

Ghosts that Cut: Folkert de Jong's Bronze Apparitions



A detail of Folkert De Jong's "The Eye of Jupiter," 2014, currently on view at James Cohan Gallery.
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When an artist suddenly shifts material — say, from edgy ephemera to a resistant, traditional medium like bronze — one must ask if the move was made in the service of a concept, or to suit more worldly exigencies. While these considerations need not be mutually exclusive, it is generally true that each idea has its best material vehicle, the integrity of which cannot be measured by resistance to frost, historical venerability, or market value.

Folkert de Jong's striking new body of work, "The Holy Land," on view at James Cohan Gallery through April 25, is an unusual example of a dramatic, risky, and completely apropos transition in medium. De Jong has spent the past decade establishing himself with his smart and forceful use of industrial foam — a substance decisively contemporary, cheap, fragile, and (in a world impassioned for earth-friendly and upcycled materials) repellent with its naked, chemical-industrial identity. For "The Holy

Land,” de Jong taps into the historical baggage of bronze and its imposing physical properties to ratchet up his continued exploration of themes around power in a mature and integrated body of work.

The use of bronze, in fact, has always been inextricably bound to power and violence; the impulse behind its very invention was not, to be sure, decorative. Harder and sharper than its copper predecessors, bronze came on the scene 5,000 years ago to smash, rend, cut, shield — and secondarily to adorn. Indeed, many if not most of the bronze forms in museum collections are martial in nature. It was also expensive, and therefore primarily useful to rulers and their armies for self-aggrandizement.

This loaded pedigree, as well as the history of bronze’s widespread use in Western war monuments and memorials, does not escape de Jong. Dispersed across four rooms, his works include imposing knights, arthropodic contraptions with machine gun trunks, and display cases housing assemblages that read like bizarre, museum-esque time capsules that collapse the past and present.

In general, these sculptures are marked by the same disjoint of de Jong’s foam works, both in their unrefined assemblages as well as their combination of elements of both terror and levity. This is perhaps best exemplified in “Babel’s Maze,” a tree-like gun apparatus that implies functionality, like some viciously excessive Rube Goldberg device that needs to fire nine machine guns in order to tip a hat or kick a soccer ball. It references an easy access to and use of lethal weapons, but additionally — in de Jong’s jester-like fashion — shoves metaphorical flowers in their barrels by making them absurd, colorful, defunct props.

Also consistent with de Jong’s work in foam is a complete eschewing of preciousness and a search to connect with his medium’s primal nature. These bronzes are anything but the familiar, polished objects that preponderate in art history (par excellence: Brancusi). Totally uncleaned after casting, they retain the sprues and gates used in the

foundry pour, which now cling like crude, laboratory beaker-appendages to armor, weirdly vascular and redundantly decorative, contributing to a sense that de Jong has dredged these from the past in an experimental teleporter. But, like “The Fly,” the transmission has been a little screwy, leading to outlandish conflations and superimpositions. Lemons and death masks and grenade launchers merge in the vaguely sci-fi mechanism “Spiritual Generator,” edged with hairs of frayed metal like a static charge from its recent time travel.

In a way, de Jong literally *has* conjured these apparitions from history. During a two-year process that involved collaborations with the Royal Armouries in Leeds, England, and his local foundry in Amsterdam, de Jong had military artifacts such as Henry VIII’s personal body armor scanned, milled in foam, and cast in bronze. Essentially, the pieces went from metal, to a digital cloud, to foam, then back to metal — effectively traipsing from the 15th to the 21st century. This multilayered, multimedia, multi-temporal process imbues the work with an uncanny, holographic quality that is both indexical and idiosyncratic: forms exactly replicated have been corrupted by digital elision and material reincarnation, punctuated by de Jong’s creative interventions.

To wit, the knight “Fidei Defensor” looms in a puddle of his own slag, pitted like polystyrene and corroded with the vibrant acids de Jong custom fuses into each piece, a casual reference to the graffiti vandalism of public monuments. “Defensor” is a multi-hued slayer, sporting a hyperbolic codpiece that suggests the eroticism of violence, and contoured by jagged edges like a page torn from history. These are ghosts you can cut yourself on.

The plasticity and reusability of bronze means it can regularly morph to suit successive layers of cultural imperative; paradoxically, the qualities that make bronze so useful threaten the longevity of objects made from it. In times of need, art has always been sacrificed: bronze sculptures were regularly melted down to make armaments, which is why so few Greek sculptures in this material remain. Triumphantly, de Jong

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reappropriates objects of warfare, and once menacing uzis and armor lie inert and splashed with color, reaffirming the power of art to have the last laugh.

Ultimately, all the pieces in the show are bound together by a feeling of temporality — ideas about history, the historical identity of objects, and what is deposited after the eluvial forces of time, technology, and new sensibilities erode former contexts. De Jong's alchemical layerings of material, concepts, and processes begin to form their own complicated strata, as if the ores of history itself have been liquified and reformed in the crucible of his glowing imagination.