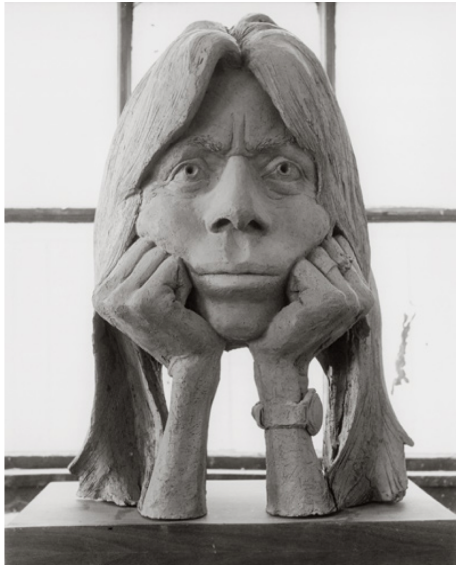


Sculptures that stand up to scrutiny

Jencks examines human vulnerability in her large terra cotta and plaster works

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | March 23, 2006



It's easy to stroll past Penelope Jencks's public work: Her sculpture of the puckish Samuel Eliot Morison, "Sailor, Historian," stands along Commonwealth Avenue at Exeter Street. In New York her elegant, approachable bronze depiction of Eleanor Roosevelt leans against a granite stone in Riverside Park. Such works are accomplished, but designed to fulfill a civic expectation. An exhibit of her work at Boston University's 808 Gallery offers a glimpse behind the scenes of the sculptures she crafts when she's not working on public commissions. They show her to be technically and formally daring, down to earth and humane.

Humanity is a challenge in monumental public art: Often what comes across is heroic or iconic, but that robs the figure of its vulnerability. Jencks's figures at BU are nothing if not vulnerable.

The exhibition, a bit of a retrospective, starts with a series of self-portraits done in terra cotta in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She frowns, she hollers, she takes on a caricature of propriety. You can see the artist working on two levels, with form and with emotion. As she intellectually tackles questions of form and technique, potent feelings reveal themselves.

For "Self Portrait V," in which you can look down the gullet of her wide-open mouth, she must have posed the question: What do neck and shoulders look like

when a woman howls ("Self-Portrait V")? In "Self-Portrait VII," her neckless head perches on her hands, knuckles pressing into her cheeks. Hair and arms hold the fretful head in the air -- a technical experiment, an unflattering moment of intimacy, a stunning piece of art.

In the late '70s and '80s, Jencks crafted figures out of terra cotta -- some life-size, some even bigger. Making such large works in terra cotta was unheard of in contemporary art because the medium tends to collapse on itself. Jencks pulled it off. These figures, from "Beach Series I," are unabashedly nude or barely clad in open robes. "Beach Robe" shows a scowling 60-year-old woman, her hands on her hips holding a long robe back from her body. They're wonderfully candid. Recently, Jencks has made "Beach Series II," more large-scale nudes, mostly of older men and women, sometimes struggling out of their shirts and pants. These are plaster, and the imperfections of the material speak to those of an aging body. The sheer awkwardness of some of the postures is endearing. She's also crafted work on a miniature scale: The terra cotta "Dunescapes" give the sweep of the dunes fleshly curves, but the fascination is in the itty-bitty figures on the beach, such as the dog paddling beneath the curl of a wave in "Dunescape -- Homage to Goya."

Jencks's terra cotta and plaster sculptures are the fertile ground upon which she builds public commissions. In these, she explores the body in its mechanics and its aging with fondness and clarity.