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ARTIST



MICHAEL BISHOP

ENIGMATIC EXPRESSION

BY DELL RICHARDS



While You Were Away

If you live in Sacramento, you have most likely seen the work of artist Michael Bishop.

Arresting examples of his public art include the gold metal grid and river on the Alhambra water tower, the foxes in the Downtown Library galleria and the soles of the feet and shoes at the Capitol East End complex.

Because of Bishop's unusual take on the world, his work is meant to make people think.

"Especially with the Alhambra project, I was really taken by how the water tower works, and the urban history it represents," says Bishop, a department chair and professor of art at California State University, Chico. "I was also interested in the tower as a symbolic contrast of organic space versus human made space— Jeffersonian grid meets American river."

Although not a direct representation of the actual water cycle, the disk in the center of the work gradually fills with light to symbolize the continuous use and replenishment of water. "The entire contents of the tower is used and replenished every day," says Bishop, "but I sped time up a bit, so a day becomes approximately the amount of time it takes you to drive by the Alhambra water tower on Business 80 at the speed limit."

In its curving lines, the viewer can see the tributaries of the river flowing into the tower and out to the square grid of the city. Art deco-like concrete water vessels tie the sculpture to the bas-relief above the first floor door to the towers offices, now occupied by the Fire Department, and to the water vessels common to antiquity.

Using iron, aluminum, steel, fiberglass, synthetic concrete and LED lights, Bishop cuts, rolls, drills, bolts, casts, sandblasts and finesses his pieces into shape. The choice of materials lends the work a presence and solidity that should stand the test.

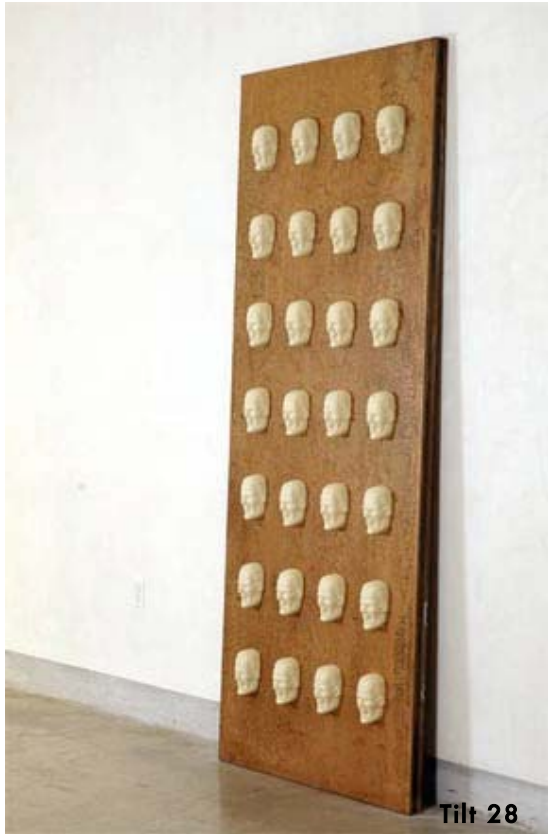


Ying Yang, 2/3



Plane Truth

ENIGMATIC EXPRESSION





Eight

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Site, Detail



Waiting For Titus

Perhaps because the public work is a collaborative effort between the artist and the people on committees that fund, choose and sometimes give direction to the work, Bishop's public art may not be as enigmatic as some of his more personal pieces. "You could say I have two bodies of work— public art projects and my studio work. The studio work in many ways is my private world," says the 62-year-old Bishop.

Bishop's best known works include cast-iron baby heads taken from a 1940's Bakelite model, the male faces with dropped jaw, and female death masks from the Victorian era. Combined or separate, these images address moments in time, capturing the inscrutable and even haunting reality of life.

Individual pieces often are arranged in a pictorial fashion – groups with chairs, benches, boats or other objects of modern life. At its finest, Bishop's art tells viewers more about themselves – their dreams, difficulties and disappointments – than they sometimes want to know.

"I'm not the believer in western narrative that I once was," says Bishop. "My current work is distilled; like focusing on an expansive horizon and realizing you are not spacing out, but taking it all in. It is about having the confidence to have less there – and let it be more poignant."

Some of the sculptures featured in this article were initiated during Michael Bishop's John Michael Kohler Arts & Industry residency at the Kohler Foundry in 2004.

Michael Bishop is represented in San Francisco by the Limn Gallery, 292 Townsend Street. Hours are Tues. – Sat., 11am – 5:30pm. For more information, call the gallery at 415-977-1300, email gallery@limn.com or go to <http://www.limnartgallery.com/>