

# The Symbolism of Size in the Work of Penelope Jencks

By Wendy Doniger

The sweep of scale is what surely strikes the viewer of this show first, the range from the disturbingly outsized human models to the tiny detail of the figures on the less-than-dollhouse-sized beaches. Only on second glance does one begin to see that the range of human emotions conveyed and provoked by these figures is equally broad. If the giant statues represent a child's view of grownups, the new terracotta miniatures, so carefully observed down to the ears of the dog in the water



Homage to Goya (detail) Plate 16

and the shadows carved the into the lay("Dunescape: Two Women fig. xx) , represent the grand, wide screen vision of someone who has finally grown old and wise, mastered life, seen the world for what it is, and looks down on it with compassion and tenderness.

The earliest sculptures in this show, from 1969, are the self portraits (Figs xx - xx); "sculpt what you know," to paraphrase what teachers always tell budding writers, and young artists also do self-portraits because they don't have enough money to hire a model. These first pieces represent just the head and shoulders. But how expressive and passionate those heads and shoulders are: yawning (or is it screaming?), angry, strained to the point where the sinews of the neck stand out like ropes, or with lips parted to expose the teeth (in one case, wide open to expose the uvula). They are merciless in depicting not only the artist's physical features, often stretched to the point of grotesque distortion, but a psyche seething with fury or despair. And this unsentimental, no-holds-barred gaze remained when she began to make life-sized figures (and, eventually, over life-sized figures) and nudes.



Jane 1975 lifesize terra cotta

By 1975, during the first of several stays at the MacDowell colony, she was making large standing terracotta figures. This was a watershed for her. She had previously made life-sized terracotta figures sitting and lying down, but making them stand up was much more difficult technically, largely due to gravity, the bad habit that clay has of returning to the earth from

which it came. The making of colossal terracotta figures at that time seemed to be a lost art. The French did it in the 19th century, the Chinese much earlier than that (the great terracotta warriors and horses from the Han dynasty in China were discovered in 1974, just after Jencks started making these life-sized terracottas; Annie Dillard described them wonderfully, as they were being born out of the earth[i]), and people are making colossal terracotta horses in India to this day.[ii] But it was not happening in Europe or America. This was terracotta incognita.

When Jencks started making these sculptures there was no one to show her how, or even to say, “Oh yeah, you’re doing one of those colossal terracottas.” Instead, people said: “It’s going to break, it’s going to explode, it’s going to collapse, you can’t do it.” So she made it up as she went along. Jencks had never been taught, in art school, how to deal with clay in this way. She could not use an armature, since clay will explode if fired with foreign bodies inside it. Instead, she built the clay up around a long pole stuck into a base and, when it was done, pulled it straight out the top, as the soul escapes from the skull in Tibetan Buddhism. For the soul/pipe to escape she needed a studio at least twice as high as the standing figure, and she had that at MacDowell.

The first sculptures were originally life-sized but after they were fired they were, much to her dismay, considerably shorter; clay shrinks about an inch to the foot when you fire it. So when, in 1978, she started the first pieces for the Beach Series I, (figs xx - xx) she made them larger than life-size before firing so that, after firing, they would be life-sized. Perhaps this preliminary stage made her see the power of these larger-than-life figures, inspiring her to make figures that remained oversized even when they had shrunk in the oven. And when they got bigger, as if reaching their majority, they began to shed their clothes. Earlier, she had refused to make nudes because art school had taught her to look on the human body as a cluster of lines and forms and shapes, a still life. She felt she had lost the ability to see the humanity in the body, the sexuality of it. She felt that, paradoxically, when you put clothing on the figures they become people. (Pornographers have always known this: women are sexier in a filmy negligee than when they’re buck naked; clothing maketh man, and woman, too.) Alphonse Allais may have had this in mind when he said: “Somebody points at a woman and utters a horrified cry, ‘Look at her, what a shame, under her clothes, she is totally naked!’”[iii] But the clothing that frees your humanity is also what trips you up and traps you; the disrobing figures from the much later Beach Series II are entangled in their clothes as the marble figure of Laocöon was imprisoned in the labyrinth of sea snakes, and as all sculpted figures are trapped in the medium of the clay or plaster (or marble).

Gradually, the women began to strip. One figure, from 1979, is wearing a gown that is open to reveal her breasts and the genitals, open almost like the image in an anatomy text, the skin peeled back to reveal the organs; she is far more naked than



Beach Robe 1979 lifesize terra cotta

she would be naked. Another standing woman holds a cloth around her legs—though not high enough to cover her crotch(Fig xx). This image later develops into a statue of a woman whose upper half grows out of a column, like a mermaid or a Mélusine--half woman, half something else even worse.[iv] Or perhaps it is the image of a woman turning into a pillar, perhaps a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife. Or she may be the female counterpart to one of the Hermae of Greece, stones that marked boundaries and were carved with just a suggestive part of a human being, the face and the genitals, the essentials.

Nude and semi-nude figures first appear in the Beach Series I, shown in New York in 1981 (fig xx), though there are still, also, a fully clothed figure and a woman, seated, nude but with a jacket that covers part of her breasts and shadows her crotch. There is a nude male figure with a rich mat of body hair carefully captured in clay. In 1982 the show was moved to the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis, and the knowledge that she could have access to the Museum's pool inspired several additional figures. A floating man lies spread-eagled on his back in the water(fig xx), perhaps in happy abandon or, perhaps, dead (like the narrator of the film *Sunset Boulevard*). This ambiguity reminds us of what may lurk beneath the everyday, the yawn that may be a scream, the bather that could also be a corpse. The most mundane or even beautiful surface, like the surface of a pool, may conceal things too unnerving to look at face to face.

The figures spread out over the sand are all individuals, each in her own space; they do not look at one another. They are not smiling. And they are not all young. They do not have the idealized bodies of our time, or any time. Each is an individual, warts and all. The woman who modeled for the figure with the open gown was sixty years old. These are bodies that people have lived in for a while. Even without their clothes on, they are real people. Their bodies show the scars of life, and it is this that makes them individuals.

During this period, Jencks began accepting the first of her public commissions. (She is presently working on a monumental granite sculpture of Robert Frost, seated on a rock, for Amherst College.) The commissions made it possible to work on major figures in a far more expensive medium, bronze (which she had previously worked with on only a smaller scale). The first major bronze, in 1982, was the statue of Samuel Eliot Morrison, "Sailor, Historian," boyishly perched on a large rock on



Eleanor Roosevelt 1996 Bronze & Granite 8'x6'x3'

Commonwealth Avenue at Exeter Street, in Boston. This was a time for multitasking: Jencks made all the figures for the Beach Series I, and the Samuel Morrison figure, and raised her children, and was teaching at Brandeis. Then came several more commissions, including, in 1986, the sculpture of a student sitting on a rock, holding a book, outside Farber Library, at Brandeis. In 1996, she made the one

for which she is perhaps best known, the one that Philip Hamburger, writing in the *New Yorker* in 2003, referred to as “the peaceful, beautiful eight-foot-high statue of Eleanor Roosevelt that stands in Riverside Park at Seventy-second Street.” (He went on to remark, “Jencks’s people sit on rocks.”) Everyone loves this statue, and the artist put much of herself into it, which, paradoxically, made it possible for her to capture a particular essence of her subject. She found, as she worked on the sculpture, that she identified with Eleanor Roosevelt in a way that she had not with her dead white male subjects.

Between Morrison and Roosevelt there were also commissions for more anonymous bronzes in other cities, where she returned to the grouped figures she had done in terracotta, but now working in bronze. In 1984 in Toledo, she installed a family group. She had taken the train from Boston to Toledo, and when she disembarked she saw nothing but families greeting and hugging one another, and decided to use the family as the subject for her commission.

But her own family had been part of her art right from the day she brought her first child home from the hospital, barely a week old, and made a sculpture of the baby’s head (when other women were just mixing formulas or trying on nursing bras). For the next twenty years she continued to portray her three children, fastidiously paying them for their modeling time (when other children had paper routes or baby-sitting gigs). (Her children are now, in various guises, standing, walking, or sitting from Toledo OH to Pittsburgh PA and scattered throughout eastern

Massachusetts). At the other end of the family spectrum, one of her most remarkable recent small bronzes is a group consisting of a aged woman falling and being caught; the woman (who is also modeled in one of the colossal plaster images) is her mother. Sculpt what you know.



Descent 1998 Bronze 6"x8"x1.5"

And at the same time, 1982-5, she began to make colossal terracotta heads and torsos, which, by 1998, led to the full colossal figures in plaster (FIGS. XX - XX). In contrast with the relatively smooth-surfaced and realistic bronzes, the larger plaster pieces retain the slaps of the palette knife and are less realistic. (The later bronzes also take on this rough surface, and look like clay magically turned to bronze, like figures in mythology suddenly cursed to petrify.) They keep reminding you that they're made of plaster, as if you couldn't bear to see a realistic, smooth person of that size; as if that would be too threatening. Even so, the size of the figures is terrifying, as is their ungainliness and raggedness. They resemble not gods but mythical giants, creatures as earth-bound as we are but older and hungrier, like the starving, desperate creatures that have used up their own worlds and have invaded ours to prey upon us. What flesh they have hangs upon them but does not soften them; they are pendulous but not plump. We cannot bear to look upon them as living creatures, and so the roughness of the plaster rescues us and reminds us that it is "just" art, as we tell ourselves, in nightmares, that it is "just" a dream. But these nightmares creatures move straight from the artist's unconscious into ours, and lodge there, to trouble us in memory long afterward.

The recent small terracotta dunescapes (Fig. xx - xx) grow out of ideas that Jencks began to develop back in the late 1970's, when she was doing the first beach series. At that time, she began a series of small-scale nudes as dunes or dunes as nudes, nude dunes or dune nudes, noon dudes. The dune looks like a great big woman, towering over the little normal people, like James Thurber's cartoon of "Woman and House," the woman becoming a house to tower ominously over her intimidated husband. Somehow this early work was lost. But nothing is ever entirely lost, and now she has salvaged these lost terracottas out of memory, and returned to them (and will hold on to them this time, we hope).

Several of the Dunescapes are based on a Shakespeare Sonnet (64) that Edwin Dickinson loved and that Jencks's father heard him recite at the top of his lungs in front of the ocean which was all roiled up after a hurricane. It contains the lines:

When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm shore win of the watery main,  
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;  
When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay;

Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare --  
That Time will come and take my love away.



Interchange of State 2005 terra cotta 8.5"x5"x4.5"

Two of the Dunescapes are called "Hungry Ocean," (Fig xx) and one is titled "Interchange of State"

This late work, the Beach Series II and the Dunescapes, span the extremes of scale: enormous plaster figures and miniature terracotta scenes. The large figures bring out what was always latent in the earlier figures, the darker, murkier, scarier aspects, but exaggerated by the size. The monumental figures of Beach Series II are the terrifying and unpredictable superhuman creatures who not only inhabit the child's early life (and the mythologies of the world) but remain to haunt us in our adult existence, even if only in our unconscious. The bronze disrobing man at first seems headless, or perhaps trussed up by a torturer, until we realize that he is just someone taking off his shirt. Or is he?



5 Figures on the Beach 1990 Bronze, 4"-7" High

Like the some of the earlier pieces, too, the small bronze studies, including several disrobing figures, are meant to be seen in water, now not a pool but the shallows of the ocean.

On the other hand, the extraordinary miniatures of the Dunescapes break new ground in many ways. In scale, the figures are tinier even than those small bronzes that she has made all along as models for the colossal figures; and the delicate edges of the waves express a new fragility, “state itself confounded to decay.” In subject, now landscapes frame the human figures, even puffy clouds, like clouds in a child’s drawing, floating blissfully above it all. And in cohesion, these figures, by contrast with the earlier beach series and the large bronze groups, really are together, in close human contact: the woman is caught as she falls, the pair of swimmers are holding hands, the man is asking the woman an “Unanswered Question” (a reference to a piece by Charles Ives), though even there, though he is looking at her, she is very definitely not looking at him. (The tiny dog is alone.) And they are also all a part of the earth; the figures seem to come straight out of the mud or the water, like the Chinese horses breaking through the surface of the soil. Or like a vision breaking out of the mind of the artist.

[i] *In For the Time Being* (New York: Viking, 2000).

[ii] In Tamil Nadu, as many as five hundred large clay horses may be prepared in one sanctuary, most of them standing between 15 and 25 feet tall (including a large base), and involving the use of several tons of stone, brick, and either clay, plaster, or cement. They are a permanent part of the temple and may be renovated at ten to twenty year intervals; the construction of a massive figure usually takes between three to six months. Stephen Robert Inglis, “Night Riders: Massive Temple Figures of Rural Tamilnadu” (in *A Festschrift for Prof. M. Shanmugam Pillai*, edited by M. Israel, et al. Madurai: Madurai

Kamaraj University, Muttu Patippakam, 1980), 298, 302, 304. See also Wendy Doniger, “Presidential Address: ‘I Have Scinde’: Flogging a Dead (White Male Orientalist) Horse.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 58 (4), November, 1999, 940-60.

[iii] Cited by Jacques Lacan, 1986 seminar, “The ethic of psychoanalysis,” cited by Slavoj Žižek, “How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?” 28-9.

[iv] Recall the words of King Lear:

“Down to the waist they are Centaurs,  
Though women all above:/ But to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
Beneath is all the fiends’;  
There’s hell there’s darkness,  
there’s the sulphurous pit,  
Burning, scalding, stench, consumption.”