

Art in America

APRIL 2001

Lawrence Berzon at Caelum

Pervading this show of New York artist Lawrence Berzon's figurative paintings and polychrome reliefs from the last two years was the theme of doubling. In *Private Meeting*, a roughly 4-by-3½-foot oil on linen, a woman clad in only a bra and skimpy towel is combing her hair before a mirror. In this boudoir of rampant narcissism, the woman's face and body are doubled not only in the mirror she looks at but also on the wallpaper behind it, a nearby pin-up calendar, the brass drawer handles of a dresser, the handset of an old-fashioned rotary phone and in a dozen other knickknacks scattered around the crowded composition. Even the tattoo visible low on the woman's back is a self-image. In a small diptych titled *Alikeness*, Berzon, whose style is often reminiscent of George Tooker (with a strong dose of David Lynch weirdness), shows us, on the wider lefthand panel, a sculptor carving at a clay bust of herself that is identical to dozens of other busts lining the shelves behind her. In the smaller panel on the right, the

bust-in-progress is beginning to bleed where it has just been incised and the sculptor (a naked, buxom blonde as improbable as the scenario around her) drops her carving tool in shock.

The most successful of the five polychrome reliefs in the show was *The Mission*, a nearly 3-foot-long, 1-foot high diorama of cast resin, epoxy and birch that warps out from the wall some 10 inches. The setting is a suburban scene of single-family houses, wide lawns and lush trees. In the foreground, where the work shifts from two dimensions to three, a heavily painted, cast-resin figure of a man is gazing at his own reflection in a roughly dug pool of water.

Berzon takes a more indirect approach to the theme of doubling in *Foreshadower*, a 6-foot-high, 2½-foot-wide painting of a young boy standing in a corner. Surrounded by toys and fanciful wallpaper, the boy is looking over his shoulder at the viewer. This picture of innocence (done in a style that evokes old-fashioned children's books) is disrupted by the shadow of a long-tailed, long-clawed, horned monster looming over the boy. Does this devilish shadow represent the dangers of the adult world or the specter of puberty or simply some vividly remembered childhood nightmare? Unlike the mirror images which Berzon favors elsewhere, this suggestive shadow takes us beyond allegories of narcissism. Berzon further widens the implications of this picture by situating his unseen monster alongside those other invisible watchers: artist and viewer.

—Raphael Rubinstein

Lawrence Berzon: *Foreshadower*, 2000, oil on linen, 72 by 30 inches; at Caelum.

