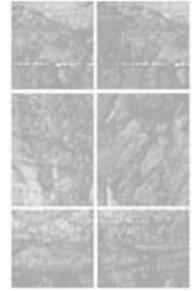


# Sculpture as deconstruction: the aesthetic practice of Ron Mueck



ANNE CRANNY-FRANCIS  
University of Technology, Sydney

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses recent (2009) work of Australian-born, British-based hyperrealist sculptor, Ron Mueck, in order to show how it not only engages with a range of specific contemporary concerns and debates, but also operates as a visual deconstruction of Cartesian subjectivity. In order to identify Mueck's deconstructive practice, the article uses a combination of multimodal, sensory and discourse analyses to situate Mueck's work discursively and institutionally, and to explore the ways in which it provokes reader engagement. As the author identifies, each of the works – *Youth*, *Still life* and *Drift* – addresses specific issues and they all provoke a self-reflexive engagement that brings together all aspects of viewer engagement (sensory, emotional, intellectual, spiritual), challenging the mind/body dichotomy that characterizes the Cartesian subject.

## KEYWORDS

being • discursive • intertextuality • meaning • sculpture • sensory • subjectivity  
• touch • visuality

This article begins by locating the discourses within which Mueck's work is embedded, which influence viewers' responses to the sculptures and the meanings that they generate. It then considers one major characteristic of Mueck's sculptures – the contradiction between their hyperrealist surface and non-life size – and relates this specifically to the works' deconstructive practice. This is followed by an analysis of the three new works from 2009 – *Youth*, *Still life* and *Drift* – that were shown in the Mueck exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria (2010). The analysis discusses both specific meanings of each of these works and the way each contributes to Mueck's deconstructive practice. The article concludes by summarizing the analysis of the works – their disciplinary

SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC:  
<http://vcj.sagepub.com>) Copyright © The Author(s), 2012.  
Reprints and permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalspermissions.nav/>  
Vol 12(1): 3–25 DOI 10.1177/1470357212462672

and institutional positioning, their appeal to viewers, their material practice, and how they operate as social and cultural technologies.

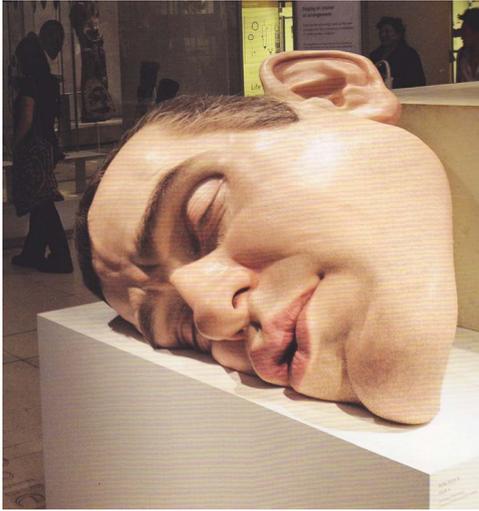
## INTRODUCTION

The analyst's, indeed anyone's, encounter with a text (be it sculpture, painting, film, book, everyday encounter) is never naïve. It is inevitably influenced by her/his own embodied experience; that is, by a range of factors including the viewer's sensory response and conceptual engagement, which are in turn provoked and mediated by disciplinary and institutional discourses that situate the work; the cultural status or position of the work and its maker; the intertextual references it evokes; and the social and political context in which it was made and in which it is viewed. In the case of an art-work, the viewer's knowledge of the artist's current cultural status inevitably influences (though does not necessarily determine) the response to the work.

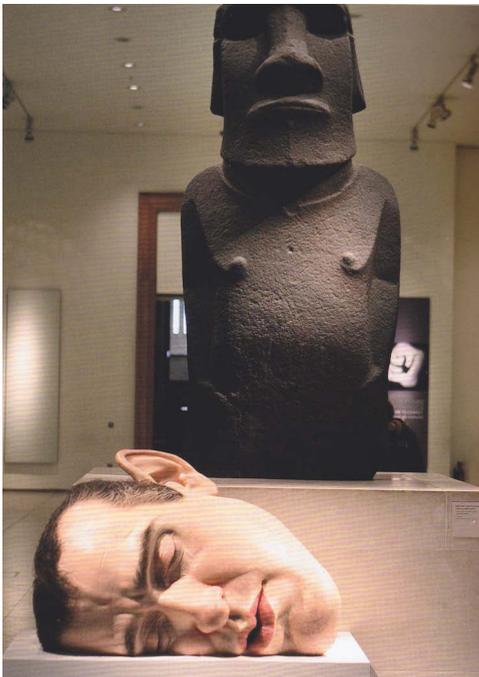
Ron Mueck is considered one of Britain's major contemporary sculptors, as was demonstrated recently by his inclusion in the *StatuePhilia* exhibition at the British Museum (4 October 2008 – 25 January 2009), which placed the work of Britain's six leading sculptors – Antony Gormley, Damien Hirst, Ron Mueck, Mark Quinn, Tim Noble and Sue Webster – in different galleries within the British Museum. Mueck's sculpture, *Mask II* (2001, see Figures 1 and 2) was placed in a Pacific Gallery, where it lay in ironic counterpoint before an Easter Island statue – a configuration that raised specific questions about the nature of sculpture; what makes museum exhibits artefacts rather than art-works; the colonialism inherent in such classifications and so on.

Mueck's inclusion in this group is evidence of his status as a major artist, which affects the way in which his work is presented in museums and galleries, determines the cultural status of those institutions (Mueck's work is shown in National Galleries, not local shopfronts), and so inevitably influences the way in which both critics and the general public approach the work. At the same time, Mueck has detractors who see his work as versions of the models that he formerly made for film and television, their appeal based on an extraordinary verisimilitude that for these reviewers demonstrates craftsmanship, not art. As my argument below demonstrates, this criticism is a fundamental misreading of the work, but it is instructive to note that their work uses a traditional arts/crafts distinction to challenge the artist's cultural status and his works' cultural value. So even a sculptor whose work has reached canonical status and is exhibited in major national galleries is not free of criticism, even if the grounds of the criticism seem drawn from outmoded paradigms of cultural worth and value.

Viewers also engage with the works intertextually, locating their meanings by reference to works in the same and other genres. In the process, the meanings associated with those referenced works become part of the viewer's negotiation of meaning in the encounter with the sculpture; the associated



**Figure 1.** Ron Mueck, *Mask II*, 2001. Mixed media, 77.0 x 118.0 x 85.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.



**Figure 2.** Ron Mueck, *Mask II*, 2001. Mixed media, 77.0 x 118.0 x 85.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

meanings may accrue to the sculpture, becoming part of its own meanings, adding complexity and nuance to the meanings associated with the work. The *Wild Man 2005* sculpture (Figure 3), for example, refers the viewer to a range



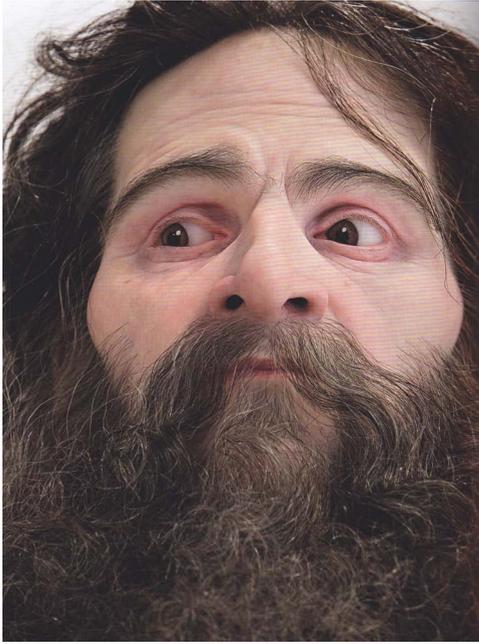
**Figure 3.** Ron Mueck, *Wild man*, 2005. Mixed media, 285 x 162 x 108 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.



**Figure 4.** Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Oswald Krell* (detail), 1499. Oil on panel, 49.6 x 39 cm. Albrecht Dürer, [Public domain] via Wikimedia Commons at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albrecht\\_D%C3%BCrer\\_086.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Albrecht_D%C3%BCrer_086.jpg)

of Wild Man figures, such as Edmund Spenser's Wild Man of the Forest from *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and the medieval European and English figures on which Spenser's character is based – shown in the side panels of a Dürer portrait (1499, see Figure 4).

The Wild Man is traditionally a human being who lives outside human society; in this sense he is 'uncivilized' or asocial. In some versions of the Wild Man (or *woodwose*) myths, this is simply his 'natural' state; he is quintessential 'natural' man – like the Green Man of English mythology. In other versions, he is a civilized man who has somehow been driven mad and can no longer survive in human society as, for example, in the Biblical story of Nebuchadnezzar II in the Book of Daniel who is exiled from his kingdom after going mad and lives in the forest, or more recently the mad Lear who roams the wilderness in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Whether a vegetal figure like the Green Man or a mad recluse, the Wild Man tends to be shy and fearful of human society. This might explain why this very large male figure – in one sense, the very image of the powerful white male – grips his chair, body rigid with tension, and stares over the heads of viewers in an apparent paroxysm of fear. The mythical associations of the Wild Man accrue to Mueck's sculpture, and are then read in relation to other specific, contemporary meanings associated with the



**Figure 5.** Ron Mueck, *Wild man* (detail), 2005. Mixed media, 285 x 162 x 108 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

work. So, for example, the work might be viewed as an ironic reflection on the idea that white masculinity is socially and culturally powerful, given that it is under challenge from a range of positions and viewpoints, including feminist and postcolonialist theorists. Alternatively, it might represent liminality – the position at the fringe of society often occupied by unkempt individuals (the homeless) who are metaphorically, if not literally, naked (i.e. bereft of the protection of civilization); or the liminality of human life in an environment so damaged by human behaviour that human life itself is under threat.

The material practice of the work also fundamentally affects the viewer's embodied encounter for a number of reasons, beginning with its sensory appeal and the meanings that generates. The practice will also be more or less conventional within the history of the art-form, which will create other meanings for the viewer. Consider, for example, the *Statuephilia* piece, *Dark Stuff* (2008) by Tim Noble and Sue Webster.

Rather than marble, stone, wood or bronze, this sculpture is constructed by the arrangement of mummified small animals and birds into shapes fastened to stakes and the projection of these shapes onto the wall behind the piece. The sculpture is very complex, including both organic material and shadow play; it is very fragile, in that it clearly could not be handled by viewers; it has multiple intertextual referents, some of which are shocking and bizarre (such as the severed heads of English and Celtic military history, or the impaled bodies of the notorious Romanian ruler, Vlad Tepesch);

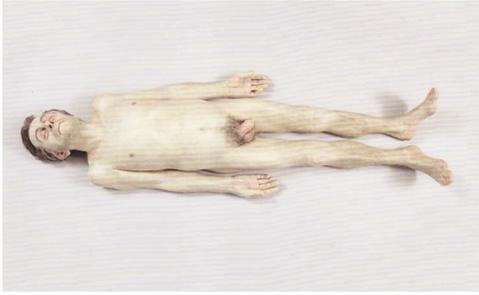
it uses multiple technologies and materials in a bizarre kind of convergence that mocks the sterility of modern digital technologies. This work could be discussed at much greater length but my purpose here is simply to suggest the ways in which choice of material opens up the meaning potential of a work, not least by its confrontation with the more conventional materials of the form. This is a significant issue with Mueck's sculpture because of the relative fragility (for sculpture) of the works. Indeed, traditionally one of the key differences between painting and sculpture, much quoted in the rivalry between them, was the tactile verisimilitude of sculpture. In her article about the rivalry between the art-forms, Andrea Bolland (2000: 321) quotes 16th-century sculptor, Nicolo Tribolo's claim that a blind man would recognize a sculpture by its feel while a painting would simply seem to him a flat surface. Mueck's sculptures, however, cannot be touched because of the relative fragility of the material, and their verisimilitude lies not in their tactility but in their surface appearance – as it does for painting – though the scale of his works (not life-size) disrupts that surface realism. So Mueck's work deconstructs that traditional distinction between painting and sculpture, while at the same time evoking in viewers a desire to touch the work that is related not to the tradition of sculpture but to Mueck's manipulation of scale and the visual paradox/conundrum this creates.

Within this complex set of expectations and assumptions, the viewer bodily encounters the work, a sensory engagement with its own expectations, assumptions and demands based not only on the contexts just discussed, but also on the specific features of the art-works.

## **ON: BEING**

With Mueck's work, the immediate challenge is the disparity between the hyperrealism of Mueck's surface detail and the size of the sculpture: the figures are either very large (as with *Wild man*) or very small, as in the new work, *Youth* (2009), or Mueck's first publicly acclaimed work, *Dead Dad* (1996–1997, see Figure 6).

The contradiction between the hyperrealism of the sculpture's appearance and the non-realism of its size induces in many viewers a desire to touch the work – to verify that the work is not 'real' or to check whether the work feels as lifelike as it looks. Susanna Greeves (2003: 30) has written of Mueck's work: 'Touch, the sense which Mueck's rendering of warm, heavy, flesh or fine, downy hair most arouses, has been deemed unreliable, dangerous or even morally questionable.' Greeves records not only the viewers' desire to touch, but also the cultural meanings associated with that desire and that sense. In western society, touch is traditionally considered a 'lower' or debased sense, ranked the lowest of the five senses identified by Aristotle (seeing, hearing, taste, smell, touch). In conservative Christian theology, the body itself is considered debased; as leading to evil and sin.



**Figure 6.** Ron Mueck, *Dead Dad*, 1996-97. Mixed media, 20.0 x 38.0 x 102.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

Touch is metonymic of human embodiment, which is constituted within mainstream western philosophy and (Christian) theology as a site of misleading perceptions and passions – in opposition to the mind or the soul that fights constantly to control the body. In mainstream philosophy, this mind/body relationship is articulated in the notion of the Cartesian subject, which is characterized by the dictum, ‘I think therefore I am’; within this paradigm the essence (I am) of the individual is the mind (I think). Mueck’s work directly challenges this Cartesian understanding of embodiment and being by demonstrating the intimate connection between touch and (therefore) the body with understanding and knowledge. As Greeves records, in order to understand the work the viewer involuntarily reaches for it – an action all the more palpable for being performed in an art museum context in which touching (unless invited) is forbidden. The censored (usually) reaching-out-to-touch encourages in viewers an awareness of both the context of the work and its demands and expectations (social, cultural) and of their own bodily response – the immediacy of the sensory engagement that is then subjected to social and cultural control.

As with other sculptures, Mueck’s work engages several other tactile senses, related to the body’s positioning in space/time: proprioception, the body’s internal sense of self (of muscular tension and blood warmth) and relation to the world (objects, people, etc.) and the vestibular sense, the sense of balance that enables us to move through that world. Negotiating the spatial relationship to Mueck’s sculptures as they invite or evoke a tactile response requires from viewers an enhanced bodily self-awareness – not only to resist the urge to touch, but also to maintain a safe distance from the works (because of their material fragility) and to recalibrate spatial awareness by reference to the contradictory information given by the (size of the) works. For example, on one visit to Mueck’s recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, I watched in horror as a viewer with a camera leaned forward over the plinth on which *Dead Dad* was centred, apparently to place it beyond human reach, and then tripped momentarily on the

edge – causing a collective intake of breath as we all waited for her to fall onto the work. She didn't fall: however, I suspect that, from then on (*Dead Dad* was the first work in the exhibition), all of that group of on-lookers were intensely aware of the bodily engagement between viewers and the works. The final work, *Youth* (2009) a tiny work that had no physical barrier between work and spectators was equally disturbing to encounter as viewers moved within the spatial boundary of the pedestal, narrow as it was, in order to peer into the face of the sculpture.

At the same time, this bodily practice confirms not only the individual's fundamentally embodied being, but also the connectedness of all being; that the individual constitutes her or his own being through negotiation with the world, using senses such as vision and touch – and even more particularly the interrelationships between the senses – to situate her/himself in relation to other objects, people, events and so constitute her/his specific being – or being-in-the-world, as Heidegger would specify. Mueck's sculptures make the viewer particularly aware of this connectedness because of the work needed in order to make sense of them – work that requires from the viewer a fully embodied (sensory, intellectual, emotional) engagement. And this connectedness is confirmed and enhanced by the works' direct and intertextual references to a range of social and cultural meanings that locate the works within a specific cultural history and/or a specific social and political context – as noted above in the discussion of *Wild man 2005*. In this way the work challenges the notion that being is determined by cognitive activity – the removed, distanced, abstract thinking-about – and instead acknowledges that being is constituted through bodily engagement that involves all aspects of embodied subjectivity; a visual deconstruction of Cartesian subjectivity.

## **WORKS (2009)**

Mueck's recent works articulate a range of specific contemporary concerns, while continuing to interrogate and deconstruct Cartesian subjectivity. The sculptures discussed in the article: two human figures – a middle-aged man (*Drift*, 2009) and a young man (*Youth*, 2009) – and *Still life* (2009), a large sculpture of a plucked chicken hanging from a hook were the most recent works in an exhibition mounted at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (22 January – 18 April 2010) and toured to the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (8 May – 1 August 2010) and the Christchurch Art Gallery, New Zealand (2 October 2010 – 23 January 2011).

The location of the exhibition immediately creates both aura and expectation; by being exhibited in major galleries, Mueck's work is confirmed as 'serious' and 'meaningful' so that viewers approach the work with an expectation that it has some cultural and/or social significance to match the status this location confers. Even so, echoes of the familiar 'high art' rhetoric sur-

face in reviews such as that by one of the country's leading art critics, John McDonald, whose concluding paragraph begins:

Perhaps one should not hold Mueck in suspicion for his background in the movie industry, as it has left him well equipped to make a mark on a contemporary art scene desperate to keep pushing back boundaries that barely exist. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 February 2010)

Presumably if 'one' should not suspect Mueck, the critic would not have felt the need to suggest that he does – and for the familiar reason, that he has learned his art/craft within a popular medium (the movie industry) rather than being confined to the art world. McDonald concludes:

It has been a long time since artists were comfortable with the Renaissance idea of 'man as the measure of all things'. Mueck has shown that by the manipulation of scale and an exacting realism, viewers may be confronted with the complexities of their own relationship to other human beings. These large or small bodies are mirrors of psychological states: they make us conscious of our own insignificance or the way we tend to view others as mere bit players in the all-encompassing drama of our subjectivity. Even the most insensitive of viewers must feel that these sculptures open a small chink in the armour of the ego.

McDonald uses a version of Freudian psychological discourse to analyze the significance of Mueck's sculpture, noting that 'the very fact that we are drawn to construct psychological explanations for these works is testimony to their realism.' While McDonald locates the relationship of the work to the 'drama of subjectivity', his analysis does not do much more than suggest a series of psychological or dream states that might be associated with the works. In other words, McDonald's review reproduces the kind of realism he associates with the sculpture, even though he notes (slightly disparagingly) in his review: 'if they were all life-sized, the effect would be similar to visiting a wax museum.' So while McDonald senses that Mueck's sculpture means something different from this (it is not a wax museum), he does not get much further in his review than likening them to the real (as if they were in a wax museum) via a kind of pop psychology.

McDonald's review articulates an aesthetic that is still governed by the Cartesian consciousness that Mueck's sculpture deconstructs. For the Cartesian subject and its highly abstract and intellectualized understanding of art and artistic value, it is very difficult to understand the work, demonstrating that acceptance by leading cultural institutions does not automatically mean that an artist's work will be understood. For McDonald, the evocation of Mueck's 'Low' or 'Popular Culture' background is a way of introducing doubt about his status as an artist and so resolving the problem of

his own non-comprehension of the work. For my reading, however, what this response reveals is the extent to which Mueck's work confronts Cartesian consciousness and the distanced and intellectualized aesthetic with which it is associated; to see Mueck's work differently would require a radical change of thinking and being.

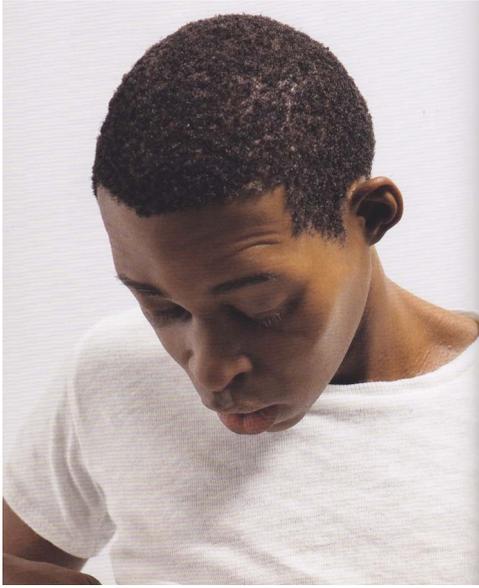
Another feature of the sculpture noted by McDonald in his enigmatic reference to 'man as the measure of all things' is its ostensible subject-matter; Mueck sculpts the everyday. When he creates monumental sculptures, they are not memorials of great battles or great men; in fact, his largest work is 'Boy', a 4.5 metre sculpture of a crouching boy that was the centerpiece of the Millennium Dome in London in 1999 and of the Venice Biennale in 2001. It is less shocking now than 50 years ago to find sculpture that celebrates ordinary people, but still unusual. Twentieth-century western sculptors inherited a 19th-century tradition of sculpture as a mode of celebrating the grand narrative of (western) civilization. Modernist sculptors rejected that tradition in a variety of ways but, when they sculpted the everyday, it was usually for the essential forms that underpinned the quotidian, rather than the quotidian in and of itself. During the 20th century, however, sculptors such as Duane Hanson began to sculpt everyday life and people.

Hanson's figures are, in fact, cast from life. Visually, this work deconstructs the grand narrative of western progress that the Victorians had so often celebrated in their monumental art-works. It also moves beyond the stylization and abstraction of modernist art to focus on the everyday. Hanson's work might be seen as an artistic equivalent of social history, rather than traditional 'great man and events' history. Still, McDonald might find them waxwork-like.

Mueck's work does something different again. The non-realist size of the sculptures means that they cannot be read only as documentary; viewers need to account for the disparity between appearance and size. As argued above, the result for viewers is a hyper-awareness of both their own embodied being and of the fundamentally embodied and interconnected nature of being. This gives Mueck's work a different character and meaning from that of artists such as Hanson; while also engaging with the everyday, it prompts a more fundamental interrogation of embodied subjectivity, as being-in-the-world. In a sense, the quotidian nature of Mueck's subject-matter is simply a further prompt to the viewer to relate this interrogation of the nature of subjectivity not to some abstract notion of being, or to others, but to their own lives. This will be explored further by reference to a number of Mueck's recent works.

### **Youth (2009)**

One of the most affecting of Mueck's recent works is *Youth* (see Figure 8), a tiny sculpture of a young man who seems to have just made the shocking

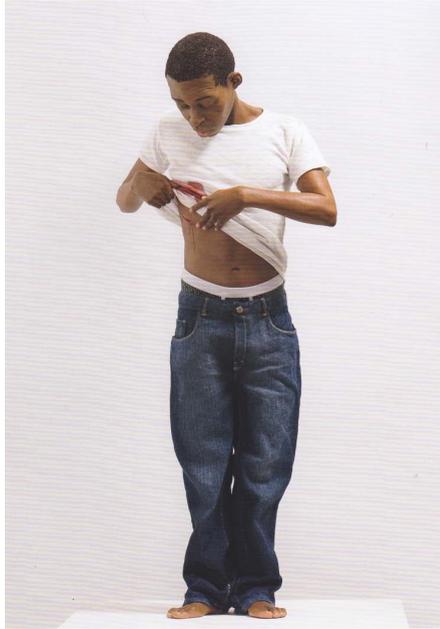


**Figure 7.** *Youth* (detail), 2009. Mixed media, 65.0 x 28.0 x 16.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London

discovery that he has been stabbed. Immediately the exquisite detail of the sculpture provokes the tactile response so often noted with Mueck's work.

At the National Gallery of Victoria exhibition, no barrier was placed around the sculptures, which meant that some viewers moved unnervingly close to the work. Gallery attendants reported that they spent a lot of time telling people to stop touching the works in the exhibition, and that *Wild man* was particularly vulnerable to what one guard called 'attack'; touching and patting the sculpture. During my visit a number of visitors touched the large baby sculpture, *A girl* (2006) while viewers of *Youth* repeatedly encroached the edge of the plinth on which the sculpture stands, leaning up at an awkward and unstable angle to peer into the young man's face.

Characteristically, Mueck's work draws the viewer bodily into the space of the work, the delicacy of this piece discouraging direct touching but evoking a desire to share the volumetric space of the work – to be contiguous with it. Again, as Greeves (2003) notes, the works evoke a tactile response – if not direct tactility, then proprioceptive and vestibular senses are engaged to position the viewer close to the work. So in reviewing and assessing the work, formulating what it means and how those meanings might be evaluated, the viewer is prompted to engage bodily with the work, in a way that demands somatic, emotional and intellectual awareness. This awareness of embodied being and of its role in generating knowledge about the world constitutes a deconstruction of Cartesian consciousness, which is an essential part of the work's meaning.



**Figure 8.** Ron Mueck, *Youth*, 2009. Mixed media, 65.0 x 28.0 x 16.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

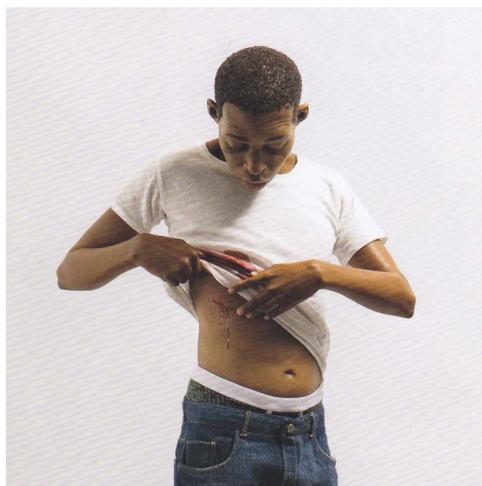
Other meanings derive from the experience of interacting with this small, beautifully realized figure. As noted, the subject is from everyday life, not myth or legend, which immediately argues the value of the everyday, the local or intimate, rather than the grand narratives of conventional history. In particular, the tiny size of the figure signifies the fragility of youth along with our collective responsibility to care for and protect that fragility. In this sense, Mueck's work participates in the move away from conventional (great men) history to social history, locating individual response, responsibility and effective social action not only in major events but also in the local, intimate and everyday. This is reinforced by contemporary elements such as the portrayal of the young man's attire, his low-slung jeans leaving the elastic band and label of his underwear visible – a recent fashion. The tiny size of the figure mitigates any sense of menace that might have been associated with such a figure, which is the conventional attitude to young men, especially young Black men, in many western societies, and particularly to those dressed in 'street clothes', the 'gangsta' fashion associated with hip-hop music. By making his figure diminutive, Mueck confronts viewers not only with the vulnerability of youth (literally), but also with their own prejudice and/or assumptions: would a life-size or larger figure attract the response, or would it be incorporated (literally) into a narrative about young Black men and violence – with the suspicion that this young man must somehow have provoked this attack? So the tiny size of the figure is not simply a sentimental



**Figure 9.** Hans Memling, *The Virgin Showing the Man of Sorrows*, 1475. Oil on panel, 27.0 x 19.0 cm. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans\\_Memling\\_055.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Memling_055.jpg)

choice, equating small size with vulnerability; rather it deploys this common semiotic assumption (small = vulnerable) to challenge the assumptions and preconceptions that deflect us from recognizing the vulnerability that is a function of their youth and inexperience, and also of living in a society that conventionally positions them as ‘problematic’ and ‘potentially dangerous’ because they are Black.

Mueck uses intertextual reference to reinforce this notion: The placement of the wound refers the viewer to *Pietà* images (see Figure 9) that are familiar in Christian art. This is the wound that the risen Christ later invited Thomas to touch in order to prove to himself that the Christ he saw before him was his former master. The wound signified Christ’s dual nature as human and divine, capable of the act of dying and then rising again. With *Youth* (see Figure 10) the reference does not literally suggest that this young man is divine; rather it refers the viewer to the sacredness of all human life – and to the responsibility of us all to protect all members of our society. It also confronts the notion of mundanity with the sacred; that if Christ was both mortal and man, profane and sacred, then each embodies the other. This young man has within him the same sacredness.



**Figure 10.** Ron Mueck, *Youth* (detail), 2009. Mixed media, 65.0 x 28.0 x 16.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

Mueck's immediate context, contemporary London, makes this one of his most directly political works as Londoners have experienced a massive increase in knife crime over the last few years, particularly knife attacks on young men; even more particularly, an apparently high percentage of these attacks have been on young Black men. So, unusually for Mueck, this work has a direct political and social reference – not just to the problem of knife crime itself and its victims, but also the lack of social responsibility and interpersonal caring and the race-, gender- and generational- prejudices that enable this situation. *Youth* avoids being openly didactic or simplistic through the visual problematic Mueck's work characteristically creates, which includes not only the size and visual appearance of the work but also the intertextual references on which his work draws and his confrontation with the history of the medium in which he works.

The meanings of *Youth*, then, include the ontological – the embodied nature and fundamental connectedness of all being-in-the-world – and a radical confrontation with Cartesian consciousness, which makes Mueck's work often difficult to understand and appreciate for Cartesian/modernist thinkers. Discursively, the sculpture argues the sacredness and profundity of all human life, confronting attitudes and values that are inherently racist, ageist and sexist and which have created the environment within which this kind of assault takes place. Socially and politically, the sculpture argues our individual responsibility for the protection of the young and for the creation of a social environment within which our interconnectedness is recognized and respected.

The complex of visual and tactile engagement invited by the work not only creates these meanings but also leads the viewer to feel them, to be



**Figure 11.** Claude Monet, *Pheasant*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 40.6 x 50.8 cm. Via the Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=3048>

‘touched’ by them – emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, socially politically, as well as bodily/physically.

### Still life

With *Still life* (2009, see Figure 12) the immediate impact of the visuality is visceral: an over-sized slaughtered and plucked chicken hanging from a hook. The chicken is human-size, not life-size for a chicken, though the equivalence is significant. During my visits, *Still Life* was not often approached; it tended to horrify, bemuse or repulse, with viewers observing the work from a distance, rather than invite physical interaction. Again the sculpture is completed with extraordinary accuracy; a large chicken that has been plucked, with tufts of some feathers remaining, puckered yellowish flesh where there is excess, firmer and bluish where there are large muscles beneath the skin. Near the neck the skin is torn and the underlying yellow fat, bone and other tissues are visible. This is a very domestic fowl, not the hunting trophies of conventional still life paintings, such as Claude Monet’s *Pheasant* (1869, see Figure 11), where the birds were conventionally painted with all feathers intact.

The bodily response invited by *Still life* is a horrified or amused (depending on mood and vulnerability) recognition of our physical being and mortality. When the maddened Lear says in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, ‘unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art’, this is the vision he might have had; it’s the vision that the Abu Graib photographs gave us of ourselves – helpless, vulnerable, creatures of flesh and bone, united in our humanity – or divided by our inhumanity. The size of the chicken brings home to viewers their own, disturbingly contiguous embodiment; puckered flesh, wrinkles and folds, so easily bloodied and torn. There is no escape into a comforting Cartesianism; no pretence that in the end we do not share the common fate of our bodily mortality.

The still life is conventionally a subject for painting and those with dead birds usually represent the results, the bag, of a hunt. Mueck’s choice of this subject for a sculpture raises the issue of what might be achieved by a three-dimensional rendering. The most immediate response to this question



**Figure 12.** Ron Mueck, *Still life*, 2009. Mixed media, 215.0 x 89.0 x 50.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

is that sculpture shares the same time–space coordinates as its viewers, and so demonstrates the continuity of viewer and subject. With Mueck's sculptures of human beings, this enables an identificatory affective response that is disrupted by the size of the work to generate an interrogation of being. It does the same with the chicken, despite an almost palpable desire *not* to identify with this hapless bird – at once boringly everyday or ordinary, *and* monstrous (see Figure 13).

It is not simply the (human) size of the bird that encourages the identification, but the (hyperreal) details of skin, blood, flesh, muscle and bone, which would not be possible with a more conventional sculptural medium (marble, stone, bronze, wood). So, just as with the human figures, the subject of *Still life* leads the viewer to challenge the nature of being and to acknowledge both its fundamentally embodied and contiguous nature.

At a more prosaic level – and after all, a plucked chicken is at one level unremittingly ordinary – the bird signifies our most basic physicality, which is appropriate at a time when we seem more than ever occupied by 'the body' – whether in advertising, medicine, technology, the media, critical theory or everyday life. Indeed this shockingly prosaic (to echo Mueck's visual oxymoron) work confronts us with both the reality of the physical body in all its un-loveliness and the anxiety that this preoccupation with the body causes contemporary western subjects. This anxiety is generated by the implicit demands for physical perfection made by air-brushed advertising images



**Figure 13.** Ron Mueck, *Still life* (detail), 2009. Mixed media, 215.0 x 89.0 x 50.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

(evident in the consequent increase in cosmetic surgery); by the threat of genetic manipulation and the creation of the monstrous (as dramatized in *Splice*, 2009, a science fiction horror film directed by Vincenzo Natali); by the development of new medical techniques, which can be enabling or, if they treat the patient non-holistically, can be seriously disabling (e.g. the treatment of elderly patients with prosthetics that they cannot manage); by the visual media's demand for physical perfection in performers (leading, for example, to the premature performance of young female opera singers because they fit a particular visual image, which risks permanent damage to their vocal cords). *Still life* refers us to all of these everyday anxieties and concerns about physicality.

At the same time, as indicated above, this physicality also demonstrates how alike we are, which the horror photographs of Abu Graib prisoners showed all too clearly, even as they demonstrated our ability to suppress that awareness. In other words, this intense awareness of the body *as* being (i.e. not as separate from, or simply a carrier of, being) potentially leads to greater empathy and an unwillingness to participate in behaviours and practices (like 'rendition') that fundamentally disrespect the rights of fellow human beings, as demonstrated by their physical abuse. To use the more Romantic formulation of scientist, Carl Sagan in his television pro-

gram, *Cosmos* (1980): 'We are one species. We are star stuff harvesting star light.' And Sagan traced this identity of all living things on earth to our shared genetic coding, noting in another *Cosmos* episode: 'Down deep at the essential heart of life we are the same as trees.' The same awareness of our species identity should also alert us to our interdependence with all other living creatures on earth, not just the human. It is appropriate, then, that Mueck's evocation of the 'poor bare, forked animal' that is humanity takes place through one of the most abused creatures in western factory farming, the ubiquitous chicken – once a yearly extravagance, now largely because of inhumane factory farming become everyday fare.

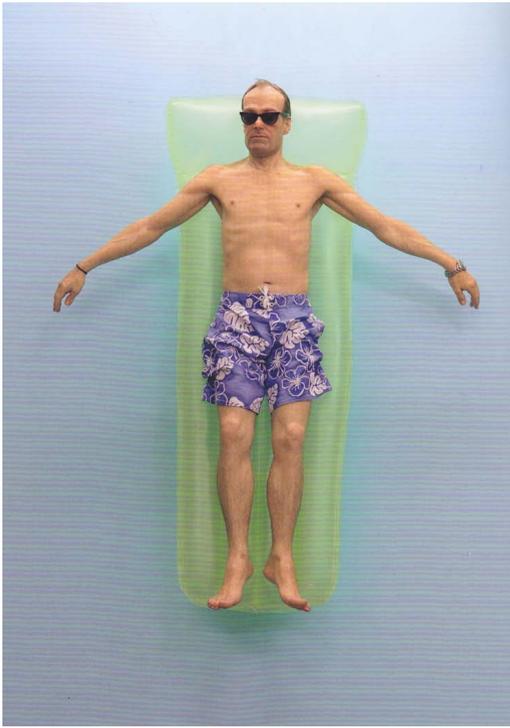
So Mueck's disturbing and uncanny *Still life* interrogates both the nature of being and the nature of beings, with all of whom we share this earth and our ability to interact responsibly and ethically with them. Like all his work, it starts with a visual conundrum that prompts viewers to focus on their own bodily being and its relationship to consciousness; a notion of being-in-the-world that eschews the transcendentalism of Cartesian thinking. It then extends that interrogation of embodiment to the relationships – with other people and other life – that situate us and that we negotiate in order to constitute ourselves as subjects. In this work, perhaps more than any other to date, that interrogation focuses on the basic matter of human life – blood and bone; muscle, fat and skin; sag, pucker and wrinkle – not in contempt or disrespect but in a profound recognition of our being; as what Sagan poetically terms, 'star stuff'.

### ***Drift* (2009)**

The last of the three works from 2009, *Drift* focuses quite specifically on the notion of self-awareness or reflexivity, by its portrayal of a figure that seems to have no understanding of this quality. On first encountering this work, the viewer is confronted with the figure of a small, very ordinary-looking man, lying on a plastic mattress, located above eye-level on a vast gallery wall (see Figure 14).

Even before concentrating on the figure, the first impression is like a cinema long shot, which is conventionally used to create a sense of context. Like a figure in a landscape, the focus is not specifically on the figure but on the relationship of the figure to the world. The blue-green of the wall (at the Melbourne and Brisbane galleries) may be the colour of a swimming pool (its most likely naturalist referent) or of liminal sea-water, close to shore and not yet the deep or sullen blue of the deep ocean. Mueck's figure drifts in safe waters, curiously discontent.

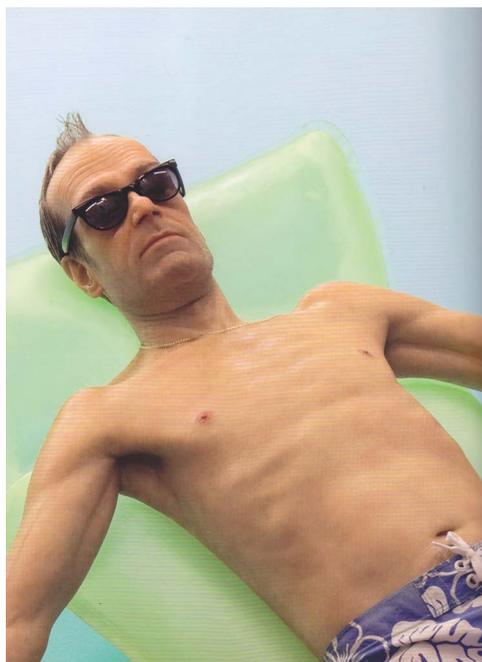
That discontent is evident in the lines of the body as well as in the cruciform arrangement of the figure. Bodily, the figure's trailing arms and relaxed legs suggest someone at peace with the world, but the etched lines of the face and the barrier of the sunglasses convey a contradictory sense of discontent and detachment. The context in which the figure is positioned is



**Figure 14.** Ron Mueck, *Drift*, 2009. Mixed media, 118.0 x 96.0 x 21.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d’Offay, London.

empty: a Dantesque evocation of the hell of someone who has not suffered in any major way; has had a relatively privileged existence; but yet feels his life is not fulfilled – that he has not achieved his potential. This impression is reinforced by the formal reference to the crucifixion in the disposition of the figure (see Figure 14).

In this secular crucifixion, the cross is replaced by an airbed, the loin-cloth by board shorts, and the crown of thorns by the heavy black sunglasses that conceal the figure’s eyes. Where the Christian crucifixion was bloody and barbaric, this secular version is full of ennui and a kind of passive aggression, conveyed by the tension in the body of the figure. It is also a self-imposed crucifixion, not a political act by an occupying imperialist force. The profanity of the transposition reflects back onto the figure as an indictment of his lack of awareness, which is to say, the lack of awareness of those whose lives are so comfortable, yet empty, that even they cannot understand their own discontent. They lack the self-awareness to see/perceive their own privilege and/or passivity that has created the safe emptiness or empty security in which they exist. Further, they project that lack of awareness outward as a form of discontent, a passive form of aggression that impinges on the world around them.



**Figure 15.** Ron Mueck, *Drift* (detail), 2009. Mixed media, 118.0 x 96.0 x 21.0 cm. Image courtesy Anthony d'Offay, London.

*Drift* might be compared to Duane Hanson's *Man on a Bench*. Hanson's life-size figure and contiguous relationship to the viewer encourage personal identification, a kind of psychological verisimilitude. The Man looks grumpy, discouraged, sad, the paper-bag he holds indicative of the quotidian nature of the pose and the feelings expressed. The figure of *Drift* projects a similar persona; however, the non-mimetic size of the figure and its disposition within a much larger space provoke the viewer to move beyond psychological verisimilitude. As the figure is detached from his surroundings, viewers are detached from him – positioned to question his aloofness, his passivity, his apparent obliviousness. Once that process of critique is engaged, the viewer is led to the specificities of the figure and its accoutrements, which triggers a process of recognition, rather than identification. Are we, like this disaffected figure, equally oblivious to the safety from which we discontentedly assess the world? To what extent are we self-aware and self-reflexive?

As with *Youth* and *Still life*, then, the material practice of *Drift* creates the surface illusion of verisimilitude that is crucial to its meaning, here a lack of the reflexivity that Mueck's visually-anomalous sculpture otherwise works to create. Intertextually, as noted, the reference to the crucifixion in the pose of the figure is also crucial to this meaning. Discursively, the figure belongs to the recent body of hyperrealist work of which Hanson was an exponent. Yet

Mueck's work is different from Hanson's, not only in its material practice, but also in its fundamental poetics. Where Hanson's work models social history – casting directly from life – Mueck's work generates critical engagement, its visual problematics refusing any simple contiguity with the everyday.

## **DECONSTRUCTIVE AESTHETICS**

As the analysis of specific works illustrates, Ron Mueck's work is fundamentally deconstructive, interrogating our ways of being and knowing. Mueck draws on his training as a model-maker in producing these art-works; however, their meaning and significance go far beyond a simple reproduction of figures from life – or fantasy. In order to explain the impact of Mueck's work, this article has explored its practice in a number of ways. Situating the work within the disciplinary practices of sculpture – an analysis that could be taken much further through the study of art history – enables us to position Mueck's sculpture as an example of contemporary hyperrealism. At the same time, it allows us to specify those points at which Mueck's work differs from other works, particularly his manipulation of size. Identifying that characteristic of the work leads us to question its purpose; what meanings are generated when Mueck changes this aspect of otherwise extraordinarily life-like sculptures. Positioning the work as visual art also leads us to explore the intertextuality of the work; the meanings it makes through its dialogue with other art-works and visual iconography. In the recent works discussed in this article, the most immediate referents included religious icons and paintings, which situate Mueck's interrogation of being within Judeo-Christian western culture.

Exploring the embodied encounter with the works – the combination of sensory, emotional and intellectual responses they provoke – enables us to identify how Mueck's work engages the individual viewer in the production of meaning. This analysis includes the effect on viewers of Mueck's play with scale; how this evokes a desire to touch the works (to check they are not real and/or to assess whether they feel as real as they look), based not only on the intellectual/conceptual engagement with the subject of the work, but also on the need to verify and recalibrate (i.e. renegotiate) the individual's sensory perception which is challenged by the sculptures' visual incongruity (lifelike but not life-size).

This analysis also involves study of the material practice of the work, which includes Mueck's use of non-traditional materials for sculpture such as fibreglass, resin, paint, horsehair and the relative fragility of the works. The more traditional materials for sculpture are wood, marble, bronze, stone, which are far more durable materials. Again, viewers are challenged to consider how this choice of material contributes to the meanings of the works: does it signify simply the nature of contemporary materials and the new technologies that produced them, or does it refer us also to changing understandings of the

# Visual Communication

<http://vcj.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Sculpture as deconstruction: the aesthetic practice of Ron Mueck**

Anne Cranny-Francis

*Visual Communication* 2013 12: 3

DOI: 10.1177/1470357212462672

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://vcj.sagepub.com/content/12/1/3>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Visual Communication* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://vcj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://vcj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jan 21, 2013

[What is This?](#)