

Penelope Jencks' Figures on the Beach

By Hayden Herrera

During the decade that followed World War II, a group of Cape Cod families had frequent beach gatherings at which the adults wore no clothes. The occasion might be an evening picnic or a midday swim. For children the anticipation of these events was exciting: because our parents were busy with writing, painting, or composing music, most of the time we were left to our own devices. No one was prepared to ferry us to tennis lessons or little league games, that would have been considered bourgeois. The idea of family "togetherness", much touted in more conventional circles, was not for us. Privacy, creativity, and individualism were the order of the day. Over the years, the young people became like a tribe. We knew a lot about each other, but very little about that other tribe, the grownups, except what they looked like naked, which we did not want to know.

Penelope Jencks' Beach Series II gives solid substance to her memories of mingling with those naked adults on broad stretches of private beach beneath high Truro dunes. Her over life-size plaster figures are imagined from a child's perspective: they seem huge, remote, ungainly. To a young girl, the physical peculiarities of adults past their prime must have held a certain fascination. But sags, bulges, wrinkles, and hairs can fill a young person with pity and disgust. Jencks' imperfect nudes embody these conflicted feelings. They retain the shock value of body parts that she, as a child, could not avoid seeing close up. At beach picnics, everyone drew close and as food was handed across legs and buttocks and genitals, it was hard to avert your eye. I remember my mother, having forgotten to bring a knife, simply pulling tomatoes apart with her fingers and handing the dripping pieces around. Seeing her fingers covered with pulp, I lost my appetite for tomatoes. Surely there was anger in my aversion. Why, I thought, couldn't our parents be more normal? Why couldn't they have prepared sandwiches instead of feeding us bluefish cooked in foil over the fire?

Some of this anger is conveyed in Jencks' Beach Series II. They also suggest, as she puts it, the "otherness" of grownups. As representations of a group of fathers and mothers, her figures ought to be nurturing and protective. But these are not the kind of adults who would welcome a child climbing into their lap. We children knew not to make demands or to interfere: our parents were engrossed in conversations about art, literature, psychology, and the dreadful state of American culture. For all we knew, some of them might be exercising their powers of seduction. Whatever they were thinking about, it was clearly not about us.

But there was a flip side to this neglect. We were free to do as we liked. While our naked parents sat or lay in the sand discussing neuroses, politics, Buddhism, and Existentialism, we might be cart wheeling off the tops of dunes or splashing across a string of sand flats that were

fast disappearing beneath the incoming tide. This kind of freedom meant that no one imposed an identity on us: we were expected to muddle through on our own. Perhaps our parents thought that this separateness would make us into more independent and original human beings. There was, however, one idea they did impose, the importance of beauty. They were constantly pointing out the shapes of clouds, the light on the ocean, the late afternoon sun on beach grass. They taught us also that it was good and pleasurable to be close to nature. This closeness might be implied in the way the clay out of which some of Jencks' figures are modeled seems to come straight out of the sand.

Thus, while Penelope Jencks' Beach Series speak of the loneliness and anxiety of being a child amid a group of undressed grownups, the sculptures also deliver a more positive message: they embody our parents urge to be natural, to relish beauty by immersing the body, shorn of false clothing, in sun, water, the sand. No doubt these values had much to do with Jencks becoming an artist in the first place.