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*SHIFTING ROLES  
AND IMAGES*



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# GENDER ROLES—AN EVOLVING TRADITION

## WORKS BY MARIO DILITZ AND SEAN HENRY

by Sculpture Review Editors

Sculptural depictions of gender have evolved as attitudes about men and women's actual gender roles have shifted. Classical ancient Greek and Roman period sculptures depict men and women in narrowly defined roles. Sculptures of significant scale in stone or metal were very expensive to produce, so only the wealthy and powerful could afford to commission

them. Consequently, the subjects of the sculptures were the wealthy and powerful, or images from the religious mythologies that supported the culture, or images of people such as the soldiers and athletes who protected the institutions of power and of the culture. The men were typically presented as patriarchal, noble, and strong; the women as maternal, sensual, or vulnerable.







Photos: Courtesy of the artists.





When these antique sculptures were rediscovered over a long period of time and championed for contemporary and future audiences by such people as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), the conservative male role was also championed as an intrinsic part of the tradition and embedded in the aesthetic. Classically depicted men were interpreted as strong, silent, and stoic, and the tradition moved forward in a more entrenched manner:

*“In the peace and quiet of the body is revealed a calm, great spirit: the man who has become an example of great virtue to the poets, who exposed himself to the greatest danger from love of justice, who brought security to the nations and peace to the inhabitants.”\**

The last half of the twentieth century saw rapid social change, as industrial and technical revolutions, not to mention more violent revolutions, such as World War II and the Vietnam War, all resulted in women and men taking on much more diverse social and professional roles, including careers traditionally reserved for members of the opposite gender: women physicians and male nurses, for example, were something practically unheard of in the United States at the midpoint of the last century.

Since then, women have held every high political office in the U.S. except for vice-president and president, while some people living today were alive when women did not have the right to vote. The sustained feminist movement has challenged gender roles as well as images in mass media and art. In the U.S., gays now serve openly in the military for the first time, and gay marriage is rapidly becoming law, state by state, which radically changes the traditional gender roles of man/husband and woman/wife. Similarly, and also unevenly, changes are happening globally, as there

*On page 20: Sean Henry in his studio. On page 21: Mario Dilitz in his studio looking at Best Friend (2013), linden wood.*

*On this page: Man and Child by Sean Henry (2001), bronze, oil paint, 33 inches high.*

*Opposite page, top: Big Fish by Mario Dilitz (2011), linden wood, 60 inches high; bottom: The Dying Gaul (c. 230–220 B.C.E.), Roman marble copy after a bronze original from Pergamon; in the Collection of Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy.*



is a broadening of acceptable gender roles for individuals in cultures worldwide (with significant exceptions). The range of what is being expressed in figurative sculpture is also expanding.

As noted, expanding gender roles are due in part to expanding industry. In the arts, the development of new materials has provided innovations such as fiberglass, cardboard, resin, and composite materials, which have been embraced by artists as diverse as Scott Fife, Louise Bourgeois, Duane Hanson, and Ron Mueck. The new materials have enabled these and many other sculptors to create radically new expressions, rather than using the traditional media of bronze and stone, enabling them to avoid unintended references in their work to "traditional" sculpture. The lower cost of these materials also allows artists to explore less traditional images independent of a benefactor. In addition to lower-priced new sculpture technologies, materials such as wood, plaster, and ceramics, which are also less expensive, have often been the chosen materials of sculptors of a different voice or stripe.

Mario Dilitz and Sean Henry are two sculptors with two very distinct voices who advance the gender discussion. The Austrian sculptor Dilitz (b. 1973) currently lives in the nearby town of Axams, near his birthplace of Innsbruck. He works in both bronze and wood, but his signature material is basswood. He laminates blocks of wood with a reddish glue rather than a transparent adhesive. The visible joining suggests process as well as the sanguine interior of the subjects.















*The Dying Gaul*, a semi-reclining nude depicted with nobility as he is dying from an obvious chest wound, is a rare surviving example of male vulnerability in Classical sculpture from the first or second century C.E., which is a larger-than-life-size Roman marble (possibly a Roman replica of an earlier circa third century B.C.E. sculpture). This was a permissible and advantageous expression of male vulnerability, because the depiction is of a Gaul, who was considered a barbarian and enemy of both the Greeks and Romans. In contrast, Dilitz represents male vulnerability not by depicting a physical injury, but rather by crafting a psychological mood. His meticulously fashioned nude figures are planted neatly and directly on simple bases. Their open gazes and tentative postures suggest that the viewer has interrupted a private moment. Instead of sculpting heroic figures, Dilitz captures the fragility of an interior life, as he states:

*"I am fascinated by moments, especially withdrawn, non-active, and silent moments. My sculptures all express such moments, and they remain in the moment... The moments they show are tender and fleeting and therefore fragile and vulnerable, so this may be why my sculptures seem to be fragile and vulnerable themselves."*

In another example, *Best Friend* (2013), Dilitz portrays a larger than life-size nude boy holding a teddy bear low in front of his hips, which seems to act as a shield or a pillow or both. The toy personifies the genitalia of the boy (referenced by the title), and hence his sexuality as innocent. The sculpture of the boy's body is carved with sensitivity, and the refined surface has the delicacy and fragility of a porcelain teacup. In contrast, the teddy bear's shape is hewn roughly, evoking the texture of fur, but is jagged, not cuddly, suggestive of a possible future, which is less innocent. What is clear in Dilitz's work is that the male subjects have a more complicated, nuanced, and realistic emotional presence. In his words:

*"The whole view of men in culture has changed and is still changing. We know we can never be just strong ... nevertheless, a vulnerable man can still be very strong."*

English sculptor Sean Henry's (b. 1965) themes are less about the intimate and more on the public presence of the sculpted figure. Henry's work expands the conversation on gender with expressions of powerful women. Henry's *Sleeper* (2013) is a somewhat absurd image in which an imposing figure of a woman is presented as sturdy and gravid. She is holding a (seemingly) sleeping, adult male in her arms, but the man is scaled to the size of an infant and is dressed in military fatigues and barefoot, so presents as very vulnerable as

*On page 24: Studio Mario Dilitz (2013).*

*On page 25, left: Wood #6 by Mario Dilitz (2014), linden wood, 71 inches high; right: Bronze #7 by Mario Dilitz (2014), 77 inches high.*

*On this page: Bronze #3 by Mario Dilitz (2013), 26 cm high.*

*Opposite page: Seated Man by Sean Henry (2011), bronze, cor-ten steel, all weather paint, 93 inches high, detail.*

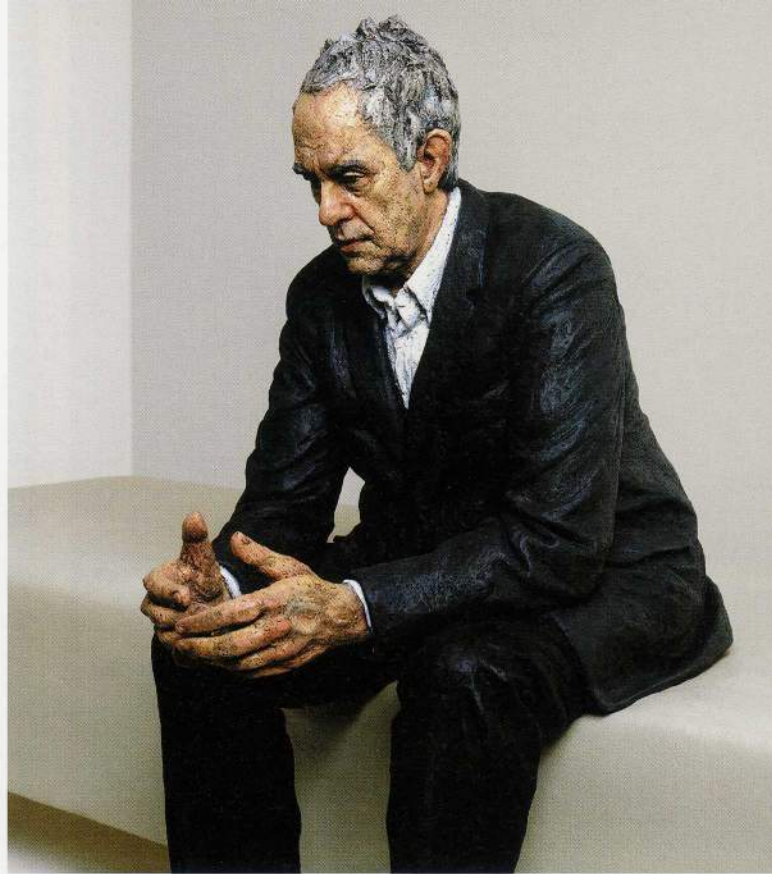










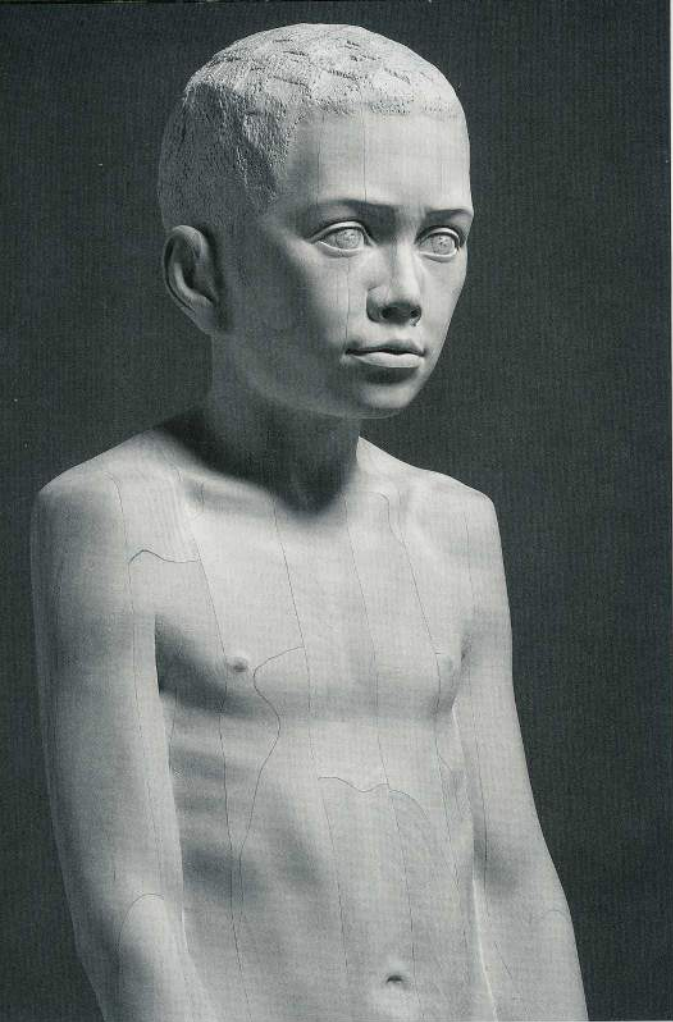


*Opposite page: Walking Woman by Sean Henry (2010), bronze, oil paint, 85-1/2 inches high.*

*On this page, left: Man Looking Up by Sean Henry (2008), bronze, oil paint, 34 inches high, detail; top right: You're Not the Same by Sean Henry (2005), bronze, oil paint, canvas, steel, wood, 26 inches high; bottom: The Way It Will Be by Sean Henry (2012), bronze, oil paint, 20 inches high.*


Photos: Courtesy of the artists.





In Salisbury Cathedral, a place where the viewer might expect an image of a saint, Henry places among traditional niches and tympana, *Seated Man* (2011), an image of a working-class man. In the case of *Walking Woman*, which in 2013 was also installed on a public pathway in a park in Oslo, Norway, the woman is depicted in full stride, focused and purposeful, and presented on the same pathway as all the other pedestrians. Unlike memorial sculptures of the past, which make statements that mark time and place with an aspiration of permanency, Henry's sculptures have reoccurring themes of transition and temporality, as the artist comments:

*"I tend to think of them as 'paused,' or on the edge of action, as this is often the moment that reveals more than a static pose. It's a more honest view, more intimate, and a more emotional response to a human figure than the idealized one that tended to be the basis of most, although not all, classical sculpture... the strength of Walking Woman is something that viewers comment on a lot. Her scale is significant because she is larger than life size. And I've noticed that people tend to respond to large-scale female figures in this way."*

Traditional figurative sculpture tended to represent traditional cultural values, and shifts in gender roles are a part of the evolution of our cultural tradition. Current transitions and gender roles are being expressed by contemporary sculptors in a dialog with past masters, just as new gender roles evolve out of past models. And beyond this, artists are exploiting the viewers' expectations and even their discomfort at perceived gender norms to create power in the expression of the individual both as artist and as subject. 

both an infant and in sacrifice as a soldier. Henry references the traditional Christian subject of the Pietà in which Mary, typically in regal robes, holds the body of the crucified Christ, but in this case the woman is in business attire and emotionally disinterested in the man/child that she holds. This is neither an expression of the traditional nurturing mother and child nor of a mother's grief for her lost hero-son. As Henry states:

*"The female figure in Sleeper does have a physical strength to her, in part because she carries the male and exudes an air of indifference to her burden. She is neither nurturing nor necessarily protecting the male, just offering a haven for him to sleep."*

Henry's polychrome sculptures evoke both uncertainty and transition in his depictions of both genders, and his figures have the texture of contemporary public life. Bronze figurative sculpture, which so often has been used to aggrandize and to depict a narrow range of gender roles is repurposed by Henry. In public works, such as the colossal *Couple* (2007), which is billed as the UK's first offshore commission (40 feet x 69 feet x 19.5 feet) depicts a couple taking in the view and sharing the moment as couples might. It is both grand and ordinary.

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\*Source: Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Curtis Bowman (coauthor), *Essays On The Philosophy And History Of Art, Vol.1* (Continuum Classic Texts, 3 Volume Set, Thoemmes Continuum: March 11, 2006), paperback.

**On this page, left:** Wood #15 by Mario Dilitz (2013), linden wood, 78-3/4 inches high; **right:** Wood #4 by Mario Dilitz (2010), linden wood, 72-2/3 inches high.

**Opposite page:** Wood #12 by Mario Dilitz (2008), linden wood, 61 inches high.



