

ART REVIEW

Visages in clay let the viewers mold perceptions

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Asked if he is a political artist, Michael Minelli sighs. "Well, not intentionally," he says. "I don't set out to make a point. But anyone who knows me knows I yell at the television a lot."

A glance at "cannibals & christians" at the Michael Kohn Gallery suggests that it is newscasters, politicians and other talking heads who receive the lion's share of the L.A. artist's expletive-peppered invective. Each of Minelli's 19 wall-mounted sculptures, on view through July 10, is a super-realistic head made of clay.

There's a young female soldier wearing a camouflage helmet and an expression of in-over-my-head naiveté. But Minelli's doll-size sculpture is not a portrait of Jessica Lynch. "Soldiergirl" is a 3-D rendition of a modern archetype, a generic character of quasi-mythological dimensions.

As presented by some of the media, Lynch was an updated version of the innocent abroad and a pawn in the Army's self-serving effort to put a friendly face on an ugly war. Now she's yesterday's news. In Minelli's hands, the story is transformed into a mute object onto which viewers project their fantasies about femininity and militarism, aggressors and victims, memory and forgetfulness.

"All of my works," Minelli says, "are all about investment, about the values we bring to inanimate objects. In that sense they're fetishes. For this show, this was important to me, espe-



Michael Kohn Gallery

MUTED: Michael Minelli's "Soldiergirl." He calls the heads "nodes for projection."

cially because of the way things are going in the culture.

"Archetypes are being used for political purposes."

And missing from politics (and much of the news about it) are the gray areas of compromise and negotiation — and the mutual respect that accompanies the give-and-take of dialogue. In their place, Minelli says, "we get fearful absolutism and nostalgia for the fantasy of things with fixed meanings, of good versus evil."

The heads he sculpts "are nodes for projection. They're all about shifting meaning," he says.

Minelli created all but one of his figures from memory. The exception is a screaming terrorist with a yellow ski mask pulled over his face. That figure is based on a black-and-white photograph of terrorists at the 1972

Munich Olympics.

Another figure, whose face is partially hidden, titled "Arab," balances a metal basin on her head. Rounding out the rogues' gallery of stereotypes is a Catholic priest, a Mexican bandit, a nurse, a flapper, a mid-level manager, a water carrier, a buffalo and a park ranger. Some evoke news stories that once captured the popular imagination but have faded into near oblivion. Others look like characters from central casting — not stars but journeymen actors who fill in the background: a cannibal, a scar-faced thug, an anonymous employee and a bagpipe player.

Minelli says: "All these characters — the hero, the villain, the victim — are in the news every day. It just seems like such an epic story that's unfolding. . . . And you fear how it's going to turn out. I just wanted to look at these heads — to actually look. They are like Rorschach blots. They're realistic but they're caricatures."

Each of Minelli's vividly realized folks is so meticulously crafted that nothing is left unresolved. But the emotions his figures trigger are ambivalent, even conflicted. Part of that is because they were made by hand. Each is about the size of a mango and crafted from Sculpey, a polymer clay made for kids, not serious artists. Kilns are not required. Like cookies, you bake Sculpey in the kitchen oven.

"I wanted them raw," Minelli says, "to have the sense that someone made them at the kitchen table."

He created some in one sit-

ting; others took up to six weeks. He mixed various solvents with different colors of clay as if he were a painter, getting the right translucency and texture for each character.

It doesn't take a great leap to imagine that this body of work began with an argument Minelli had with his television. It is as if he's letting the characters from stories speak for themselves, without being dressed up by politicians or processed by news programs. As viewers bring their perceptions to the odd cast, the conversation gets even more complicated and multilayered.

"I don't set out to make political art," Minelli says. "But I think good art is political. I respond to what's around me. Anger plays a big part of that. So does individual engagement."

"I'm interested in the viewer doing some work. If I walk into a gallery and everything is already figured out, I think, 'Why do you need me?' On the other hand, as an artist you have the responsibility to say something. I try to do that without making it all about me."

'cannibals & christians'

Where: Michael Kohn Gallery, 8071 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

Ends: July 10

Price: Free

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