

# Penelope Jencks:

By Eleanor Munro

Penelope Jencks's retrospective at Boston University's School of Visual Arts this spring was stunning, an anthropological tour de force. (The show travels this summer for viewing at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.) These groups of life-size clay and plaster sculptures, seen seriatim in order of their dates of production, scan the history of the human family, beginning in the metaphoric depths of time. The archaic age is marked by clay, half-torso self-portraits, which seem to emit howls and cries, grimaces and shouts. Each one expresses the muscular frenzy of a young being experiencing the need to stretch to the utmost her self-charged will to differentiate herself from others. No agreed-upon rule of conduct or sculptural procedure could channel such maddened intentionality. But it fit the times. These works were made in the 1960s and early '70s, a time when barbarians were writing graffiti on city walls, and making art out of ropes, bricks, and electric wires. And in at least one out-of-the-way ocean-side encampment, modern-day tribal elders were stripping off their clothes, lying around naked, and eating with their hands.

By 1976, Jencks had learned the craft that was her defense and justification. She had an educated gift, not for fine detail, but for the whole human subject, posture and expression. Through many individual steps, she arrived at a model of human-size figures with relaxed faces, which are proportionately equivalent to ones in the streets and on beaches. These beings in normal alignment descend from the genome: they represent Jencks's own mother in her old age, a heart-burdening figure somewhat outside the proportions of normal because of her bent and pendulous—therefore, woefully expressive—anatomy. Jencks would use this anatomical type again for the understructure of her bronze of Eleanor Roosevelt, which is displayed in New York's Riverside Park.

The work of Jencks's maturity came in the '80s and '90s with full-fleshed women, lying in the exhaustion of fulfillment; pubescent girls perched on tree stumps; and elders with life-haunted faces, eyes fixed on the place where the sky lifts off the earth. The impression made by these figures is tremendous: women's weighted breasts lifted on crossed arms, such food- and child-swollen bellies; and the men, imperial no longer but somnolent with full-used cocks on spread thighs.

The galleries at this exhibition led us through the stages of life, and ultimately, to advanced age, its own revelation. Here the "through line" of the story—which has emerged over these several decades as a momentum that impelled the artist from thought to thought, sculptural idiom to idiom—was again revealed in the faces and body postures. Expressions change from inward dreaming to the rough demanding expressiveness of long experience, and, finally, to an epiphany of the visionary: a figure called *Watching Woman*, made only last year. Centered like a post, she cups one hand to her chin and gazes out and beyond, toward nothing in particular, but much in the abstract. And the facial features of this singular figure weren't thumbed in soft plaster in Jencks's usual style, but were brushed on by the artist in black pigment—possibly an effort to distance herself, by the length of the brush-handle, from the disturbing quality, the strangeness of the piece. At the end came a beautiful coda of small, hand-modeled raw-clay abstractions—bodies melted into the matrix of water and sand—too plaintively suggestive not to mention in this discussion.

The series represents nature's own momentum and direction. The artist, understanding the way anatomy crisscrosses with thought, seems to suggest that creative intelligence is the flower of long living. That the past lives on in the present is every artist's lesson from art itself, from the learning, practicing, casting out of new models, balancing contradictions, and returning, in the case of sculpture, to the wheel, the forge. Jencks is not alone in working this ground, which back in the 1970s gave birth to the idiom of landscape-earthworks. Certain works today are conceptually related to those earlier programs: Betty Woodman's flights of wall-mounted ceramics, Nancy Webb's encyclopedic graphic runs of plant-forms, and Patricia Johanson's programs for earthwork and waterwork parks. Woodman's ceramics are at the Metropolitan Museum of Art this season; Webb's drawings were at the Boston Public Library in 1998 and, together with her sculpture, are at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum now; and Johanson's watercolor ground plans were recently issued in book form. I predict, and hope, that museums will one day dream up installations large enough to embrace Jencks's vision of human natural history.

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