Pablo Picasso

Are we to paint what is on the face, what's behind it?

Shahn seized the moment and within the limitations of the healing period, in his right hand. Mandated by his doctor to refrain from using the hand, he accidently cut the tendon. Occasionally, he would carve into one of them. Then, one day while moving plaster around the studio, the residual leftovers from casting other pieces. He traces the emergence of this group of works back to a series of smaller plaster lumps he would began focusing on carving small heads out of the little plaster lumps he would create then draw on them. As he whittled away at them he'd start to see something, and would continue to work at the piece until it started to develop a larger and larger group of these works. His studio of 10 years is located in an old factory building. The space is filled with filtered daylight entering through many large panes of thick, industrial glass. After many years of working in this environment, it is the lighting of his works that emerges as one of his primary concerns in their successful display. He works diligently to light each work so it has its own space and communicates his intended visual and psychological impact.

Heard the number of works held a glass insert which Shahn often cuts from the pieces of thick glass from his broken studio windows. The glass is not clear but it is ridged and difficult to cut. It began to bother him when he got too good at cutting the glass shapes perhaps since he evidenced greater skill through repetition. The drawings on paper represent a very important aspect of Shahn's thought process for him. His work is likely completed once he ignores it. He carves, sculpts, and paints some with washes of color. He points out that the artist knows it or not. The measure of the formal qualities of the artist is only a sign of the measure of the artist's obsession with his subject, the fear is always in proportion to the obsession.

To engineer, good enough means perfect. With an artist, there's no such thing as perfect. Alexander Calder

For more than two decades, Jonathan Shahn, who lives and works in Roosevelt, New Jersey, has donated much of his sculptural work toward the exploration of the human head. He has created hundreds of sculptures and related drawings in bronze, terra cotta, wood, and plaster and has steadily invented the numerous faces, eyes, ears, noses, mouths, expressions, and genders that distinguish his work from traditional sculptural portraiture. His studio of 10 years is located in an old factory building. The space is filled with filtered daylight entering through many large panes of thick, industrial glass. After many years of working in this environment, it is the lighting of his works that emerges as one of his primary concerns in their successful display. He works diligently to light each work so it has its own space and communicates his intended visual and psychological impact. He points to the many ways he has dealt with the subject over the years but particularly with his use of a single, highly concentrated light feature and as his "box works." The feature is suspended directly above each of the wall-mounted boxes in order to achieve the desired effect for each small plaster head or grouping of such heads within.

Now, after many years of sculpting, Shahn reflects back on those early years. He's not sure how it all began but acknowledges that perhaps they do owe a long period of time. He talks about his interest in the idea of skill and the concept of perfection, two things he'd rather avoid. He points out that the work is likely completed once he ignores it. He carves, sculpts, and paints some with washes of color. He points out that the artist knows it or not. The measure of the formal qualities of the artist is only a sign of the measure of the artist's obsession with his subject, the fear is always in proportion to the obsession.

Jonathan Shahn

Heads in Wood and Plaster

When he was in his twenties, Shahn vacationed in Paris with his parents. When it was time to leave, his parents asked him to let them know when he could continue to explore the city. Concerned about him being alone, Shahn's parents asked their friend, Alexander Calder, to keep an eye on the young artist. Shahn recounts times when he visited Calder's studio and witnessed "a burst of work where you couldn't tell when one sculpture or mobile ended." He got to know the great artist one on one experiencing firsthand how Calder talked about his work. He took note not only of how inventive Calder was in the creation of his work, but also in the unique way he stored and as he lowered them on strings they would take their shapes." Later, while still in Paris he got to meet Alberto Giacometti and became very interested in his work.

Shahn is continually raising the bar, challenging himself and his art. We can all look forward to seeing where it leads him and us.