

GABRIELLE JENNINGS: FRIEZE

by Jan Tumlir, August 2007

Writing in the catalog accompanying the exhibition *Anthony Caro: Sculptures, 1960-1963* held at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in the Fall of 1963, the critic Michael Fried draws an analogy between the situation of the viewer of modern sculpture and "that of a small child, at most on the verge of speech, in the company of adults conversing among themselves." With no more than an intuitive grasp of "what is going on," Fried asks the question, "to what does the child respond, if it is still ignorant of the meaning of individual words?" In the specific case of the critic's response to Caro's abstract works, the situation is roughly reversed, as here one comes equipped with language before an object that is, for its part, mute. The question, then, is how does one "respond," in the sense of answering back, to such an object?

The answer, as Fried goes on to explain it, is relevant to Gabrielle Jennings' work insofar as it is, from the first moment, complex. The relation between the experience of the child and the viewer of abstract sculpture cannot be reduced to any one concept; rather, it is in the process of translating between discrete systems of communication and reception that they become linked. More specifically, in order to understand something that lies in a fundamental sense outside their given capacities for explanation, both must negotiate between two very different kinds of abstraction. These will be divided, by Fried, into categories pre- and post-linguistic; that is, either these abstract forms "precede language and its related social institutions" or else "they crown them."

Now, obviously Jennings does not practice the sort of "high modern" abstraction that we might attribute to Caro; in effect, the ubiquitous presence of the human figure in her work would seem to place her at the opposite end of the categorical spectrum as a representational artist. If Fried's argument remains relevant nevertheless, it is because she consistently seeks to reduce or distort the innate legibility of her figures through various means that always leave us contemplating a more or less abstract proposition.

In the most general sense, Jennings' work is concerned with what is commonly known as "body language," but being an artist as opposed to, say, a sociologist, she can afford to regard the relation of physical pose and signification with a certain ambivalence. Certainly, the body "speaks" and it does so in a manner that both undermines and emphasizes - or again, "precedes" and "crowns" - our intentional statements. And just as certainly as we produce these embodied communications, we also receive and read them against or alongside those statements. In academic publishing as well as the popular press, the body is subjected to exhaustive analysis, with every pose and gesture linked to its corresponding meaning so as to form a complete physical lexicon. But an artist is not only interested in these explanations for what the body signifies, the how and the why of it; rather, the relation of the body to language must be seen against their essential opposition.

Here, Fried's argument about the child would seem to apply most directly, as this is also the situation of the viewer before Jennings' images of bodies. The poses and gestures that she works with are abstract in that we, as visually literate beings, understand but cannot exactly explain them. Drawn from a mediated repertoire, these are instances of visual communication configured by experts in the field. An understanding of how the body can be made to mean is being demonstrated in these images, on the part of the bodies themselves as well as those who represent them, but taken out of their framing context on the magazine page or filmic narrative, these meanings become ambiguous.

When Jennings reduces the image of the body to a white silhouette, as she does here, it becomes a literal cipher, a single letter or character, excerpted from its place in the word or sentence. Replacing these silhouettes side by side in a row, she is clearly playing on a number of classical analogies, from Hellenistic pottery painting to the architectural frieze, all of which have deployed the body as a signifying element within a larger narrative structure. We are historically primed to read lines of bodies almost as lines of text, or else as a sequential unfolding, fluid movement segmented into its constituent parts as in Edward Muybridge's motion studies. The dense historical play between the forms of Jennings' painterly photo-frieze and her video works, shown within the same space as related elements of a single installation, suggests a line of inquiry that

bears upon the initial question of "body language" while also striking out on a tangent. That is, every historical reference to narrative art must here be read through a contemporary reference to mass-media, to photography, cinema and television, which further complicates our understanding of what the bodies "themselves" are trying to say.

The body, configured in this way, strains toward meaningfulness in the most general sense while remaining empty of any particular meaning. It is "about" abstraction in its resistance to reading, a resistance that must nevertheless be made readable, but it is "of" abstraction in its attempt to articulate by other means than those we already have at our disposal. Ultimately, according to Fried, abstraction must be unreadable and yet still "eloquent"; that is, it must be able to convince us by strictly formal means. Gabrielle Jennings would seem to be striving for an analogous "eloquence," one that no longer leads outside the givens of language, but that turns in toward that very point where image and text intersect. The challenge that faces the artist and viewer at this point is to confront the over-exposed and over-interpreted as if for the first time.