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7 Judith Shea CHARACTERS ON THE VERGE OF A Revelation

by Martin Friedman

Judith Shea, a notable presence on the New York sculpture scene since the 1970s, seemed to have unaccountably withdrawn from it some 10 years ago. Her last major work to attract critical notice was an enigmatic equestrian sculpture carved in wood, stained black, and, in September, 1994, sited on 59th Street, just southeast of Central Park, where it had been strategically placed behind another man-on-a-horse, Saint-Gaudens's 1903 gilded bronze Civil War monument that bears the lofty appellation *General Sherman Led by Lady Victory.* It took little for passers-by to grasp that Shea's sculpture was more than a thematic variation on its grand predecessor. Titled *The Other Monument*, its rider was no conquering general but an emancipated slave.

Following that acclaimed public presentation, Shea resumed making gallery-scale works, increasingly interested in exploring other approaches to figuration. She had the opportunity to do so when she was awarded a fellowship by the American Academy in Rome. Beginning her residency in fall 1994, she immersed herself in the study of the Eternal City's artistic past, in particular its High Renaissance sculptures, filling her notebooks with innumerable drawings. "At night, in the library at the Academy, I'd read about those artists, particularly Bernini and Michelangelo. Being in my 40s then, and with considerable experience as an artist, I wanted to know what it took to do what they did. How were they able to continue for so long? Longevity was certainly a factor. Both of them lived productive long lives. There weren't disruptions of the sort that would essentially get them off track. Since the Church was the patron, the 'given' was that their sculptures had to be holy images—popes or saints or other religious figures, living or dead. But what interested me more than that was what they were saying about themselves and their lives as artists through their sculptures."

Shea says, "With Bernini, there was tremendous passion but also tremendous fun in his works. Sometimes, even the passion is tongue-in-cheek." "Really?" I asked her, "Where's the fun, for instance, in the carved marble of a feverishly ecstatic Saint Teresa of Avila, her body about to be pierced by a smiling angel's gold-tipped arrow?" "Well, yes," was her amused response, "not everything was fun and games, and, after all, that was dire martyrdom he was depicting. But I looked at all his sculptures, not just the saints but also his mythological figures." As an example of that master's all-stops-out approach to non-saintly subject matter she cited the erotically charged abduction depicted in *Pluto and Persephone* in Rome's Borghese Gallery. "What you have with Bernini is this constant explosion. In the religious commissions, he goes to the limit of martyrdom and to the limit of passion; in pieces like the Persephone, he goes to the limit of aggression, to the limit of sex. With Michelangelo, it was a very different set of emotions. It's *not* fun. His sculpture is also passionate, but it has a much darker nature. He didn't represent acts of martyrdom the way Bernini did. I think on some level,

***Icon*, 2003–04. Wood and bronze, 62 x 16 x 13 in.**

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he felt too much personal pain, and that's expressed in his work. There is certainly high drama about it—I'm thinking about *The Dying Slave*—but I wouldn't call it theatrical. What I ended up feeling was that both artists were communicating, whether consciously or unconsciously, their experience of life more than anything else."

Not long after her Italian sojourn, and still thinking about new directions for her work, she headed south to live and work for a while in Oaxaca. Mexico, she says, had quite an impact on her: "You're driving in the desert, in the middle of nowhere, and suddenly there's a church full of saint figures, all of them newly dressed in handmade clothes—and some with real hair. There's a little of that in Italy, but, there, the clothes and hair are mostly carved." Mexican folk art, with its exaggerated human forms and strong craft sensibility, had interested her well before her stay in Oaxaca. While pursuing a fine arts degree at Parsons she was in charge of display at the United Nations folk-art shop where, she says, "I got to know those objects in depth."

For all their overt expressiveness, the polychrome saint figures she encountered in Mexico were no great surprise, since she had more or less grown up with more sedate versions of them. "My early childhood was in middle-class suburban Philadelphia," she points out. "The first sculptures I ever saw were not in museums but figures in churches. I was fascinated by those statues and tried to figure out what they were saying and doing. All that is in my work." Her parochial-school education, she concedes, affected her view of things. While she regards herself as a freethinking, liberal-minded artist for whom traditional religious values are secondary to overarching social ones, she is nonetheless ineluctably drawn to the mysteries and import of the Catholic Church's iconography.

Her ambivalence is expressed in the tension-fraught images that composed her recent "Statues" exhibition at the John Berggruen Gallery. (She chose "statues" because for so long the term was one of denigration among art world cognoscenti.) After a year in the San Francisco Bay area, where she took on a few sculpture commissions, she came back to New York in the summer of 1997. She found herself a new, light-filled studio in an industrial section of Long Island City, with a spectacular view of the Queensborough Bridge. There, she began making life-size sculptures of heads and bodies, some in wood, others in clay. The heads, specific in their detail, had been foreshadowed a few years earlier in a series of small works, some only a few inches high, formed of clay and hardened in kitchen and toaster ovens. The idea, she explains, was to teach herself to make accurate, descriptive portraits: "I carved some in beeswax that I bought in the markets in Oaxaca. I took those little heads with me in a shopping bag wherever I went, carrying them around from airport to airport."

Left: *The Other Monument*, 1994. Wood, project for the Public Art Fund installed at the Doris C. Freeman Plaza, New York. Right: *Urban Francis*, 2000–02. Bronze, 76 x 41 x 32 in.

Prior to her return to New York, most of her single-figure sculptures were headless. Her best-known earlier works were, in her words, "clothes without figures in them." Armless "hollow dresses" symbolized women, and voluminous overcoats were male surrogates. Gradually, she says, "I began filling the clothes with people." For whatever reason—whether sustained exposure to Baroque figuration, in which facial expression was as important as bodily gesture, or to the martyred Christs and lachrymose saints of Mexico—she decided to pursue a less distanced and more immediate reality. This turned out to be an idiosyncratic form of portraiture, its descriptive detail in inverse proportion to the abstraction that had characterized her figure sculptures: with one important caveat—these portraits were of no one in particular. They were of invented beings, heads in search of bodies.

RIGHT: © RUY SANCHEZ BLANCO

During successive visits to Shea's studio, I could see how this new specificity was becoming an increasingly important factor in how she dealt with the human form. The place abounded with highly descriptive male and female heads, some alone on work tables, others attached to necks and shoulders, and still others joined to carved wooden bodies. In the midst of this jumble was an imposing, larger-than-life-size standing male figure wearing a long overcoat. Figure, overcoat, and flat, low base were modeled in red wax. Introduced to me as St. Francis, he was the first of Shea's depictions of well-known saints in the guise of ordinary people.

The face of this sculpture, since named *Urban Francis*, tilts heavenward. It is as though Shea's humble saint were hearing things denied to the rest of us. When I asked how she had come up with so prosaic a figure to represent so spiritual a being, she replied, "My perception of Francis of Assisi as an earthy, simple man was greatly affected by what I read in Nikos Kazantzakis's book about him. The book was a starting point for my interest in this character. While I was reading it on the subway one day, I looked up, and there was a man in ragged clothes sitting across from me. Suddenly I had the feeling that he could be Kazantzakis's saint. He seemed to be in an altered state; his reality was not the same as anyone else's around him. What Kazantzakis does in his books is to take mythologized figures like St. Francis and bring them into real time. You wonder, if this man lived on your block whether you would even go near him."

In addition to *Urban Francis*, Shea showed two other sculptures with religious themes in the exhibition. Each of their subjects, she maintains, is as prominent in the public imagination as a major Hollywood celebrity. "Mary Magdalen and Joan of Arc are just as much household names today as Julia Roberts and Elizabeth Taylor. Mary Magdalen is even more famous now, basically because of the popularity of

Left: ***Joan, for Twain*, 1999–2001. Wood, bronze, hair, and silver leaf, 28 x 12.5 x 9 in. Right: *Magdalen Fragment*, 2002–04. Bronze and hair, 38 x 12 x 9 in.**

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The Da Vinci Code, whose story focuses on her as the companion of Christ. But I started work on my *Magdalen Fragment* before I read the book. And, of course, every girl knows who Joan of Arc was. You didn't have to grow up Catholic to be interested in her."

Shea's Magdalen is a partial figure, extending from mid-thigh to head and formed of silvered bronze. Hollow, like Shea's generic female figures of the 1970s, she wears a thin, form-revealing, low-neckline shift. She is at once a full-bodied, sensuous creature and a profoundly abject one. Highly defined as her body is, her face is even more so, suggesting one of Bernini's vision-struck saints. She looks as transported as *Urban Francis*. Though traditional depictions of the Magdalen focus on her long red hair, in Shea's portrayal only scraggly wisps remain. It is as if, in her anguish, Shea's Magdalen had violently pulled most of it out.

Far more serene in demeanor is Shea's *Joan, for Twain*, named for Mark Twain's book about Joan of Arc's life as peasant girl, warrior, and defendant in her trial for heresy, as recounted by a fictitious sympathetic chronicler. Unlike Shea's portrait of the Magdalen, her Joan is a woman in mystical rapture. Her mouth is slightly open, her eyes gaze into the far distance. When I first saw this truncated bust in Shea's studio three years ago, the cuirass bore a gleaming, silver-leaf fleur-de-lys, so bright that light reflected from it across the room. She subsequently toned down the silver-leaf surface, burnishing it with a torch so that it became almost subliminal.

Left: *Clarion*, 1999–2002. Wood and hair, 22 x 9 x 9 in. Above: *Storage 1999*, 1999. Bronze, 5 elements, 9 x 13 x 42 ft. View of work at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri.

Although Shea's current sculptures began with religious themes, they are not the only ones to project degrees of spirituality. Just as inward-looking are the women depicted in two other sculptures, *Cara* and *Nobody's Angel*. What is evident in these works is that the line between the spiritual and the secular blurs easily in Shea's imagery. *Cara*, a composition in the form of a traditional portrait bust, is, like others in the Shea sisterhood, an amalgam of wood, bronze, and human hair. Her downward-looking eyes are barely open. Her features include a high forehead, well-defined cheekbones, an aquiline nose, and a small mouth. Her thick blond hair is short and roughly cut. We have no idea who Cara is. The sculpture's title, "dear" in Italian, doesn't tell us much.

One of the first sculptures Shea made after working her way through the saints was *Nobody's Angel*, which, for all its stylistic similarities to the Magdalen and Joan, portrays a woman decidedly of this world. In many ways it is an unresolved work, combining slabs and chunks of wood cannibalized from sculptures she had earlier abandoned. "Some of its parts go back to 1990, when I lived in the Berkshires," Shea recalls. "I dragged huge logs down from the mountain and cut them up." *Nobody's Angel*'s torso is constructed of white pine and reddish fir. Her skirt, uneven at the bottom, is formed of wide sections of wood. Her legs are thick, roughly defined, and her feet are like pads.

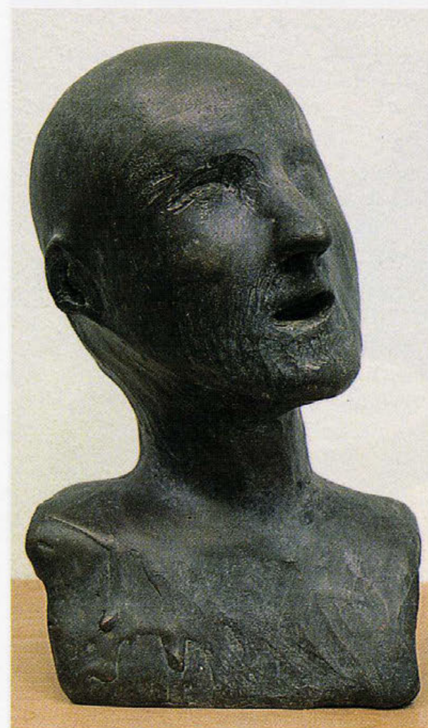
There are extremes in this curiously doll-like creature. Her smooth face and left hand, both in gleaming bronze, contrast sharply with the rough-hewn quality of the sculpture's lower half. Overall, *Nobody's Angel* is an unsettling work. The subject's face is youthful and fresh and, at the same time, frenzied and frazzled—as improbable a composite of expression as of materials. "She looks both determined and anguished," Shea says of her imperfectly fitted-together woman. "Her right arm ends in a clenched fist. It's as though she were saying, 'I'm not letting myself come apart.'" There is a slightly crazed quality about this sculpture, which in my view makes it all the more engaging. "She is far from perfection and forever incomplete, so who would want to claim her?" Shea wryly observes. "She's *nobody's* angel."

It's hard to ignore the evidence that Shea's portrayals of women, saintly or otherwise, are in many ways self-portraits. I suspect that this is also how

BOTTOM: © RUY SANCHEZ BLANCO

she perceives them. Maybe that's why she takes so much time with the details: which head works best with which body; whether a figure's hair should be real, rope, or a synthetic material. It's hard to know which was the first of her female figures, an emotionally volatile lot, because she worked on them simultaneously, trying combinations of heads and bodies until the character she wanted finally emerged. Commenting on their realistic detail, she says, "Making these pieces used so much that I know as a woman—playing with the hair, painting the faces. Even though the clothes are carved of wood, I knew how to make them from my training in design."

Quite apart stylistically and emotionally from its wild-maned predecessors is the fifth female sculpture in this group. Cryptically titled *Icon*, it is the embodiment of calm. Its gleaming, polished bronze bald head is dotted with holes into which Shea, at one stage, had intended to stuff tufts of hair. Its body was carved from a single great timber that had an earlier life as a railroad trestle. It still bears holes made by the huge spikes that joined it to the trestle's other beams. (It might be a stretch, but those perforations, especially in the context of this exhibition, might be read as symbols of saintly martyrdom.) The smoothly formed body of this single-armed personage looks as if it had been wrapped, mummy-like, in a stiff garment. There is, in fact, something vaguely Egyptian about *Icon*, whose face, impassive except for a slight smile, adds to the aura of antiquity—not a great surprise, since over the years Shea's sculptures have alluded to Egyptian and classical deities.



Acknowledging the stylistic break between *Icon*, whose head and body are generalized, and her more literal works, Shea says, "Next to the female figures that preceded it, maybe she does go off in a different direction. Her face is clearly not that of a saint. It's benevolent but not spiritual. I like the fact that they have hair and she doesn't." And, as if to emphasize *Icon*'s secular down-to-earth nature, she adds, "I also like the fact that her head is fastened to her body with visible screws." (More evidence of martyrdom?)

Another apparently secular presence is *Clarion*, the dreadlocked head of a black man. At one point, this character was destined for a loftier calling. During her early ponderings of saintly iconography for our times, Shea had seriously considered casting this head in the role of John the Baptist. Though she did not assign him that fateful duty, this massive head nonetheless has biblical potential. Its subject, I suggested to an amused Shea, could easily qualify as Goliath, given his larger-than-life size, but she had other plans for him. She was demoting him from saint to prophet, or even to preacher—"Maybe a herald of social change," she says. *Clarion*'s scraggly real hair and patch of beard below his lower lip—a "soul patch," in today's parlance—are Shea's subversive take on the aristocratic portrait busts she had seen in such profusion in French and Italian palaces. She liked the idea of using that convention to depict a black man. In a sense, *Clarion* is an updated version of the head of the man on horseback in *The Other Monument*.

Left: *Call/Grito*, 1994. Bronze, 4.5 x 2.4 x 3.5 in. Above: *Zimba*, 1995. Bronze, 2.5 x 1.5 x 2.25 in.

What is the connection, I asked Shea, between these new works and her earlier generic figures, which bordered on pure abstraction? "They are a continuation of them," she maintained, seeing no disjunction between past and present. "When I think about my first works, which were made of cloth and looked like clothes installed flat on the wall, I realize that even then I was looking for characters, for personae, really, to occupy them. I used clothes as stand-ins for people. They were like types, maybe even stereotypes. I refined those clothing forms down to the overcoat and the dress, which, as the work grew three-dimensional, became the leading man and the leading lady." As her work became more volumetric, it also gained in emotional depth. When I asked if she ever felt that something might be lost were she to continue her pursuit of detailed description, her unhesitant response was: "Not at all. For me, what I'm doing now is a continuation of what I've always tried to do—to make sculptures, whether they are extremely formal or obsessively descriptive, that will express human states."

Since retiring as director of the Walker Art Center, Martin Friedman has lived in New York. His book on Chuck Close will be published next year.