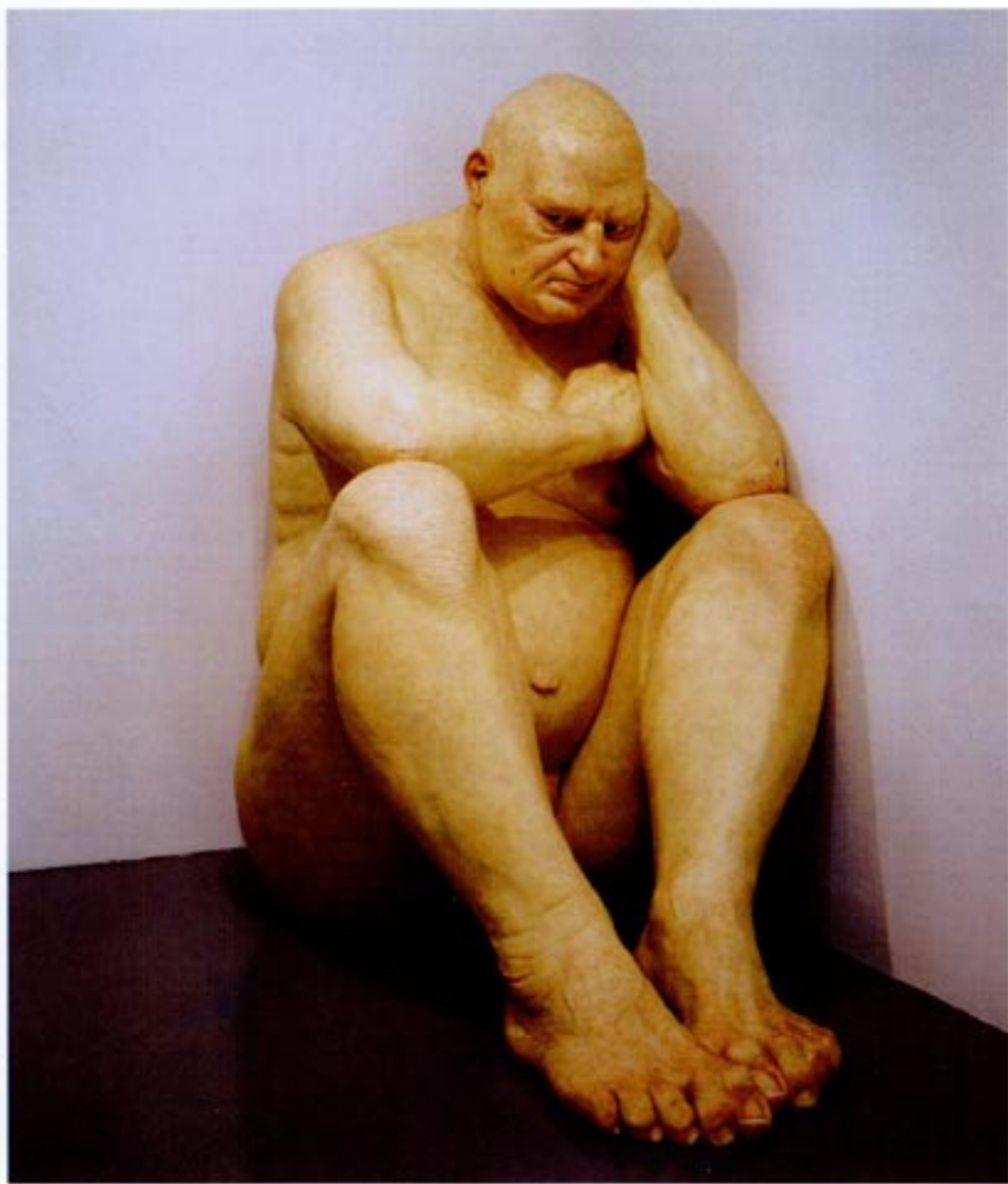


DIRECTIONS

Ron Mueck

July 18–October 27, 2002



Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Big Man)*, 2000, pigmented polyester resin on fiberglass, 81 x 46 1/4 x 82 1/4 in (205.7 x 117.5 x 208.9 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution; Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2001

Although I spend a lot of time on the surface, it's the life inside I want to capture."

—Ron Mueck¹

"I knew she was a sculpture but my poor, confused impulse didn't."

—a London art critic on a Mueck sculpture²

RON MUECK'S SCULPTURES, though inanimate, seem alive—eyes are wet, vessels swell with blood, and you can almost feel the heat and breath emanating off the body—but the scale of each figure is dramatically off. In this exhibition, a newborn is inordinately small, an old woman in her sickbed is half normal size, a naked man in the corner is a giant, and the head of the sleeping man belongs to a colossus, making us Lilliputians to his Gulliver. "With his clever use of scale and pose," one writer observes, Mueck "bounces you between a child's viewpoint and a grown-up's."³

Mueck's startling naturalism has been compared to that of the paintings of seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan Vermeer⁴ and hailed as figurative sculpture's most important new direction in years;⁵ it has also been denigrated as Hollywood artifice and the stuff of wax museums and theme parks. However, even the most skeptical observer cannot fail to acknowledge Mueck's skill at representing reality in three dimensions. The artist often spends several months on one sculpture, working with dogged determination to achieve the accuracy of his representations. "I can't paint the eyebrows in," he has said. "I have to put the hairs in, one by one."

The work of this Australian-born, London-based artist was included in "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection," the controversial 1997 exhibition.⁶

"Sensation" summarized a prevailing London aesthetic of "realism with a vengeance," as one critic put it.⁷ It presented Mueck's *Dead Dad*, 1997, a chillingly accurate half-size nude portrait of a corpse on the floor that left many viewers deeply moved.

Praised for the skill and straightforward power of his work in "Sensation," Mueck (pronounced Mew-ick) had no formal art training beyond high school. In his spare time, he made creatures, puppets, and costumes, developing his craftsmanship and knowledge of materials through experimentation. Later, in Australia and Great Britain, these skills stood him in good stead when he worked in the fields of children's television, motion picture special effects, and the advertising industry as an animatronics technician and model maker.

Figurative model making in a competitive market was "the best practice a sculptor can have," Mueck has said.⁸ In the mid-1990s, he created his first independent artwork—an "alarming but not too obvious"⁹ oversize baby, a response to his newborn's sudden domination of the Mueck household.

Mueck created a half-size Pinocchio figure for his mother-in-law, the noted painter Paula Rego, to use as a model for a series of Disney-inspired canvases shown in "Spellbound: Art and Film" at the Hayward Gallery, London (1996). Rego not only painted from this sculpture but also included it as part of the installation of her works. Collector Charles Saatchi, who first saw this figure on a studio visit to Rego, gave Mueck an open commission to create several more figures.

Mueck, now free to focus on making sculpture, continued to reduce or enlarge a figure's actual size as a way of intensifying the impact. In 1999, he created a fifteen-foot-high crouching

Boy to fill the cavernous space of London's Millennium Dome; it reappeared at the multinational Arsénale section of the Venice Biennale in 2001.

Currently artist-in-residence at the National Gallery in London, Mueck has begun to use live models who pose for one or two long initial sittings. He builds an armature in metal and chicken-wire and might also make a marker drawing, plaster sketch, or Polaroid for later reference, modeling the figure to its full form in grayish clay, sometimes over a period of several months. A plaster or silicon mold is made of the clay figure from which he casts the final sculpture in fiberglass resin or pinkish silicon (a material he stumbled across in a bathroom tile shop) with varying amounts of pigment added to replicate the translucency of skin. Onto this layered shell, the sculptor then paints specific details like blotches and blemishes, and adds elements such as eyeballs he makes from resin and strands of monofilament to represent eyelashes, eyebrows, stubble, and hair. He drills holes and punches these fibers individually into the surface.

In creating *Untitled (Big Man)*, Mueck used one of the National Gallery's frequent professional models (until this residency, photographs were usually his starting points). The man tried but could not comfortably strike the "vaguely fetal" pose Mueck wanted, which took off from an earlier sculpture of a bald man, the size of a baby, swaddled in blankets. As the frustrated model rested between sessions, Mueck recognized the pose he was seeking. In capturing the vulnerability in such private moments and exaggerating the scale of their representation, he makes us complicit in the voyeuristic experience.

Twice life size, *Untitled (Big Man)* crouches glowering in a corner.

Piercing eyes, a drooling scowl, distended purple veins, tense hammer-toed feet, and lumpy, blotchy skin enfold a pudgy physique. He is completely hairless like an enormous baby. The figure seems simultaneously threatening and sympathetic.

Untitled (Baby), 2000, also made in Mueck's first months at the National Gallery, is a tiny male newborn, measuring a mere ten inches long, hanging isolated on the wall. Like the fetus in Stanley Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey*, the newborn seems caught in concentration and projects an intelligence well beyond its miniscule lifespan. Rekindling a fascination with the deceptive innocence of infancy that inspired his career as a sculptor, Mueck here was drawn to "the strangeness and alien-ness of a newborn."

His starting point was a photograph from an anatomy book—an infant girl with legs curled—on which he intended to base a four-foot-tall sculpture. Once the figure was roughed-out, he saw that the distended stomach "resembled that of a famine victim," which was not his intention, so he switched scales. "Bit by bit," Mueck says, "the legs stretched out, the figure became male, and it went up on the wall." The Madonna and Child paintings in the collection of the National Gallery filtered into the conception and the work's new status as a wall piece unintentionally wound up taking the form of a crucifixion. Viewed thus, the small creature becomes emblematic of universal suffering and transcendence.

By contrast, *Untitled (Old Woman in Bed)*, 2000, investigates the end of life. Although not a portrait, the work was generated by Mueck's hospital visit to his wife's grandmother, a much-loved figure in the family, during one of her bouts with pneumonia. The artist was so affected by the experience that he made this homage. Unconscious and

apparently ailing, this child-sized figure might elicit in the viewer a nurturing, care-taking response or it might be taken as a morbid depiction of dying.

In front of *Mask II*, 2001, we can study the intimate details of an exhausted-looking forty-year-old man's face—the artist's—fast asleep. We await a snore, expect stale breath, inspect the bags, wrinkles, whiskers and spittle. *Mask II* relates to Chuck Close's photo-realist portrait paintings of the late 1960s, in which wrinkles, goosebumps, pockmarks, and nose hairs create an absorbing landscape and enable a microscopic inquiry of details even his subjects cannot see.

Mueck's work is often credited with taking up where photo-realist sculpture of the 1960s and 1970s left off, particularly that of the American Duane Hanson. Hanson's finely detailed mixed-media sculptures, based on body molds, startled and attracted crowds at the time, much as Mueck's works do today, but Hanson's life-size figures are sociological rather than psychological: standing among them, viewers are forced to commingle with uniformed guards, garish tourists, and bloodied accident victims. Mueck's sculptures, by contrast, put the focus on the human as an individual.

His strategy as a sculptor relates to the current reinvigoration of the figure as a vehicle for self-reflection, epitomized by Juan Muñoz's multi-figure environments, the ennobled wood figures of Stephan Balkenhol, and Charles Ray's mannequin sculptures, all of which to one extent or another distort scale and perception. Mueck's probing of physical appearance also has parallels in Lucian Freud's uncompromising studio nudes, and John Coplans's and Rineke Dijkstra's head-on photographs of bodies. Mueck himself cites works such as Evan



Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Old Woman in Bed)*, 2000, silicone rubber, polyester fibers, paint, polyester resin, polyurethane foam, cotton 9 1/4 x 37 1/8 x 22 in (24.765 x 94.4 x 55.88 cm). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Purchased 2001.

Penny's portraits of imaginary people as proof that he isn't the only "hyperrealist" around.

Mueck's "pimple-noticing realism"¹⁰ has plenty of precedents in older art: late Roman portrait busts, the Constantine colossus fragments in Rome, wood altarpiece figures of the Northern Renaissance, Bernini's gargantuan putti inside St. Peter's Basilica, and such nineteenth century curiosities as Milanese mausoleum tableaux and the sentimental stone carvings of French academician Eugene Robert. Curiously, the artist's own favorite sculptures from the past, George Minne's and Käthe Kollwitz's early twentieth century expressionist works, are neither particularly realistic nor determinedly out of scale; rather, they use distortion, elongation, and action to arouse intense emotion.

Mueck is a master at anatomical rendering. His art stimulates our imagination while grounding us in the physical world. It is as real as a rock and as fantastic as a dream.

Sidney Lawrence, exhibition curator

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Unattributed quotes from the artist are from telephone conversations with the curator, April 2002.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Judith Palmer, "Eyeball to Eyeball with Mueck and his Works," *The Independent*, June 2, 1998, "The Eye": 3.
2. Waldemar Januszczak, "Invasion of the Body Watchers," *The Sunday Times*, May 31, 1998, "Culture": 8.
3. *Ibid.*

4. Craig Raine, "To the Life," *Modern Painters* (Autumn 1998): 21.
5. Peter Plagens, "Less is Mueck," *newsweek.com*, May 23, 2001.
6. "Sensation" appeared at the Royal Academy of Art, London, September 18–December 23, 1997; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, September 30, 1998–February 21, 1999; and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, October 2, 1999–January 9, 2000.
7. Jerry Saltz, "Like Life," *The Village Voice*, June 12, 2001: 61. Also *artnet.com*, June 6, 2001.
8. Quoted in Louise Bishop, "Model Family," *Creative Review* (April 1997): 38.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Januszczak, *op. cit.*



Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Baby)*, 2000, pigmented polyester resin on fiberglass, 10 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 2 1/4 in (26.01 x 12.07 x 5.3 cm). Private collection, New York

BIOGRAPHY

Born Melbourne, Australia, 1958. From late 1970s to mid-1980s, worked in children's television, then in motion picture special effects. Traveled to Los Angeles for six months in 1986, then moved to London. In 1990 switched to advertising and ran own business for six years. Made and exhibited first independent sculptures in 1996–97. Appointed Associate Artist at the National Gallery, London, February 2000–2002. Lives and works in London.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 James Cohan Gallery, New York
- 2000 Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London
- 1998 Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2001–2002 "The Passions: From Brueghel to Viola," James Cohan Gallery, New York
- 2001 "Plato dell'Umanità/Plateau of Humankind," Biennale di Venezia 49/49^e Venice Biennale (catalog)
- 2000 "Ant Noises at the Saatchi Gallery," London (catalog); "ArtAid 2000," Vinopolis Gallery, London (catalog); "The Mind Zone," The Millennium Dome, London; "Extra Ordinary," James Cohan Gallery, New York
- 1999 "House of Sculpture," Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Mexico (brochure); "Unsichere Grenzen [Unstable Boundaries]," Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Germany (catalog); "Spaced Out: Late

- 1990s Works from the Vicki and Kent Logan Collection," California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco (catalog); "Heaven," Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, Germany, and Tate Gallery, Liverpool (catalog)
- 1998 "The New Neurotic Realism," Saatchi Gallery, London (catalog)
- 1997 "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection," Royal Academy of Arts, London, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, and Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York (catalog)

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Tate Gallery, London

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(see also essay endnotes and catalogs previously noted)

- Amy, Michaël, "New York—Ron Mueck: James Cohan Gallery," *Sculpture* (December 2001): 72–73.
- Bishop, Claire, "Ron Mueck," *Flash Art* (October 1998): 126.
- Boy by Ron Mueck: Photographs by Gantier Deblonde*, Anthony d'Offay, London, 2001.
- Bumpus, Judith, "Do you Believe in Fairies? Ron Mueck, Sculptor," artist's statement, *RA Magazine* (Winter 1997): 35.
- Gayford, Martin, "Visitors from Another World," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 27, 1999: 22.
- Graham-Dixon, Andrew, "Father Figure," *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, April 16, 2000: 20–21.
- Herbert, Martin, "Ron Mueck," *Tema Celeste* (January/February 2001): 87.
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- Kimmelman, Michael, "Ron Mueck: From the End of Life to the Beginning, with Lucidity and Awe," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2001: E 34.
- Lefingwell, Edward, "Ron Mueck at James Cohan," *Art in America* (November 2001): 144.
- Myers, Terry R., "Ron Mueck," *Art/Text* (November 1998/January 1999): 84–85.
- Phillips, Shaun, "Big Ron, Little Ron," *The Face* (June 1997): 106–12.

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

All programs are free; see <http://hirshhorn.si.edu> for more information or to preregister; or call 202-357-3235, ext. 117; 202-633-8043 (TTY); or e-mail education@hmsg.si.edu.

Art Night Gallery Talk

Thursday, July 18, 7 pm

With exhibition curator Sidney Lawrence. Meet at the Information Desk.

Art Explorers Workshop for Adults: Big Me, Little Me

Friday, August 16, 1–3 pm

After viewing the exhibition, join art therapist Kristinah Talus-Ayala to create a clay self-portrait. Meet at the Information Desk. Space is limited and preregistration is required.

First Friday Gallery Talk: Big Man

Friday, September 6, 12:30 pm

Education Program Director Linda Powell will discuss Mueck's *Untitled (Big Man)*. Meet at the Information Desk.

Issues in Art, a Forum: What is Realism?

Sunday, September 22, 3–4 pm

With Merry Foresta, Senior Curator for Photography, International Art Museums Division, Smithsonian Institution; Arthur Wheelock, Curator of Northern Baroque Painting, National Gallery of Art; Blake Gopnik, Chief Art Critic, *The Washington Post*; moderated by Sidney Lawrence, exhibition curator. Ring Auditorium.

Film: Uncle Frank

Thursday–Friday, October 3–4, 8 pm

The first project supported by Kevin Spacey's production company involves one of his pet concerns, the dignity of the elderly—a topic Mueck explores in *Untitled (Old Woman in Bed)*—this biographical study features an octogenarian's pursuit of stardom on the nursing home circuit, with poignant and often hilarious insights into his life. With discussion by first-time feature director Matthew Ginsburg. Ring Auditorium.



Smithsonian
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

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Ron Mueck, *Mask II*, 2001, pigmented polyester on fiberglass, polyester fibers, 30 1/8 x 46 1/8 x 33 1/8 in (77.22 x 118.1 x 85.09 cm); base 28 1/8 x 55 1/8 x 33 1/8 in (72.39 x 140.3 x 85.09 cm). Courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.