

## Hirsch Perlman

at BLUM AND POE, 24 March–21 April



The impulse is as old as the myth of Pygmalion: to make a sculpture that comes to life. This ambition is as challenging today as it was in the past, even though contemporary artists have tools their predecessors lacked, including photography and related techniques like . . . claymation. Granted, it's not likely that *Chicken Run* or the *Wallace and Grommit* series are what Praxiteles or Lysippus had in mind, but, oddly enough, these works exactly fulfill the ancient commission: Take a sculpted figure and make it seem to move, breathe, and speak. Hirsch Perlman's newest pieces spring up at the weird intersection between classical motives and modern capabilities, resulting in a strange bastardization that is utterly compelling.

The figures that come to life in the forty-eight photos he has culled from a larger untitled project are not made of clay, much less marble or bronze, and the finished work is not an animated film. But the characters are still fully sculpted forms and the work is completely cinematic in nature. Between 1998 and 2001, Perlman collected such packaging materials as corrugated cardboard, Styrofoam peanuts, and bubble wrap. Bunching them up, bending them around, and taping them into a variety of anthropomorphic forms, he then photographed them with a pinhole camera to produce images that are rough, spooky, sometimes in focus, sometimes not. The figures casually slouch against the wall, fall drunkenly out of their chairs, morph into a single monstrosity that occupies the whole space, then disintegrate back into a heap of rubbish. You follow this progression because the photos are all labeled by day and

exposure number, and, even though they are not arranged chronologically, a sequence is evident nonetheless. The succession of shifting scenarios is not linked narratively (there is no narrative), but morphologically. Each set of forms grows out of a former set and leads to a subsequent one—like stills from a movie that doesn't exist. As a whole, these works focus on the conditions of objects that have just come to life and are taking their first faltering steps, not on the adventures that transpire after an animator has taught them to run.

Just as the figures literally emerge from the junk in the room, the junk in the room and then the room itself become characters. Although the space where this all takes place is actually a spare bedroom in the artist's house, the photographs transform it into something more archetypal. Generic, with wall-to-wall carpeting, no casements, trim, drapery, or even a view, it's the kind of space we pass through but don't stay, where everything remains noncommittal. The stories that get told there are all middle, with no beginning or end. Contemporary experience makes it easy to give this place any number of possible names: sex motel, waiting room, college dorm, lobby, lounge. Such settings signify many things, but in Perlman's hands they feel like troubled holding-zones, places where you tread water without accomplishing anything. His images possess an air of suspense that oscillates between deep pathos and the merely pathetic.

This is where the elevated ambitions of classical precedents come into play. They make pathos possible by providing a state of grace from which the depicted characters have fallen. In one of *Two Affect Stud-*

*ies* (2000–2001), this state of grace is supplied by Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, a masterpiece of plaintive yearning that Perlman uses as the soundtrack for a long videotape of cigarette smoke rising from an ashtray. It's hard to say whether the action makes the music seem ridiculous or the music makes the action look sublime, but both options play on one's emotions while short-circuiting expectations. The second video achieves similar effects by setting stop-action images of a rubber band flying through the air to a lively jazz track by Thelonius Monk. Like the cardboard figures, neither video is flawlessly produced, but then, they don't have to be. Perlman is out to interrogate the mechanisms by which various kinds of discourse work. And in terms of the dramatic spark that animates a work of art, even Praxiteles and Lysippos knew that all an artist has to do is produce an arresting form, not a perfect one. It's viewers who bring it to life.

**Carmine Iannaccone** is an artist and instructor at the University of Southern California and Los Angeles County High School for the Arts.

**Hirsch Perlman**  
*Day 1.1, 1999-2001*  
Black-and-white fiber photo,  
vinyl, tape, pushpins  
24" x 30"

**Hirsch Perlman**  
*Day 52.1, 1999-2001*  
Black-and-white fiber photo,  
vinyl, tape, pushpins  
24" x 30"