

sculpture

New York: Patrick Strzelec, Garth Greenan Gallery

BY RAINA MEHLER MAY 2016

Patrick Strzelec's recent exhibition featured a mature body of work evoking a variety of profound emotions – joy, sadness, fear, recognition, and foreboding. Composed of diverse materials, including plaster, aluminum, epoxy, steel, bronze, ceramic, wood, and detritus, the sculptures collapse recognizable and illogical forms. Strzelec uses postmodern strategies – appropriation, assemblage, and simulacra – but unlike many of his contemporaries, he crafts his work with his own hands. For over two decades, he has worked in numerous studios and foundries and taught sculpture at prestigious universities. These experiences have fostered his mastery of artistic processes like woodworking, welding, and casting, as demonstrated in this show.



Feeder, 2015

Seven sculptures were dynamically arranged in a single, white-walled gallery. Viewers approached each piece from all sides, their understanding of what they saw changing as they moved. From one angle, a hand appears to support a metal scaffolding in *Feeder* (2015); another view reveals that the hand has six fingers. The golden contour of *Mirror* (2015), the only hanging work in the show, is reminiscent of a frame, and as the title suggests, we expect to face a reflection of the surrounding environment and ourselves. Instead, Strzelec offers an empty frame opening up to a blank wall. Voids become important elements, alluding to the psyche and even depth. But the empty wall in *Mirror* and the space between the fifth and sixth fingers in *Feeder* – all the real and imagined voids – *are* reality, and he shows us the tangible world via the void.

The sculptures have playful and ironic undertones, but they also touch on the darker side of the human condition. *Agnosia* (2015) refers to the inability to recognize what one perceives. As soon as a form or idea begins to actualize, it recoils and diminishes – akin to how the eye divides moments and the mind retrieves memories. *Crutch* (2015) uses wood, plastic, and plaster to create a solid yellow triangle backed by a metal grid. A linear form of a crutch extends vertically from the floor, joining the solid at the top. The title implies a need for support and, in this case, a tool to aid fading memory.

Twisting a well-known adage, Strzelec has said of his work, “It is what it isn’t.” His works generate a sense of delayed recognition, produced by the juxtaposition of materials, incorporation of disparate processes, and arrangement of elements with emphatic voids. As viewers, we cannot easily identify what we see. We become disoriented, lost in space and time. We experience fear of the unknown, causing a disconnection in our relationship to the objects, others, and even ourselves. The sculptures become *memento mori*, alluding to the fragility, inevitability, and unpredictability of the human experience. Life is fleeting and so are our memories of it. Strzelec's work reminds us to dive beneath the surface of things and into the voids before we lose our ability to recall and distinguish reality.