

Jeffrey Mongrain: Invocations of Absence

by Glen R. Brown

Reductive to the point where reflection on lost detail engages the mind more fully than perception of the sculptures themselves, the works of New York artist Jeffrey Mongrain aspire to make absence a tangible attribute of material objects. The works are, to be sure, physically unequivocal, even gestalt-like, but despite their ostensible affinities with Minimalism, they effectively invert the Minimalist focus on presence. Clearly abstractions, and therefore representations, they are necessarily about something in excess of the "specific object." Enveloping Mongrain's works is a definite, if somewhat abstruse, narrative relating to his own past. More importantly, the simple items that his sculptures represent—pillows, bells, handrails, and even water—are recognizable to any viewer and yield themselves readily to assimilation

into narratives of the viewer's own invention. Severely simplified yet ambivalent, suspended elusively in the complex weave of meanings between artist and viewer, they are radically overdetermined symbols.

For most of the 1990s, Mongrain, now a professor of art at Hunter College, CUNY, taught at the Glasgow School of Art and during that time encountered in his excursions around Great Britain the medieval crypt sculptures, most importantly the haunting gisants—solemn representations of nobles reclining in stony silence on their own sarcophagi—that would inspire his current series of work. Inherent to these medieval sepulchral sculptures is a fundamental paradox. Despite the naturalism and life-size scale of the gisants, their function as memorials and their associations with tombs

render them less surrogate presences than eternal reminders of the absence of the deceased. Moreover, as time has obscured the details of actual lives, the gisants have become effectively anonymous, and the viewer who gazes upon them is drawn to invent semblances of living beings in the voids they represent.

To convey the impression of absence in a physical object and to elicit the viewer's complicity in evolving meanings around it, Mongrain initially focused on the simple image of a pillow, created by a recumbent head that is only imaginable to the viewer through the trace it has left behind. Constructed from slabs of white sculpture clay, the pillows are cold-modeled

Below left: *Pierced Bell with Threads*, 2000. Clay and thread, 116 x 18 x 14 in. Below: *An Evening's Breath*, 2000. Clay, wax, and water, 35 x 24 x 2.5 in.





after firing through techniques ordinarily reserved for working stone. The rigid clarity of the contours thus achieved is important to Mongrain, since his concern is for the pillow as symbol rather than mimetic image. Projecting slightly from the wall by means of steel rods, the pillows hover in an ambiguous space, inviting a variety of readings without endorsing any in particular. If intimations of death seem to surround them, they just as readily—especially when displayed as pairs—suggest the vestiges of an erotic encounter. Only recently has Mongrain attached to them any more specific connotations, as in *An Evening's Breath*, in which the indentation contains 9.5 ounces of water, the average amount of moisture respired over an eight-hour period of sleep—time lost to the conscious mind.

Water, abstracted into physically discrete, geometric objects, has been a recurring element in Mongrain's recent work. Attaching slabs of fired clay to steel or wooden supports, then cold-modeling their surfaces into undulating textures and finishing them with black paint or a dark and velvety application of graphite and wax, Mongrain has attempted to distill into objective form a nebulous recollection. Childhood memories of the sensation of swimming in black water on dark Minnesota summer nights provided the initial inspiration for these sculptures, but the negation in their impenetrable surfaces of nearly every quality associated with liquid detaches the works from the realm of actual experience and imparts to them the melancholic symbolism of an irretrievable, even imaginary, past. Like faded photographs, they interpose an obvious

distance between sensation and the object they represent, even for the viewer who is unacquainted with the personal symbolism. That they *are* symbols rather than self-referential objects is an inevitable inference from their severely reductive yet still representational form.

The tendency of the viewer to focus on qualities not physically present in the sculptures themselves is perhaps most obvious in relation to Mongrain's representations of bells or handrails, in which the normal function of the objects represented is negated. To make a bell that does not ring is one matter, but to do so while reducing its visible properties to the extreme and purposely distancing it from any specific context is to begin to recast it as a pure symbol. In this respect, the bell form can come to represent not merely the physical origin of a particular sound, but the absent sound itself. While the viewer is likely to read this symbol in relation to known codes involving bells—for instance those of weddings, liturgical ceremonies, holidays, and proclamations of liberty—the form is not inevitably bound to any specific interpretation. Only by virtue of its perceived status as symbol does it compel interpretation at all.

As a final observation, it is perhaps apropos to note that Mongrain has frequently been asked to contribute work to exhibitions centering on the theme of spirituality, despite the fact that he has never consciously made spiritual concerns a focus of his sculptures. If bells have an obvious connection to church iconography, and water is a pandemic symbol in world religions, the spiritual significance of pillows and handrails is considerably



Above left: *Hollow Drop*, 2000. Clay, wood, and paint, 44 x 44 x 3 in. **Above:** *Balustrade*, 2000. Clay, 45 x 2 x 2.5 in.

more obscure. It is, however, precisely the indeterminability of Mongrain's symbols, physically so concrete, that evokes the paradoxical relationship between absence and presence, the infinite and the finite, that gives resonance to the Incarnation or the Buddhist concept of void. In Mongrain's parlance, this is the quality of the "memorial." Striving to make present the fleeting sensations of memory, his sculptures, by virtue of their very obsession with the physical, interject an insurmountable distance between themselves and the experiences they commemorate. As a consequence, the most concrete and tangible of forms are simultaneously indeterminate symbols, material objects become invocations of absence.

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