



## ELIZABETH KING RICHMOND

Enter *The Sizes of Things in the Mind's Eye*, Elizabeth King's mid-career retrospective, as if entering a lapidary dream in which, everywhere you turn, the same face swims out of dimness into pools of stark illumination [Visual Arts Center of Richmond; December 7, 2007—February 17, 2008]. It is an open face, precisely rendered in porcelain or bronze, with nimble brow, a pursed, quizzical mouth, and round, curious eyes tilting in sadness or perplexity or, sometimes, closing in resigned endurance. The artist's own visage confronts you, or occasionally those of her mother and grandmother, creating a sense of genetic replication both poignant and inexorable. The heads are accompanied by delicately jointed wooden hands and arms, which also sometimes appear by themselves, moving in response to an impulse delivered by a simple device.

King is well-known for her impeccably subtle use of mechanics and light to animate her sculptures, producing artificial renditions of the stimulus of biological consciousness. In *Compass*, 1986-99, revised 2004, a slender drive shaft hovers over rotating magnets, generating a tiny stitching motion in the higher of two jointed wooden hands and arms emerging from the sides of a black shadow box. King's mechanism simulates volition itself.

In *What Happened*, 1996, made in collaboration with Richard Kizu-Blair, King posed her half-sized sculpture *Pupil*, 1987-1990, frame by frame for replay at twenty-four frames per second. The figure appears to react to unknown stimuli that only she can hear or feel. Her luminous eyes, backlit with fiber optics, cut sideways to peer at you or shift upward in alert deliberation. Her adroit hands flicker through a series of eloquent gestures. She is alert like a startled deer, and delicately responsive. The installation *Bartlett's Hand*, 2005, pairs posed wooden hands and their video-animated moving doubles. Observed from a particular point in the space between them, the animate and the inanimate merge in

scale and motion, an optical deception that imitates the mind's overlap of the freeze frames of memory with the animation of immediate awareness.

While King's work is cerebral rather than somatic, its experience is like an injection of feeling. The works seem to bypass the other senses and go straight through the eyes into the neo-cortex to deliver a staggering jolt to the limbic system, an impossible circuit that reverses the path from impression through response to cognition. Yet they mirror neuroscience's demonstration that thought is bodily. King's wide-ranging intellectual investigations include artificial intelligence, and in an interview with curator Ashley Kistler, she states, "the intelligent artifice of the deeper emotions is still the domain of art."

A yearning that overwhelms emotion unites King's work: a powerful and almost fantastic sense of longing, sadness, and isolation. You almost flinch rather than look too penetratingly at the private, lonely feeling turned outward by these sculptures. You begin to imagine stories, as in a fairytale: a small child dreamily investing particular *things* with magical, animate properties. Or the child's longing to be picked up by a mother who cannot do so, who is instead tenderly carried by the child. *Articulated Figure*, 1981-1984, has a glittering, skeptical eye. This grandmother looks like a witty, playful companion. But she could also be a little dangerous, if her penetrating gaze were to be turned on you. It is a trick of the brain to reveal so much through the deception of the eye. It is palpably unreal, an enactment, a play, an artificial emotion—if not an artificial intelligence.

You feel self-conscious, turn slightly away. This is not the artist's psychobiography, but your own imaginative dream, your own overwhelming and mysterious circuitry of recall, perception, sensation, and thought.

—Dinah Ryan

Elizabeth King, *Bartlett's Hand*, 2005, stop-frame video animation, LCD screen, computer, wood, and brass, 72 x 24 x 60 inches (collection of Karen and Robert Duncan, Lincoln, NE)

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