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Hyper-Realistic Sculptor, Carole Feuerman: Mastering the Human Gesture

September 11, 2013 [Richard Friswell](#)



Carole Feuerman, a veteran of over four decades of creative work in many sculptural mediums, including resin, marble, and bronze, creates a range of monumental, life-sized, and smaller-scale works that encompass her signature *faux réalité* technique. Feuerman shares a hyperrealism tradition with artists like Duane Hanson and the narrative style of George Segal, but with a critical difference: *approachability*.

Left: *Carole Feuerman, City Slicker* (1982), oil on resin, 31 x 21 x 14" [art es fine arts magazine](#)

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When hyper-realistic sculpture first appeared on the gallery and museum scene in the 1980s, these iconographic figures served as a timely, three-dimensional narrative for a society in the throes of confronting long-standing stereotypes and cultural prejudices. It was time for the “Me Generation,” characterized by self-absorption and personal enrichment. Reflecting that contemporaneous motif, Duane Hanson’s *Tourists* (1970) or *Queenie II* (1988) were works mirroring our social- and class-based biases, observed and cataloged from a distance, existing in a carefully proscribed insular world—like characters in a wax museum—to be seen, but never touched. George Segal’s somber, unpainted plaster cast figures, on the other hand, were often arranged in groups, appearing like actors in an urban drama, suggesting alienation, latent violence, and indifference. Or they stood as single, expressionless figures trapped in a world of secretiveness, isolation, and emotional alienation—quietly despairing characters in a disconnected world.



George Segal, *Sheraton Square* (1980), public installation.



However, in the case of Feuerman’s meticulously finished pieces, the effect is not alienation, but intimacy. A close encounter with *Grand Catalina* (2005–2011), *left*, for example (the same image was cast in a series over six years, with slight variations), can evoke unexpected emotions. Face uplifted, eyes closed, suited and capped for laps in the pool—droplets streaming down her skin—the figure appears fresh from the water. Her lashes and brows neatly arrayed, the pouting lips seem ready to part for a deep breath of poolside air; an unexpected moment of intimacy can be found in the company of this lifelike image. We



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are left to wonder: If her eyes were to finally open, would she be surprised to see a stranger, so close by? Feuerman manages to convey a sense of strength and capability in her sculpture while, at the same time, offering an alluring vulnerability and sensuality. Displaying an important narrative element characteristic of this sculptor's work, this larger-than-life-sized figure—seemingly brimming with self-assurance— would appear to have no difficulty managing the world before her eyes, once emerging from her momentary reverie.

Her mostly female forms appear to radiate an inner life, one of self-aware sensuality and strength. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, her sculptures, portrayed predominantly with eyes closed, are denying us access to the realm-of-consciousness that would resolve the mystery. Instead, Feuerman tantalizes and seduces the viewer with a voyeuristic connection to the personal space behind the eyelids of her figures. We are invited to watch a lone female figure emerge from a shower as she wraps a towel around her hair; another figure languidly floats in an inner tube; a half-figure appears to stand waist-deep in a pool, hugging a large beach ball; yet another playful female grips the end of a surfboard as a wave presumably surges around her. The artist draws the line at the act of seeing; engaging the viewer, while depriving us of the ability to ever 'know' the true spirit of the character.



Paradise (1997), oil on resin, 26 x 16 x 9"

Feuerman's figures, in spite of their nakedness or isolation, exude confidence and personal power. Freshly emerged from their cleansing bath or pool, her Eve-like creations convey a palpable sensuality, symbolizing their close ties to nature's life-giving force. As David Rubin, of the San Antonio Museum of Art said, in a recent review: "As females, [Feuerman's] figures personify heroic archetypes, women who are proud of their bodies and triumphant in their achievements. As metaphors, they are expressive of hope and determination, and of the faith that accompanies the drive to push forward on life's journey, regardless of the challenges or obstacles that threaten to deter us." [1]

In no small way, this critique of Feuerman's work is a reflection on the trajectory of her

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Tree (2009-2011), detail, oil on resin, 62 x 37 x 29"

career as a sculptor. Emerging as an artist in the early years of the Feminist movement, she decided early on to produce work that challenged the old cliché of the woman as “the weaker sex.” From the beginning, Feuerman was committed to working with the human form. The raw power of her imagery, more literal and figurative than symbolic, was designed to transcend the label of erotic or provocative. Rather, it was created to represent personal power and the pure narrative essence of objective realism through her rendering of the human body. The risks in becoming a hyperrealist were great.

Functioning artistically on the verge of the simulacrum

poses the threat of producing an empty,

representational shell—imitative and convincing—but devoid of emotional intent. Feuerman’s sculptures, however, exceed the bounds of mere mimicry to become powerful symbols for the human experience. Her version of hyper-reality seems guided by sensory instincts distilled from life experience and an artist’s sensibilities, resulting in sculpture that achieves a universal truth: a strong emotional tie between subject and object—between the viewer and the viewed, inviting intimacy and a level of empathy with her sculptural work that is rarely attained. Far from detachment, an introspective work like *Summer* (2008), *above right*, invites the viewer to imagine a time when we could, once again, float thoughtfully in an inner tube on a languorous August afternoon, adrift on a warm sea.



Feuerman's sculpture is often critiqued as being work is charged with sexual or erotic overtones. But, the artist describes the primary emotional expression in her work as sensual and meditative. "I want to capture the universal feeling of the fleeting moment. When my figures are rendered with their eyes closed and deep in thought, it's like I'm presenting a story in the making. I want the viewer to complete the narrative," she says.



Her sculpting studio is generously blanketed, from floor to ceiling, with plaster dust. Row upon row of shelves are stacked high with errant body parts of every imaginable type: spare heads, torsos, hands, ears, and feet—resembling a surreal, contemporary setting inspired by a postmodern Prometheus. In spite of literary references to Mary Shelley's mad laboratory of another century, Feuerman is inspired by this "Titan god of craftsmen and tinkers" and resolute in her effort to have each of her figures touched "by the better angels of our nature." A work-in-progress lies prone on a worktable: a life-sized male figure in plaster, soon slated to be cast as a 13-foot athlete

in a handstand position. The studio team lifts and balances the figure against a column, as Feuerman checks for anatomical accuracy, with a view to balletic grace in the final product. This is art-by-consensus, as the whole production team weighs in on the details of the final execution. Nearby, a serene female figure, nude except for a bathing cap, passively waits. As though having just risen from the sea, in a perfectly proportioned, twenty-first century version of Botticelli's Birth of Venus, one wonders if she is quietly contemplating all the fuss.

Across from the showroom and office area, and far removed from the welter of plaster appendages, is the painting room. There, Feuerman's assistants sit meditatively—like monastic scribes producing illuminated manuscripts—preparing the figures with layer upon layer of undercoat, while they await their turn to be "brought to life" under Feuerman's experienced hand. Mounted on panels or sitting on tables, the artist's final touches—the addition of lashes, brows, hair, and (in some cases) acrylic water droplets—complete each

figure in her signature style. “It is the final painstaking effort that finally animates these figures. I am the only one who can paint the final layers of the skin,” she explains. “The difficulty comes when it is time to represent those subtle features, like veins and blemishes, which lie just below the surface and help to create a feeling of authenticity.”



An assistant working in the Feuerman studio



General's Daughter (2009) detail, oil on resin, 24 x 15 x 8"

Feuerman's sculptures walk the fine line between reality and deception, inviting us to explore our emotional response to this balance. The essential bridge is the artist's realization of the intense physicality, passion, and sensuality expressed in her figures' otherwise mundane poses. “My work is about relationships,” Feuerman explains, “exploring the secret interiority of the individual and a woman's relationship to herself. I hope to touch an emotional level that might otherwise be inaccessible. My objective is to do more than breathe life into my sculptures, but to explore the inner life of the character, much like a novel might. Is it autobiographical? “Perhaps, but, I like to think of my works as larger-than-life. I'm portraying gods and goddesses of the everyday.”

Addressing the material connection between the viewer and Feuerman's figures, critic John Yau writes: “[her sculptures] evoke an inner life, one that invites the viewer's speculation as well as signals the distance between them and us. We can never know what they might be thinking. And that perhaps is the point. [...] We see their bodies, but not their souls. By having their eyes closed, Feuerman inflects a fundamental aspect of her sculptures: they exist in the same physical world as we do, but they are also removed from us. This inflection causes the viewer to become self-conscious; looking is framed as an act of voyeurism.” [2] But, unlike the voyeur, these figures are inviting us to share in the

ecstasy arising from the simple sensual pleasures of water, sun, and air—leading by example, rather than inclusion in their private reverie.



Butterfly (2008-2011) oil on resin, 21 x 22.5 x 21"

Feuerman has recently begun to explore the kinetic effects of water on her bathing figures. "Water is the universal connection to life," she tells me.



Balance (2008-2011), oil on resin, 36 x 32 x 18"

"An important new phase in my work will be to incorporate computer technology developed recently that projects an image on

the floor or wall and will respond realistically to physical touch. Sculpted figures can be bathed in a large field of blue light that realistically ripples when the movement of a toe or hand is introduced. "This kind of interactive sculpture can heighten the sense of connection to the work and give the viewer a real-time experience with the installation," she explains.

Feuerman's interactive works incorporate new media technology developed in 2010. She unveiled pieces incorporating projection in her retrospective at the El Paso Museum of Art in Texas during the fall of 2010. In the winter of 2011, she debuted *Brooke's Play, right*, a monumental work incorporating an interactive floor projection of water. Viewers were invited to "walk on water" with her sculpture. The projected imagery reacted to the viewers' movements and footsteps. The sculptor has exhibited several versions of these interactive works since then, at venues including Jim Kempner Fine Art in New York, Mana Contemporary in New Jersey, Galerie Hübner in Frankfurt, Germany, and Aria Art Gallery in Florence, Italy.

Most recently, Feuerman has been exhibiting a new collection of life-size and monumental bronze figures. *The Golden Mean* is a towering 16-foot male diver, portrayed moments



before
doing a
back
dive.



The Golden Mean (2012), bronze with gold Leaf, 150 x 54 x 38", Riverfront Green Park, HVCCA

Feuerman's main focus for this piece was the diver's arched body and the sensuous c-shape it creates. It was two years in the making, representing more than 8,000

hours of labor, *The Golden Mean* is part her series of swimmers and bathers begun in the late seventies.

It is yet another iconic representation of the struggle for survival, strength and resilience of the human spirit—for achieving the near-impossible. Cast from life (*right*), then scaled up at the foundry to 16-feet, the piece is a feat of successfully engineering, as the two-ton sculpture looms upside down on out-stretched hands and six-inch wrists. The *golden mean* refers to the ancient mathematical equation epitomizing balance and proportion. The concept of striving for both achievements while maintaining balance in structure and in life is a common thread throughout

Feuerman's work, exemplifying the close relationship between balance, proportion and mathematics.



Feuerman uses the image of a circle and a sphere to further depict her desire for balance and harmony. In her painted bronze work, *Quan*, a larger-than-life female figure rests peacefully atop a highly-polished stainless steel ball, while remaining perfectly symmetrical



Quan (2012), painted bronze and stainless steel, 66.5 x 60 x 43", Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

and in balance. The title of this work is derived from the Chinese name for the 'goddess of compassion'. In Buddhist imagery, the goddess is depicted looking or glancing down, symbolizing her watching over the world. In Feuerman's sculpture, the figure's poise and stance on top of the sphere (a metaphor for the world) quintessentially exudes steadiness and stability. The sphere is polished to a beautiful mirror finish, allowing viewers to reflect and connect to the work on a personal level, as they are visibly incorporated into the work.

Infinity with

Swarovski Cap continues Feuerman's theme of balance and proportions by depicting a female figure, suspended from the ceiling—seemingly weightless—in a stainless steel ring. In a ring, we see the circular pattern of life, representing the daily repetition of our lives. A ring is also a symbol of power and wealth, as well as wholeness and peace. *Infinity with Swarovski Cap* embodies these symbols, while presenting an element of tranquility and grace under the pressure of accomplishing nearly impossible acts of strength and endurance .



Infinity with Swarovski Cap(2013),oil on resin with Swarovski crystals, 37 x 37 x 20"

The Golden Mean debuted in the fall of 2012, on the riverfront in Peekskill, NY as part of an installation for the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art. Earlier that summer, *Survival of Serena*, a monumental painted bronze, was featured in Petrosino Square, NYC, courtesy of New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Feuerman's work will be shown in three locations during the 2013 Venice Biennale, as well as numerous other public venues.

This latest phase in Feuerman's body of work represents another round of experimentation



Reflections (1985), oil on resin,
75 x 75 x 21"

in hyper-realistic sculpture's ability to extend beyond the boundaries of literalism and mimicry, to endure as a rich commentary on contemporary life. Her keen observations of the smallest gesture, the portrayal of flesh as a complex and viable organ capable of sweat, blemishes, and myriad flaws, the private joy of sensuality, and self-assuredness portrayed through subtle gestures and the narrative elements of her work—inviting a push-pull between the visual and tactile—has continued to resonate. As the critic, David Bourdon wrote: "What makes [Feuerman's technical proficiency] all the more powerful is that everything she does is in the service of the figure; all her attention is devoted to achieving verisimilitude. The works are like mirrors, but, like the mirror one encounters in fairytales and myths, they reveal a deeper truth about us." [3]

The artist underscores that she wants her sculptures to function like a book, offering revealing glimpses of the inner life of her characters. And like storytelling, Feuerman's work embodies the element of time; but the power of her work rests in the fact that her narrative is never fully disclosed—often hidden behind closed eyes and self-satisfied gestures of confidence and sensuality. This rarefied atmosphere of self-confidence, mystery, and anticipation opens the door for a range of reactions and feelings in the viewer. Each work is carefully crafted to defy simple interpretation and deflect full disclosure, open the door for a projection of our own impulses, thoughts, and emotions. Feuerman's sculptures may seem frozen in time, but they persist in revealing themselves at particular moments of intimacy, heightened sensory awareness, and vulnerability; thereby inviting us to consider our physicality, and our own stories, during an encounter with her work; asking whether we, too, could ever again embrace the sensual world they seem to 'know' so well.



The artist's sculpted hands cradle a face
in 2008

By Richard Friswell, Managing Editor

Visit the Carole feuerman website to see the artist and her team at work:

<http://www.carolefeuerman.com/2013/olympic-swimmer-and-gold-medalist-lauren-perdue-poses-for-new-sculpture/>

Notes:

1. David S. Rubin, "Carole Feuerman's Female Pride," 46, XX (New York, Moscow, Amsterdam: Salamatina Gallery, 2009), pp. 11–13.
2. John Yau, "States of Ecstasy," Resin to Bronze Topographies: Feuerman Sculptures (New York: QCC Art Gallery at Queensborough Community College, The City University of New York, 2005), pp. 17–21.
3. David Bourdon, "Critic's Diary: Seeing it All, or Six Weeks in Manhattan Galleries," Art in America, 80 (September 1992), p. 58.

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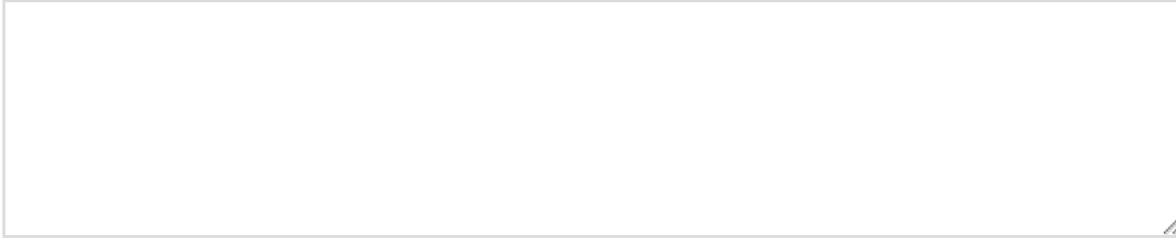
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