

THE LEFT ATRIUM

Room for a view

Who will judge?

Do you know why you're here?"

Truth be told, I thought that was all I did know; that and the fact that in life I had been a physician. I certainly didn't know where "here" was, and wasn't too sure who "I" was ...

Can you remember who I was? can you still feel it?¹

... or when "it" was. I supposed this was what it felt like to be disoriented times 3.

I nodded at my questioner. "I am here to be judged." If this was a dream, it was like no dream I had ever dreamt, for the fear I felt was like no fear I had ever felt. Fear of eternal damnation — whatever that meant.

My questioner looked back at me and sighed. "You are here to *judge*."

In the silence that followed, I became aware of a nearby shadow. He hung his head in a gesture of resignation, helpless now to influence what was apparently to follow. I recognized him as a fellow physician I had known in life and realized that I was being asked to judge his behaviour in life simply because I, too, was a physician...

Can you find my pain? can you heal it?
Then lay your hands upon me now
And cast this darkness from my soul.¹

My being cast in the role of judge struck me as odd and disappointing. I had not known him particularly well, and I vaguely recalled not liking him very much. I felt profound sadness and believe that I was crying. I had al-



Fred Sebastian

ways expected — or rather, I had always hoped — that in the end there would be perfect justice. Damnation of the wicked, salvation of the good, a discerning and just but merciful Deity. Now it appeared that justice would be imperfectly meted out by a peer — and a not impartial one at that — much as it had been in life. No divine comedy; on the contrary, just a human tragedy.

I had made a living listening care-

fully to what people told me, reading between the lines. It occurred to me now that my response — "I am here to be judged" — had not been contradicted. Was it possible, I wondered, that unlike the poor soul before me I still had a chance to favourably or unfavourably influence my own judgment?

This is a test, I thought. Yes, a final test. I must be just but merciful. But, oh my God, what if my judgement is unjustly or unmercifully damning? Would

I, too, be judged harshly? Or if my judgement is merciful to the point of being unjustly redemptive, what then? And what if before dispatching this poor soul standing before me they in turn ask him to judge me? Having judged him, how could I protest?

I looked back at my interlocutor. I supposed he knew what I was thinking about. I shook my head in refusal. “I don’t want to judge him.”

“You have no choice. You must.” He smiled. “Be just but merciful.”

He knew exactly what I was thinking. I stood my ground. “I am not competent to do so. I do not know him well enough.”

“You are beyond time now.”

Beyond time. In eternity. The concepts of past, present and future had no meaning; they existed simultaneously. The life of the man was suddenly there for me to examine in its entirety. It existed like a *gestalt*, like a written page or a painted canvass, capable of being experienced in an instant. But it was more than that. It was as if I could move effortlessly and instantaneously through time and space, experiencing any or all of his life in its minutest details, in all of its contextual richness. I was privy to all of the decisions he had made, all of the workings of his mind and heart and of the minds and hearts of those around him. I saw, heard, tasted, smelled, felt everything, the events of his life, professional and personal, and was able to read his motives at each moment. I felt all the joy and pain he had experienced and provoked in others.

I was confused, since he did not always appear as a doctor. He appeared to have various professions, simultaneously if that were possible, and disoriented though I was, I recalled the old nursery rhyme about the “tinker, tailor, soldier, [and] sailor.” It seemed as if he had done nearly everything; but how, in a finite lifetime? It occurred to me that in my travels through space and time, I had witnessed all those occasions on which he had come upon 2 roads diverging; but unlike Frost’s traveler,² he had — on all occasions except those involving moral choice — traveled both while still remaining one

traveler, though unbeknownst to himself. And I realized that the blind man had been right after all, that the man’s life had been a garden of forking paths,³ meandering through many worlds, with choices in all of them. It had, however, been the moral choices that had mattered most because only they had foreclosed entire universes.

I knew that I was not qualified to judge his professional behaviour in those many worlds in which he was not a physician, yet somehow part of me divined that I was not expected to.

At a certain point I realized that I had seen all there was to see. The man stood before me.

“Decide,” my dogged inquisitor insisted.

I thought about all I had witnessed. The man had been an average internist. He had endeavoured to help his patients when he could, and had tried not to harm them. He had made mistakes, and some had cost patients dearly, but he had never been motivated by greed. He had had priorities outside of medicine — family and self — and was not always sure that he had struck the best balance. He had put himself before others more than he should have. He had taken some shortcuts that he regretted. The man hadn’t always been kind, truthful, trustworthy, fair and honest, though he had aspired to be.

“He was a better man and doctor than some and not as good as others.” Would that be enough?

Still he waited. What had he said before? “*You are beyond time now.*” That being the case, there was nothing to be gained by procrastination. I supposed he was waiting for something less equivocal. I had spent a lifetime making hard decisions and living with their consequences, and implicitly asking my patients to live with them, too. Taking care of patients had been hard work, mentally and physically, and that had been the hardest part of it, hadn’t it? Making decisions? *If I am unprepared for this moment, I thought, the scores of little decisions I made everyday in the course of a clinical lifetime certainly left me better prepared than most.*

I thought again, remembering all I’d

seen. “I would not have been unhappy to have had him as my father, or my son, or my brother, or my friend.” I paused. “Or my doctor.”

The questioner nodded.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Where will he be sent?” I asked.

“Where will *who* be sent?”

I looked around and realized that the shadow of the man was nowhere to be seen. I realized then that it was I who had cast the shadow; and, I supposed that like the denizens of Plato’s cave I had only now been released and allowed to turn my head.

“Where *should* you be sent?”

You alone can light my way.

You alone can make me whole once again.¹

I laughed, now, the burden of judgement lifted. Since there was really only 1 right choice, there was no choice at all.

“Back ... Back there,” I said, pointing to my life as I had known it. Back to where I might make all the difference. And in my mind’s ear I heard the lines of a song from my youth:

But there’s no need for turning back
‘cause all roads lead to where I stand.
And I believe I’ll walk them all
No matter what I may have planned.¹

I looked back towards my questioner only to realize that I had cast 3 shadows, not 2; but I knew that if I stood and looked down as far as I could, I would see as many shadows as there were roads through woods, paths through gardens; and I knew that somewhere ages and ages hence, sighing, I was being judged by all of them.

Frederick Adolf Paola

Associate Professor
Health Professions Division
Nova Southeastern University
Naples, Fla.

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Lifeworks

Life, death and the power of the Real

Ron Mueck

National Gallery of Canada

Mar. 2–May 6, 2007

The exhibition of 16 remarkably realistic figurative sculptures by artist Ron Mueck at the National Gallery of Canada is both stunning and contemplative. Often described as super-real, hyper-real or even ultra-realistic, Mueck's sculptures of the human figure contain such lifelike details that both art critics and the public define his work as extraordinary. Indeed, the wrinkles, moles, body hair, even rashes and stretch marks on his fibreglass and silicone figures have been crafted to such perfection that viewers often claim they instinctively expect his figures to begin breathing.

The interest in understanding his working process and how he achieves these lifelike effects technically (for example, the sculpting, moulding, casting and fabrication processes as well as the efforts involved in punching hundreds of tiny individual pores for individual whiskers and eyebrows) lingers in the minds of most viewers. Moreover, these realistic re-creations of the human figure provoke strong emotional responses in the viewer, who can easily transform these figures into fantastical facsimiles of him or herself.

Mueck's interest in figurative modeling techniques began in Australia where he worked as a puppet maker, both making and animating marionettes for children's television. After supervising special effects for films in the late 1980s and working with renowned puppeteer Jim Henson, Mueck set up his own business in London, England, creating models for the European advertising industry. After seeing one of Mueck's hyper-realistic sculptures of Pinocchio at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1996, contemporary art collector Charles Saatchi commissioned Mueck to make a group of work for his collec-



National Gallery of Canada

Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Big Man)* (2000). Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington (DC). Museum purchase with funds provided by the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest and in honor of Robert Lehrman.

tion. A year later, Mueck was included in the celebrated exhibition *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

Mueck's iconic work from the *Sensation* exhibition, *Dead Dad*, is on view in this exhibit at the National Gallery of Canada. Unlike the other sculptures, which Mueck claims were inspired by imagery from art history or magazine

photographs, *Dead Dad* commemorates the moment when the artist heard the news that his father had died. Appearing smaller than life-sized, naked, drained of blood and laid-out on a stark museum platform with the palms of his hands facing upwards, Mueck's rendition of his father's corpse certainly elicits an emotional response. Indeed, many of his works create such a riveting sense of

realism that they leave an indelible imprint on the viewer, by eliciting memories of one's own experiences. His work creates an imaginative opportunity to reflect upon the themes and cycles of life, death, suffering, longing, loneliness and desire.

This emotional impact related to viewing Mueck's sculptures is heightened by the fact that the artist never chooses to render his figures life-sized. The effect of this altered scale is profound; it changes how we relate to these figures physically and psychologically. In *Spooning Couple*, a half-life-size man and woman (14 cm by 65 cm long, 35 cm wide) lie intimately together semi-nude as if on a bed. Due to their placement on a low pedestal, the viewer is invited to look down on this secluded couple from above and peer ever so closely at their facial expressions and imagine what kind of lives they are living. From this bird's eye view the shrunken sculpture represents a deeply touching depiction of loneliness within intimacy. Each individual is

tower above us. Cases in point are the pouting hulk, *Big Man*, and the 16 foot-long newborn baby, which still has its umbilical cord attached. In these oversized works a certain ambiguity once again comes into play as the figure's vulnerability is intertwined and seemingly reinforced by our own apprehension and empathetic involvement. In this regard, Mueck's "lifelike" sculptures embody, in one way or another, the colossal challenges and manifold perils of the human condition.

The 16 distinctive sculptures, created between 1996 and 2006, are part of an internationally touring exhibit organized by the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain (Paris) in collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada, the Brooklyn Museum and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. This exhibition marks a mid-career retrospective for the artist and is the largest collection of Mueck's works ever assembled in one place. As a relative newcomer who has already attained international ac-

The shrunken sculpture, *Spooning Couple*, is a deeply touching depiction of loneliness within intimacy.

subtly and delicately wrapped in their ownself, arms cradling their own body rather than the other's.

Other more imposing figures in the exhibition are enormous (twice, 3 times, even 10 times life-size) and

claim after only a few years of exhibiting, Mueck has obviously been embraced by an awe-struck public as well as by an enthusiastic group of collectors and institutions.

Though Mueck is not the first artist



National Gallery of Canada

Ron Mueck, *Spooning Couple* (2005).
Mixed media. 14 × 65 × 35 cm. Private collection.

to work with realist sculptural techniques in order to focus on humanistic themes, his theatrical works strike me as perhaps fitting within the long and rich artistic tradition of *memento mori*: artistic creations that remind people of their own mortality. In this regard, Mueck's expressive lifelike figures become allegorical and contemplative contemporary *vanitas*, modern symbols that both embody and evoke the illusory perfection of reality while simultaneously revealing the painful anxieties about death and the passage of time.

Cindy Stelmackowich
Art historian
Ottawa, Ont.