

PERFORMING SCULPTURE



A Conversation with

Elizabeth King



BY GREGORY VOLK

Elizabeth King combines meticulously built figurative sculptures with stop-frame film animation in works that blur the perceptual boundary between actual and virtual space. Intimate in scale — she speaks of a theater for an audience of one — and distinguished by a level of craft that solicits close looking, the work reflects her interest in early clockwork automata, the history of the mannequin and the puppet, and legends in which artificial figures come to life. The finished works are surprisingly mutable. Figures with hinged limbs are placed in a particular pose that can, and sometimes does, change. Sculptures, which took months to craft, come to the viewer solely as photographs or video animation.

King's mid-career retrospective, "The Sizes of Things in the Mind's Eye," was curated in 2007 by Ashley Kistler, director of the Anderson Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University. The exhibition, which recently finished its run at the Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia, featured new sculpture and animation, major works and significant early pieces, and a survey of objects made or collected over many years: figure studies, wax models, life casts, antique mannequins, and glass eyes. King's work can be found in permanent collections nationwide, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She has received numerous awards, including a 2006 Academy Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a 2002–03 Guggenheim Fellowship, and a 1996–97 Fellowship in the Visual Arts at the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, now the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study, at Harvard. Her book, *Attention's Loop (A Sculptor's Reverie on the Coexistence of Substance and Spirit)* was published by Harry Abrams in 1999. She is currently finishing *A Machine, a Ghost, and a Prayer: The Story of a Sixteenth-Century Mechanical Monk*, co-written with W. David Todd. Since 1985 she has taught at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she is now School of the Arts Research Professor in the Department of Sculpture and Extended Media.

Opposite: *A Moment of Regard*, 2008. Archival giclée print, 31 x 36 in. (Sculpture: 1994–2004; porcelain, glass eyes, wood, metal, eye lashes, and fiber optics; half life-size.) **Above: Installation view of "Studio: Things Found, Things Made," 2006, Kent Gallery, NY.**

ABOVE: LYNTON GARDINER

Gregory Volk: *Your recent mid-career survey underscores that you are a sculptor's sculptor to the extreme, with a tremendous aptitude for materials, including wood, porcelain, metal, and glass. You often work for months on a single piece, homing in on details with the precision of a surgeon. The finished sculptures seem almost eerily perfect, the commitment and endurance verging on mania or obsession. They are also uncommonly subject to flux and transition, and, as much as you deal in fixity, you also deal in shifts and transformation. Care to comment?*

Elizabeth King: There is a photograph that I love in Donald Keene's book *Bunraku: The Art of the Japanese Puppet Theater*. It shows four puppets mounted on a carrying pole, erect and fully robed but at rest, awaiting a performance. Distinct as character types, they are nonetheless built to assume different roles depending on the play, just like the actors that they are. They are beautiful in arrest, as sculptures, but you can see from the construction of the faces and limbs that they are designed for action, and presently they will be whirling and gesticulating on the stage. They are, as you say, mutable. Once the play begins, they become instruments of the theater. I think of my own figures as objects that cross this categorical divide, objects with roles to perform—and roles that differ from one show to the next. Of course, I feel hesitant to speak of my work in the same breath as the great theater of Bunraku, and yet what an influence its culture has been for me, for a lot of us. It is a way for me to try and talk about the double life of my sculptures, as things in their own right and as agents of something else. Later I became involved in stop-action animation with the pieces, but early on I told myself that I was making the movable joints so I could pose the figures. Finding the pose became an important part of the life of the sculpture. Once found, all of my theater was invested in this single pose, held as a still composition for the duration of the show. All this takes place in a gallery, not on a stage, yet each show is a performance, each show requires the discovery of a new pose. Maybe the sculpture is like a violin, and the pose is the sonata. It can



Top: *Pupil*, 1987–90. Porcelain, glass eyes, wood, and brass, half life-size. Above: Installation view of “The Sizes of Things in The Mind’s Eye,” 2008, David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University.

take hours, finding the pose and lighting it. Naturally, in the studio, I want to make an object that can assume the greatest possible range of positions and is also robust enough to withstand the tumult of improvisatory searching and handling. I'm always amazed at the difference a few degrees of tilt makes in how we read the position of the head. If I move the eyes so the gaze shifts away from face on, even just slightly, a thread of tension enters the pose. My own emotional responses, as I manipulate the sculpture and look at it, are innate and involuntary. I love the visceral evidence of impermanence, not in the object itself, but in its pose at any given moment.

GV: Speaking of “visceral evidence,” I was struck by how powerful and evocative your photographs are—they go beyond documentation to become enthralling works in their own right. Most of your work occurs in three dimensions: sculptures you can walk around and video animations displayed in specially built wood and glass cases. Something very different happens in these photographs: they conceal as much as they reveal, but this partial information is riveting and evocative. What is the relationship between sculpture and photography in your work?

EK: I remember early on, applying for juried shows, grants, and jobs—“send 20 slides and a self-addressed stamped envelope”—and feeling dismay at how much of the physicality of an object is lost in a photograph. Only one view? I thought that if I had to limit the whole combinatorial banquet of three dimensions to a single click of the shutter, then by God, let me make the most of photography's own virtues.

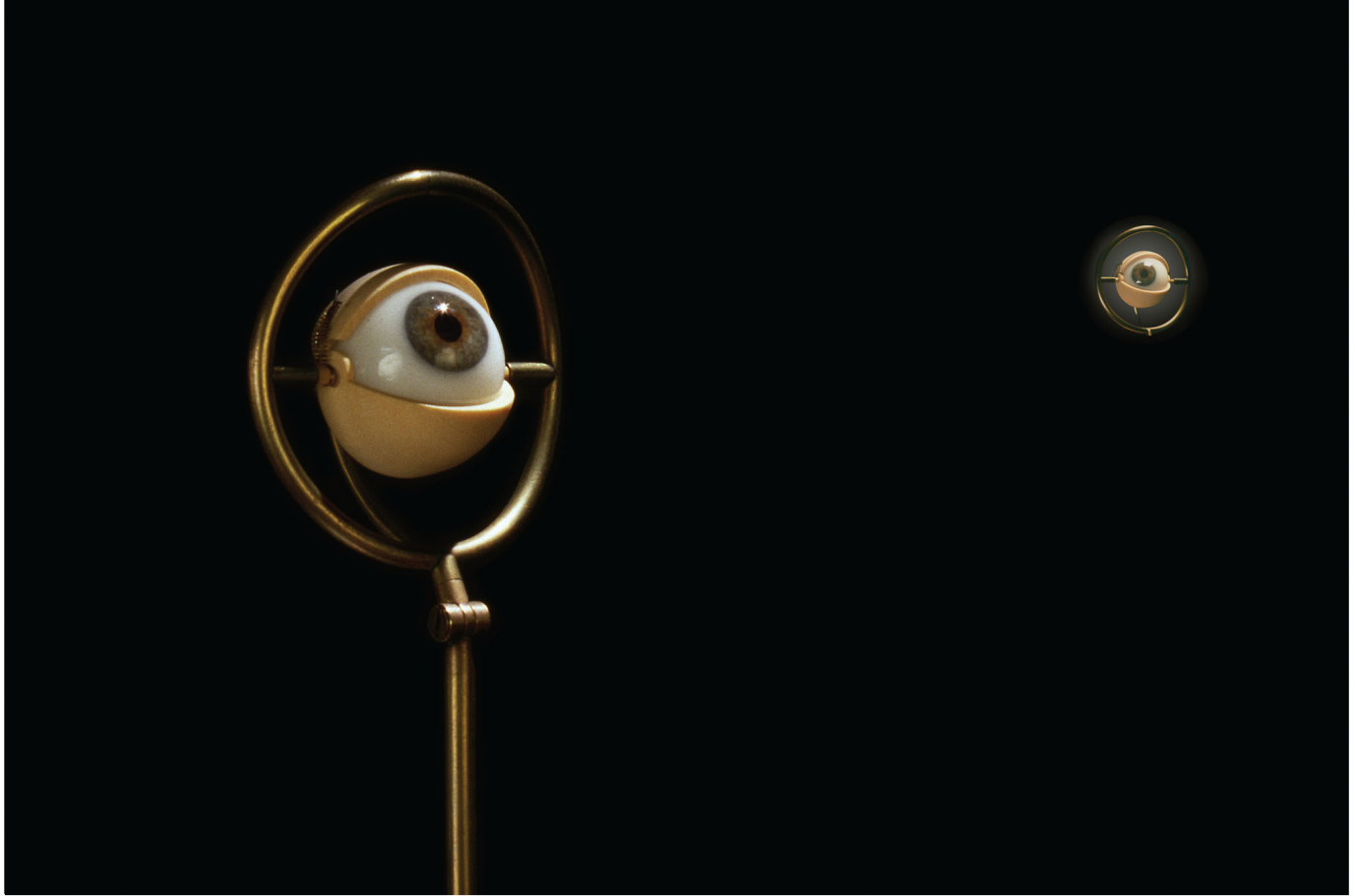
Back in the wondrous days of Kodachrome 25, the best color film ever made, when it took three days for the film to be developed, I had a system for taking pictures. I cleared my living room, and I would set up a sculpture, light it with Tungsten “day-light” photo bulbs, shoot a whole roll, and then not move *anything* and bike the film downtown. Three days later, I'd pick up the developed slides and come home to study the images and look through the camera to see what needed to be done to make the picture better—adjust the pose, change the light. But before moving a single thing, I'd mark the locations of the camera and tripods with colored vinyl tape, in case my next step was a failure. Little notes penned on the tape listed heights and angles. Then I'd shoot another roll. No one could come over or use that room: everything had to stay exactly in place. For some shots, I'd go through 10 or 12 rolls of film—over a month of adjustments and trips downtown, all for one picture. Whole layers of colored tape accumulated on the floor, a labyrinth of crumbs in the forest. I wish I had photographed that floor. At the time, it just seemed like what you had to do. Now I see how crazy it was—maybe more interesting than the photos themselves. When I was happy with a shot, then I'd take a couple of rolls to have a lot of good copies and avoid the detail loss of slide dupes. I also shot black and white film and began doing dark-room printing around 1982. Step by step, light and pose would eventually come together to make a picture. There was always this cascade, each step a little venture built on the last, like Jasper Johns's famous comment, “Take an object...do something to it...do something else to it.” You put an image together one blind move at a time.

For many years, Katherine Wetzel made beautiful documentary shots of my sculptures. Like no one I had ever met, she knew how film sees light. What had been trial and error for me was second nature for her. She showed me how to light a three-dimensional object to capture its material and volume. And, in turn, I could pay attention to the pose itself, developing it hand in hand with adjustments to the light, in pursuit of an emotional statement. Light any sculpture—Donatello, Houdon, Nadelman—and it lives or dies depending on what you do. If it is figurative work then you are really just continuing to work on that portrait when you light the sculpture and take a picture. Porcelain, especially, behaves with a mind of its own, from one light to the next. You induce life into a sculpture with light—the history of sculpture reveals how artists have adjusted form to anticipate interaction with light.

A wonderful turning point happened in 1997, when Paul Gottlieb at Abrams gave me the chance to do a book of poses of one sculpture, a jointed figure called *Pupil*.



Top and above: *Bartlett's Hand*, 2005. Wood, brass, LCD screen, computer, and wooden frame, 72 x 24 x 60 in. overall. Stop-frame animation made with Peter Dodd.



Working first with photographer Eric Beggs in Austin, Texas, where the piece was in a show, and then with Katherine Wetzel back in Virginia, I found myself crossing the line from documenting a sculpture (finding the *one* pose that could best represent a piece) to exploring what a sculpture might be able to do, in shot after shot. All the years spent not only on modeling and carving, but also on perfecting the design and machining the movable joints suddenly paid off in a way that I had never quite anticipated.

So, the photographs allow me to *perform* the sculpture: to pose it for the camera, to step consciously through the process of finding a pose, and to capture pose after pose. It is very different from posing the piece in a gallery. Now I am composing through the lens, for a single frame. And because I am composing through the lens, the photographs allow me to change the sculpture's size.

GV: *A “change of scale” seems essential for your works. Most of your sculptures are small, and some are downright tiny. Your photographs, on the other hand, are large, and in comparison with the sculptures (they are often shown together), they seem massive. What are you angling for in this exchange between small and big?*

Quizzing Glass (detail), 1988–2005. Cast acrylic, wood, brass, projector, fiber optics, and lacquered wood cabinet, cabinet 24 x 19 x 23 in.

EK: The exhibition title, “The Sizes of Things in the Mind’s Eye,” comes from something Giacometti said to David Sylvester. They were speaking of the small sculptures that have come down to us from early civilizations, and Giacometti said, “I think that this was the size that instinctively seemed right, the size one really sees things.” When you look at his smaller sculptures, you see how he tried to make exactly what he saw, together with how he saw it. If you consider the biology of the human eye—think of those familiar diagrams of the eyeball and retina—there is a small area in the macula (itself a small part of the central retina) where the cone cells are packed closely together. This is where vision is at its sharpest. But it can only exert itself on a tiny percent of your full visual field: about the size of a dime held at arm’s length. Bring the dime closer, to the closest focal length of your eye’s lens, and now you have to move your eye from spot to spot to get a good look at it. We forget that looking is time-based. I think this is why my work is the size that it is. In truth, I’d like it to be a little bigger, but once I start looking up close (the eye’s signature), the sculpture in my hands almost automatically forms itself at a certain scale. All of the figures and portraits I’ve made over the past 20 years are almost exactly half life-size. So, the very biology, the optics, of close looking entails its own scale. Giacometti said, “I can do your head life-size because I know it’s life-size. I don’t see directly anymore, I see you through my knowledge.”

And then, can one’s hands operate on this scale? I have a pair of Zeiss 3x power surgeon’s loupes mounted on a headband. They are designed to let you easily look over the lenses for native vision, then through the lenses for magnification. So, I am giving my mind a veritable barrage of scale shifts as I’m working. Journeying across the canyons of a huge ear one moment, then looking at its smaller-than-life, real size in clay the next.

The photographs test my success. How much have I seen? Can the sculpture hold up to further orders of magnification beyond what my loupes and hands can achieve in the making? Is there another world here, through the keyhole?

GV: *There’s also a different kind of “seeing” in your work, a kind of soulful vision or inward scrutiny. Your sculptures, which pull in references ranging from automata to*



By Ear, 2004. Bronze, glass eyes, and basalt, 5.5 x 3.5 x 4.5 in.

dolls and puppets that magically spring into life, medical prototypes, and advanced artificial intelligence, also investigate complex states of being and layers of the psyche. A single figure might communicate thoughtfulness and quizzical investigation, as well as whimsy, agitation, fear, longing, bewilderment, desire, awkwardness, exasperation, self-consciousness, and total grace. How is it that your ultra-artifices seem so humanly searching, so avid for the full, wild range of consciousness?

EK: In the 1998 animation *Eidolon*, I hardly moved the head at all and instead slowly moved the lights. And the face seems to change. Later on, I was bowled over to find a fantastic study of this phenomenon with a Noh mask, made by clinical psychologists in Japan in the late 1990s—Google “Noh Mask Effect” to see it. The position of the mask and the position of the light, changing together, yield a stunning array of expressions on a computer model of the mask, itself inscrutably fixed.

I’m really not thinking about this, though, when I model the heads. The expression I am after is simply one of maximum here-and-now attention. My studio windows face east, so I don’t have steady northern exposure. I set up lights to try and see the overall form as best as I can, but it’s always a losing game and I end up working in all kinds of light over the months of modeling a head in clay. I’m looking at life casts I’ve made of my subject—usually myself, for my simple availability and willingness to submit to some somewhat invasive silicon body-casting. Casts of the face are always notoriously dead looking; in fact, there is a kind of little death inside all that rubber, and you are waiting patiently, breathing through straws, for the plaster mother mold to set up so you can be reborn to the light of day. In the late 1980s, I had Mark Prent, who is very good at this,

make many, many casts of my head and body, and of separate parts of my face—raised eyebrows, flared nostrils, all kinds of expressions of the mouth. Some of these casts are in the show. Then—as I think of it, just like the composite photography that is big in the art world now—I assembled a facial expression based on looking at many different castings. I wanted a certain muscle tension on the face. What do we look like at maximum alertness? Eyes a little wider than at rest, mouth tense, brow raised. The one thing a life cast can’t do is capture all the tiny, crucial things with the eyelids. For this, I have to resort to a live model, or the mirror. But the expressions on the sculptures still elude me, as far as global emotional effects go. I’m really looking at angles, slopes, silhouettes, relationships in X-Y-Z space. I sometimes fancy that the expressions on my own face, whatever they are, as I peer, come endoscopically into the clay.

So, your question about the emotional range of a single figure is a kind of terrifying mystery to me. In fact, I am banking everything on this, on the illusion of an emotional presence. This is, after all, sculpture’s age-old task, isn’t it? It is not for me to say if these pieces possess enough tension to earn the full, subtle, poised, articulated emotional response of a willing viewer. After I am finished, look as I might, I can’t see them anymore.

GV: *You incorporate copious amounts of information and diverse influences into your work. What are some of your “real world” influences, for example, current developments in artificial intelligence?*

EK: I’m fascinated by all those classes of objects made in the human shape that have escaped the strict definition of sculpture—mannequins, dummies, puppets, automata, effigies, mandrakes, medical dissection models, the prosthetic arts, wax saints—and then all the forms that they take in literature—the host of legends in which the inanimate or artificial figure comes to life, the homunculus.

In particular, I’ve been drawn to the history of clockwork automata. Renaissance innovations in regulating the force of drive springs (fusees, escapements, and other kinds of mechanical governors) resulted



not just in table clocks, but also in fantastic clockwork performing objects of all kinds, including some that imitate animal and human motion. With a mainspring power source and transmission gear train, you could bank all kinds of cams—veritable stacks of cams—to transform rotary motion into timed and articulated three-dimensional movements in space. There were whole orchestras of figures playing musical instruments, animated by machinery hidden under miniature stages or in pedestal settings, produced by the great clockmaking guilds of Germany. And there were single figures that moved by themselves across a floor or table, concealing their own clockwork.

One particular Renaissance automaton, now in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution, is a small wood and iron figure of a monk. Wind it and set it on a table, and it walks in a rough 24-inch square path, turning its head and eyes from side to side, opening and closing its mouth, beating its chest with one hand, and brandishing a wooden cross in the other. From time to time, it raises the cross to its lips and kisses it. After 450 years, it still works, though its chest is a bit splintered from all the pounding. I've spent some years

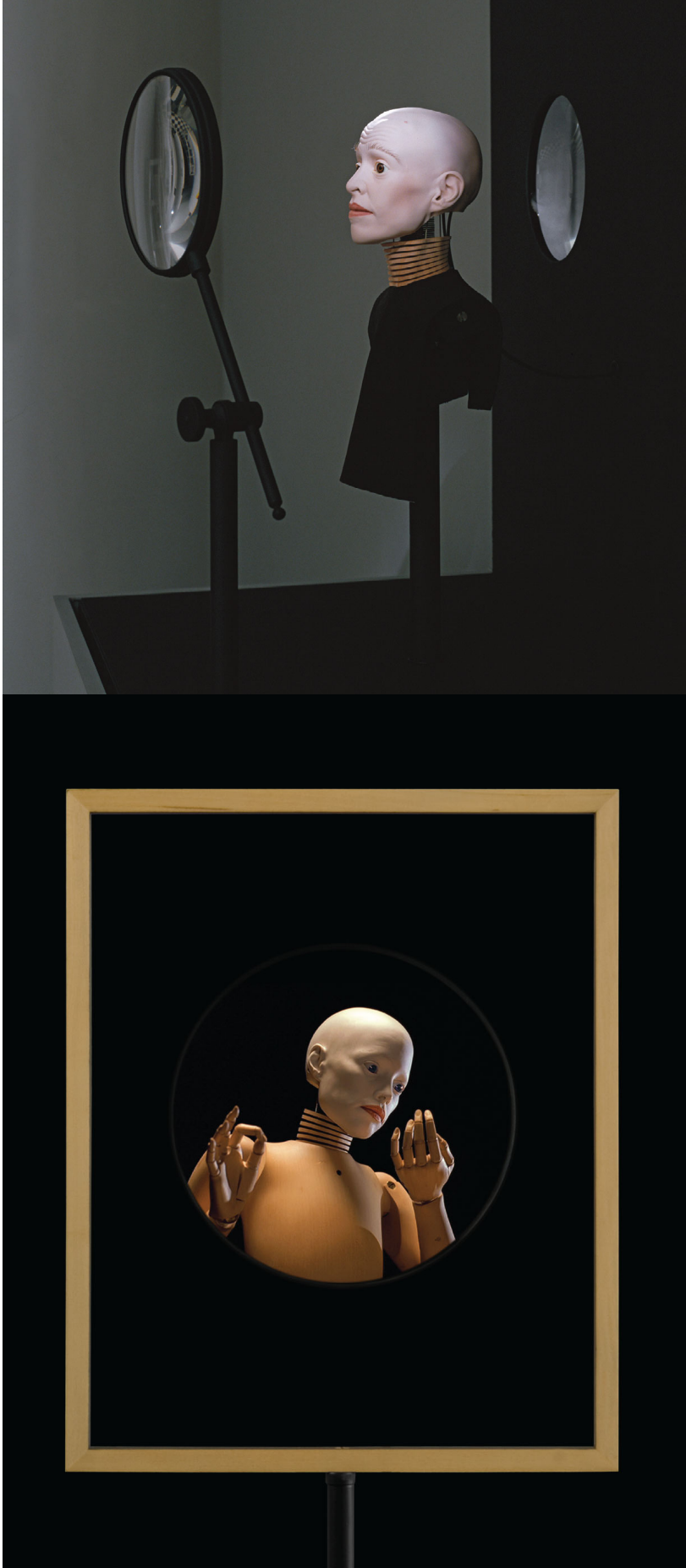
Shutter, 2008. Stop-frame film animation, glass lens, bellows, plasma screen, and steel table, 81 x 44 x 39 in.

trying to understand its particular place in the history of artificial life; and with co-author W. David Todd, Smithsonian emeritus curator and clockmaker, I am just finishing a book, *A Machine, a Ghost, and a Prayer: The Story of a Sixteenth-Century Mechanical Monk*. The maker of the monk (or makers: mechanic and sculptor) was bent on producing, if not an alive thing, then something spectators would *think* was alive. That he really thought he could do it—and everything about this charismatic object urges this conclusion—gives the figure some ineffable quality that is genuinely disturbing, even to our practiced 21st-century eye. This something—this X factor—maybe still gets into some of the more unreasonable things we try to make now.

GV: *For all your interest in movement, do your sculptures actually move in real time?*

EK: A few of my sculptures—the objects themselves anyway—move by themselves in real time. My favorite is *Compass*, which has a wonderful magnetic drive system made for me by artist Chris Taggart. A set of hidden rotating magnets generates, at a distance, a tiny delicate motion in a pair of small carved wooden hands. I like the fact that not every viewer notices the movement, and those who do sometimes discover it late, with (I live for this) a little gasp. An early piece called *Theater* is a chair with two halves of a miniature theater hinged to the backrest. The viewer sits down and swings the halves together, to close around his or her head. On the stage is a closet, and after 30 or 40 seconds, the closet door opens to reveal a puppet who looks out and chews gum. The whole thing is about 10 inches from your nose. Lots of tiny hidden motors, cams, and strings.

But I set most of the sculptures in motion indirectly, with film or video animation, posing them frame by frame or manipulating them off-camera like live-action puppets. My first chance to make a film came in 1991 when my friend Richard Kizu-Blair, then a director at Colossal Pictures in San Francisco, invited me to do a short experimental collaboration. I had just finished *Pupil*, and I packed it in a box and flew out to California. Those were pioneering years for stop-frame in San Francisco, and a lot of animators came through Colossal, a famous production company that did animation, special effects,



Top and above: *The Sizes of Things in the Mind's Eye (second version)*, 1991–2000. Mixed media, sculpture, and video animation (with Mason Mills), 77 x 22 x 16 in.

and live-action for the film and television industry. We shot for two weeks, using 35mm movie film, 24 frames per second. A good day of work nets you around five to 10 seconds of action. What I love about stop-frame, as opposed to cel or computer animation, is that it captures all the substance, color, and light of the real world. Only the motion itself is constructed, shot by shot. It's labor-intensive, but the sculptures retain their material presence on film. We made up a kind of script as we went along, each day trying a simple gesture, working with two superb animators, Mike Belzer and Trey Thomas (both now major players in the feature-length animation world). We were drawn to involuntary movements, reflex motions, the idle things your hands do when you're daydreaming. Our finished film was two minutes (counting the credits).

At first, I simply showed the film (transferred to video) and the sculpture side by side in the gallery. This was before flat screens and video projectors, and I hated the big boxy CRT monitor on one pedestal and the sculpture on another. How to get rid of the box? I found that I could do this in a limited way with lenses and optics, making a kind of funky projector by hiding the monitor behind a hole in the wall and placing a lens in the hole. This led to various ideas for combining the moving image and the still object in more deliberately ambiguous settings. I wanted to try and fool the eye a little, to complicate the distinctions between time-based and space-based entities. For example, in *Quizzing Glass*, I placed a sculpture of the eye itself in a darkened cabinet; a few inches away, a small rear-projected video animation of the eye blinked occasionally. When I move my own eyes from one to the other, I can almost talk myself into thinking that I see the pupil of the sculpture dilate; I can also fleetingly imagine that the moving eye is three-dimensional—just for an instant, a kind of stand-by supplement of one form of representation by the other.

Now, with digital play-back technology, we have access to higher and higher image resolution on a video screen, so that with a piece like *Bartlett's Hand*, if I light the sculpture exactly as I did in the film studio and show its film animation at exactly the same size and color as the sculpture, I can have a pair of hands that look very close indeed, but are each from a different world.

Gregory Volk is a New York-based art critic and curator. He is also an associate professor at the School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University.