

I and the 'I'

Sculptures and Installations by Ivan Albreht

Article by Spomenka Jelić Medaković

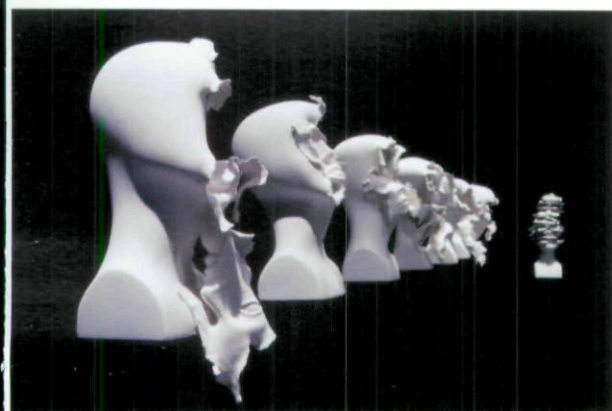


The Other (Installation View). 2004.

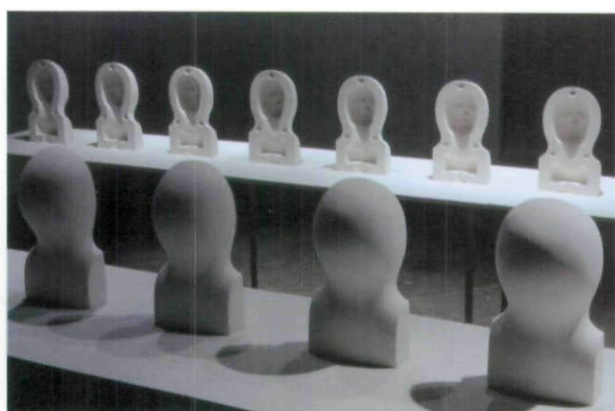
THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF RECENT INSTALLATIONS and sculptures by Ivan Albreht (b.1970) is his interest in the overall structure and tendencies of contemporary society and the condition of the individual in relation to it. The artist examines these issues on several levels: the relationship of the individual to society and the political system at large; the individual in relation to another; the individual in relation to his/her inner-world. Although Albreht reflected on existential topics while studying at the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade (Serbia), his visual language changed after undertaking graduate studies in the US (2000). His interest in existential

questions was certainly provoked by the deep social crisis in Yugoslavia, his homeland. The fall of the socio-political system of former Yugoslavia during the 1990s and the establishment of the new regime resulted in formation of a new 'social order'. These changes have influenced artists of a younger generation in various ways. Albreht was among artists who started to question the very character of the society in which we are living.

Upon arriving in the US, Albreht was confronted with an environment and lifestyle whose character was relatively unknown to the artist. He began to examine paradoxes of contemporary western society



The Other (Detail), 2004.



Waiting (Detail), 2004.



Waiting (Installation View), 2004.



The Other (Detail), 2004.



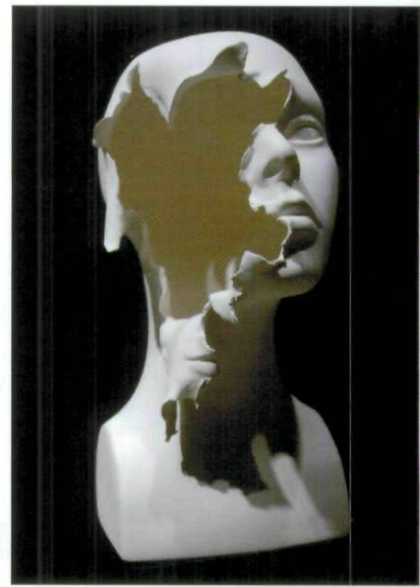
Stack, 2006.

by observing them from a distance. Seeing that in such a 'generic society', as Albrecht says, the idea of an individual becomes amorphous, he creates a visual metaphor resulting in a series of works with the same light-motif. In order to create his 'universal portrait' of contemporary man, he has shaped a white porcelain mask based on a storefront mannequin head and multiplied it. The face of his porcelain man is genderless, expressionless, cold and lifeless. The kind of visual play he creates by using this mask, perhaps better 'a module', raises questions about uniformity, globalization, simulation and numerical identification. In his works, the *homo intellectualis* of the 21st century appears to be consciously replacing his spiritual being – the part of the intellect laboriously developed since earliest civilizations – with a materialistic one. In suggesting this de-humanized character for the 21st century man, the artist is close to Erich Fromm, especially his philosophical position expressed in the book *To Have or to Be*.

Central to Albrecht's work are installations titled *The Other* and *Waiting*. *The Other* invites the viewer into its space in a similar manner as linear perspective creates an illusion of depth. Porcelain portraits arranged on metal stands are evenly positioned in the gallery space in such a way as to form two sides of an isosceles triangle. A head constructed from a stack of faces is placed at the end of the two

aisles to create a vanishing point, which serves as the visual and conceptual culmination of this work. All of the portraits are made from the identical mannequin head; however, they gain individual character by the process which involves the act of tearing. Thus, the very notion of identity becomes an illusion since individualism given to these characters is achieved during the act of their destruction. Moreover, the title itself, *The Other*, suggests the manner in which today's mass media forms a character on the screen.

In the installation *Waiting*, the artist places the viewer, like a cast, in a clinically sterile ambience among numerous casting moulds placed on long tables arranged in two rows. Although in ceramics casting moulds are used to produce identical replicas, Albrecht tends to use them more symbolically, drawing a parallel with a less specific multiplication device. "Through the play of light and shadow, I have created an illusion in which faces inside moulds behave like moving images, dependant on the viewer's position in



Left and right: *The Other (Detail)*, 2004.
Centre: *Stack (Detail)*, 2006.



Waiting (Detail), 2004.

space. This illusion formed by negative imprinted surfaces that appear positive becomes even more challenging when the observer walks between the rows of moulds; images of heads trapped inside the moulds never lose eye contact with the viewer regardless of change of viewpoint. My goal was to achieve clinical atmosphere that gives an impression of absence, even death, but not physical

death," explains Albreht. Series of moulds with identical impressions strongly imply notions of mass reproduction, cloning and the lack of consciousness. Ceramic works such as these, which are, in a way, a sublimation of the artists' philosophical attitude were previously unseen in Serbian ceramics.

Albreht provides insight to his intent: "I have specific reasons for using porcelain for my works. Porcelain, as a material, has a long tradition as being the purest, most refined and most precious ceramic medium; at the same time, it is very fragile. Its supposed fragility and preciousness works as a metaphor for our preconceptions of an individual, but I do not foreground the material itself. The surface is left dry, pale, unglazed; it loses its refinement and appears pale and empty. My aim is not to explore the properties of the medium but rather to use it as a metaphor."

Albreht's work titled *Stack*, which won the Special Prize at The 4th World Ceramic Biennale 2007 in Korea, also utilizes unified human portraits without emotional or psychological expression. Series of identical faces that appear like rubber masks are presented neatly stored in a pile. They leave us to wonder, what is, or was, their use?

Ivan Albreht's approach to the ceramic medium is distinctive. The process, by which he makes the works, as well as the treatment of the material, emphasizes content. In combining slip-casting, industrial methods and hand-modelling, he develops technological processes that are innovative and seldom complex. He insists on the quality of craftsmanship and refinement of form in a specific manner, with the intent of creating objects that appear machine-produced. Every detail that may suggest involvement of his hand is carefully removed, leaving no signature or other personal mark. Display strategy, carefully planned in advance, is an integral part of his creative process. By precise use of light and shadow, he creates sharp contrasts between white objects against black backgrounds. Black and white without gradation, in a dramatic atmosphere, stands as a metaphor simultaneously provoking the feeling of distance and embracement.



Ivan Albreht.

Spomenka Jelić Medaković is an art historian and free lance art critic. She works and lives in Belgrade, Serbia.

Copyright of Ceramics: Art & Perception is the property of Ceramics Art & Perception Pty. Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.