

TIM RIETENBACH

THE MAN

When I was young my father and I made several puppet theaters. The characters were combinations of people and animals and always hand-painted with exaggerated features to compensate for the primitive forms. We would also build the theater, much like a Punch and Judy scenario, as a self-standing facade including window with curtain. As an artist, I have always wanted to make something that refers back to that time as well as the common childhood experience of building a solid papier-mâché form around an inflated balloon or what is essentially air.

A recurring theme in my work is a resistance to and a mocking of authority. The exhibition title, *The Man*, to people of my age, invokes expressions such as “the man is keeping me down,” or “sticking it to the man.” Here, situated within the atrium space of a performing arts center, the “puppets” invert the typical theatergoing experience by making the patrons the subject of their gaze.

Skulls by their very nature are smiling or laughing depending on the position of the mouth. The process of making the heads is formulaic, but the repurposing of materials and the simplistic approach influences the level of control, resulting in subtle and sometimes not so subtle variation in form that yields strange contortions and awkward expressions. The eye sockets have a stylized pattern of concentric lines to accompany the bulging eyes. The nose, interior of the mouth, and the underside of the jaw are described as graphic shapes. This incongruent information is accompanied by the absurdity of skulls with necks and eyes.

To further animate the skulls, a vertical metal rod balances on the inside of each cranium, replacing the finger of the puppeteer as people and air currents move through the space. The armature that holds the work in space is made of repurposed wood in the form of ascending ladders joined together to make a half mound. The half mound doubles as both a pile (of skulls) and an audience, of the laughing dead.

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