental sculpture has always been shadowed by megalomania and inspired by dreams of limitless political domination. (City, October 11-November 4)

Alan Wallach