

Curatorial presentation to SEI Investments: Wednesday, 24 May
Camilla Fenning

Lawrence Berzon, Path of Least Resistance, 1999

Diptych (in two separate pieces) ~ Oil on Cast Resin, Epoxy and Birch ~ 7 x 12 x 2 inches (each)
This work can be viewed at the Caelum Gallery, 508-526 West 26th Street, New York City



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Lawrence Berzon's Path of Least Resistance is a classic example of his recent art and touches on many of the issues with which he is currently grappling. The form of the work itself confronts our expectations of how a framed work of art is normally presented, raising fundamental questions about what we expect as an art object. Resin figures (which Berzon casts from his clay originals) are set within a recessed and painted picture frame. On top of the frame, Berzon places resin trees whose roots appear to have pushed through the frame into the tunnel below. Berzon enjoys the viewer's struggle to clarify both visually and intellectually the juxtaposition between relief and flat surface. He writes, "the pieces are painted in order to unify the two and three dimensional surfaces; this illusionism is also a metaphor for the conflict between my characters and the world they inhabit, where two and three dimensions collide." The use of the continuing narrative between the two pieces of the work (notice that one figure disappears into the end of the left-hand frame and emerges at the beginning of the right) also forces the viewer to make

a visual and intellectual leap between the two.

Path of Least Resistance can be read on many different levels, and Berzon certainly intends us to do so. A key facet of his work is the question of ambiguity of the complexity of the human condition, society, nature and our roles within them. This theme has perhaps particular resonance over the cusp of the new millennium: films such as "American Beauty" raised similar concerns with similarly ambiguous conclusions. On one level, Path of Least Resistance is humorous yet it also has a dark side bordering on hopelessness. Man is seen as a groveling animal totally unequipped for this subterranean journey, blindly following a leader who appears to be leading them into the path of most resistance as the tree roots become thicker and thicker. Overhead, nature is victorious: the thicker the roots become, the healthier the trees. For Berzon, the trees represent tranquility, reality and the steady passage of time. The contrast between the tranquil trees and the desperate people illustrate for

him the dichotomy in life between what is seen on the surface and the many hidden and extraordinary things that we do not see but which are taking place around us.

For Berzon, there is a kind of salvation in the process of the crawling figures. He writes generally of his work that "the characters in my pieces often forget what they are trying to achieve. They are caught up in the moment and in their own myopic goals. Seeing what they want to see and hearing only what they want to hear, these characters intend to provoke the viewer to hope for a solution to their predicament." In looking at Path of Least Resistance, we confront our own fears of claustrophobia, inadequacy and failure. The work arrests us because we feel the connection to the crawling men and are then left in suspense without knowing the resolution of the narrative. Is there a happy ending? The artist is enigmatic: "I hope against hope that there is hope, that there is light at the end of the tunnel."

SLIDE LIST

Works by the artist

1. Lawrence Berzon, Path of Least Resistance, 1999, oil on cast resin, epoxy and birch
2. Lawrence Berzon, Taking Root, 1999, oil on cast resin, epoxy and birch
3. Lawrence Berzon, Subsistence, 1999, oil on cast resin
4. Lawrence Berzon, Myth of Performance, 1999, oil on linen and poplar
5. Lawrence Berzon, Recollection, 1998, oil on linen and poplar
6. Lawrence Berzon, Single-Minded Too, 1999, oil on cast resin and birch
7. Lawrence Berzon, No Distractions, 1999, oil on cast resin and birch
8. (Polaroid) Lawrence Berzon, Diorama, 2000, plaster (unfinished)

Art Historical Context

9. Red Grooms, Shoot Out, 1980, mixed media
10. Balthus, The Mountain, 1937, oil on canvas
11. Robert Rauschenberg, Satellite, 1955, mixed media, pheasant
12. Joseph Beuys, 7000 Oaks, 1982

Comparables

13. Ryan McGinnis, Saving Ryan's Privates, 1999, plastic toy soldiers on wood panel, 24 x 24 inches, \$2,000
14. Laurie Simmons, Edition for White Columns, 1996, hand cast, hand finished white plexiglass shelf, edition of 30. 9 x 21.5 x 3 inches, \$1,350
15. David Opdyke, Above the Fruited Plain, 1999, plastic, electronic device, wires, nylon brush, 9 x 17 x 6 inches, \$1,800