

A Tragicomic Yet Hilarious Drama With Hirsch Perlman's Compelling Characters

Art Reviews

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After an impressive series of well-received solo shows in the U.S. and Europe, which culminated in a 1996 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, **Hirsch Perlman** appeared to fall off the face of the Earth. What the rising young art star actually did was move from Chicago to Los Angeles, where he rented a nondescript house in Mount Washington.

From the outside, everything looked normal. Even when visitors entered the residence, there was no reason to think that anything unusual was going on. But downstairs, behind a closed door at the end of a hall, something strange was taking place.

This is where Perlman went to think—to escape the time-consuming, energy-sapping and attention-devouring demands of modern life so he could mull things over at his own pace. Using his makeshift studio as a decompression chamber, he sat still long enough to allow the gnawing doubts about what he was doing to take on a life of their own.

They grew into a tragicomic drama so despairing and hilarious that it rivals Samuel Beckett's capacity to make you feel as if you're on the verge of simultaneous laughter and tears. At Blum & Poe Gallery, 48 mid-size photographs made with a pinhole camera chronicle what Perlman did in the bare-walled room for the better part of the last four years.

In the beginning, he taped a few empty cardboard boxes (left over from the move) to one another, forming a life-size figure that he posed in various positions. The prints depict a cardboard Everyman leaning casually against the wall, slumping dejectedly in the corner, huddling vulnerably behind his meager possessions, lying face-down on the floor and kicking back in a chair, apparently without a worry in the world. In one of the simplest compositions, its legs are pulled up toward its chest and its hands are clenched overhead, as if beseeching the Almighty for just a bit of respite, never mind redemption.

As the days went by, Perlman brought more packaging materials into the room and made additional figures. Sometimes his cast of characters is depicted as if engaged in friendly conversation, like art students hanging around a messy studio. At other times, they seem to be stumbling through the aftermath of horrendously violent crimes, trying to comprehend their irrevocable acts.

Eventually, they all disappear and a giant head takes shape. Resembling a cross between an Easter Island totem and a Mr. Potato Head toy made of materials from the recycling bin, Perlman's effigy suggests that the relationship Tom Hanks has with the volleyball in "Cast Away" is only the tip of the iceberg. The human need to communicate is so strong that one doesn't need others to carry on a meaningful conversation—especially when one's head is filled with characters as compelling as those that live in Perlman's imagination.

● *Blum & Poe Gallery, 2042 Broadway, Santa Monica, (310) 453-8311, through April 21. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*

