

A bonfire of the vanitas, alight at Conner

Jessica Dawson



Kenny Hunter's sculpture "Like Water in Water" hints at its artificial nature. (Copyright Kenny Hunter; Courtesy Of Conner Contemporary Art)

Welcome to the most spirited cemetery ever. At Conner Contemporary Art, Glaswegian artist Kenny Hunter offers sepulchral sculptures that mimic the look of monuments yet undermine memorial sobriety. His works are too sly and knowing to bum us out, yet they don't let us off too easy -- an undercurrent of sorrow persists amid the drollery.

The show's title, "Like Water in Water," alerts us to the contradictions ahead. Here we encounter the living in the dead, the contemporary in the classical and the up-to-date in the dated.

The show's liveliest work is a skeleton. Tucked away in a gallery usually reserved for video, he stands smaller than life-size but resembles no ordinary pile of bones. Called "The Unknown," the white-painted bronze statue wears paradox on its ulna. Its title and medium suggest the most somber of funerary sculpture; its subject matter is, well, deathly. But this sculpture couldn't be less morose.

If anything, this guy looks like he's awaiting a martini at the coolest bar in Berlin. Or maybe he's a John Varvatos model delivering his best thousand-yard stare.

How does Hunter create this much life -- contemporary life, even -- out of white-painted bronze? The artist altered the bones just slightly to make this skeleton into a fashionable one -- the tibia thicken where they meet the ankles, creating the effect of a boot-cut jean.

But that pose! His head tilts to the right as he looks off into the distance. He's preoccupied by things cooler than us yet still aware of our admiring gaze. His stance is a relaxed contrapposto borrowed from the Greeks but also faithful to the way confident, relaxed people stand -- in magazine spreads, that is. The pose signals fashion, or perhaps the fashionable art world. In both enterprises, to live is to aspire.

So Hunter gives us a vanitas -- that reminder of death and human foibles that artists have been turning out for centuries. And yet rather than wag fingers at our folly, "The Unknown"

empathizes. Not only does he get us. He is us. He acknowledges that the pursuits of worldly success, beauty or fame are foolish -- but that we'll do them anyway. Even achievement can be a kind of death.

Hunter fashioned the work from bronze, anchoring him in the long tradition of monument-making -- think Maj. Gen. John A. Logan and his steed perched atop a neoclassical sarcophagus or Thomas Jefferson shaded by his Greco-Roman temple. Yet "The Unknown" feels contemporary and relatable; he's a vanitas we can live with.

The other sculptures in Hunter's show evoke memorials, too. For these the artist favors jesmonite, a lightweight gypsum-based material that Hunter casts and then carves into. Many are pigmented and have a matte finish that seems to absorb rather than reflect light. The unpigmented works have a creamy hue mimicking marble.

The show's title work, "Like Water in Water," is a stag with one leg hooked in a tire (it's jesmonite, too) and another caught on a lily pad. You can read the work as a riff on Ovid's "Metamorphoses," itself the basis of so many classical artworks: Here a tire and lily pad pursue a stag in a mad, intraspecies love affair. At the same time, the work laments nature caught in man's detritus, a message that feels wholly contemporary.

And then there's the curious fact of the hole in the stag's torso, a neat little perforation above his left foreleg. The opening punctures the piece both literally and metaphorically -- Hunter hints at the mechanism of the sculpture's making, underscoring its artificiality. He eradicates illusion even as he creates it.

There's much more on view here, including a series of silk-screened works emblazoned with pithy truisms that make light of -- and celebrate -- artistic pursuits. But I'll stop here. You're seeing the show tomorrow, right?

'The Twelfth Man'

In "The Twelfth Man" at DCAC, the sport-art divide crumbles as two smart young artists address athleticism and play.

Patrick McDonough refracts the art world through sports metaphors in a mix of works that use fantasy football, picnicking and former NBA star Chris Mullin as fodder. A series of four drawings where McDonough drew concentric lines around vintage pictures of sports heroes literalize the fan's awe. Two bloated, oversize trophies wryly address the competitive field for young artists as well as our self-congratulatory society. One is a lemon-yellow, chest-high behemoth. Vinyl letters spell "YOUNGER THAN JESUS ARTIST" across its front. The reference is to the exclusive triennial of young artists now on view at New York's New Museum. McDonough's piece is a plaint and a gibe.

Where McDonough speaks to spectatorship, fandom and belonging, Kenny George addresses couch potatoes. His message: Get moving. Here he presents photographs by looking from three different angles. We're forced to move across his pictures to take them in. As we do, we move with the artist -- he's in all his pictures -- across the frame.

What's George up to? Riding a unicycle in front of a work site, popping up and down on a pogo stick in the woods, jumping off a trampoline. Acting in urban parks and on city streets, George adds a sense of play to everyday life. George's earnestness makes the perfect foil for McDonough's more knowing gestures.

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