

conversations on *Allegory: after Courbet*

Subject matter

John de Andrea's self portrait with his model unsettles and disconcerts the viewer. The high degree of realism is offset by the colouration of the sculpture. The life-size, plaster splattered de Andrea places himself in this tableau with the lifelike creation of his naked model and muse. Placed in a section of his studio, de Andrea gazes into the mould he has just made of the model's face. She looks down at him and views him dispassionately.

How does the viewer engage in the relationship between these two figures? Are we a part of this dramatic scene or are we an intruder to an intimate moment of creativity and contemplation? De Andrea deliberately evokes a response from the viewer through the positioning and placement of the figures.

Nude figure

De Andrea needs the viewer to respond to the figures in some way so he creates an immaculate surface for this to occur. He works with preconceived ideas of beauty believing that the nude figure reveals a lot more about a person than a clothed one.

Composition

From all angles, the elements of this sculpture are arranged in a calm and balanced manner. This reinforces the relationship between the two figures. The viewer's eye follows the pale



John de Andrea, *Allegory: Allegory after Courbet*, 1988.

John de Andrea *Allegory : after Courbet*

1988 oil on polyvinyl and mixed media

The Art Gallery of Western Australia has a fine collection of contemporary realist art. This artwork by American artist John de Andrea, who was born in 1941, is an excellent example of New Realist sculpture. He casts his lifelike figures straight from live models, either as a single figure or as paired figures who interact with each other. Some works are highly detailed, mono-chromatic studies in shades of grey whereas others are realistically coloured. De Andrea turned to sculpture while at university, initially casting moulds in fibreglass and painting them with motorcar paint. He then refined his technique, by using latex acrylic or oil paint on polyvinyl to achieve the lifelike tones and high level of detail seen in his later works.

flesh, the soft white drapery through to the white of the mask. This is counterpoised by the rhythm of the dark tones and shadowed areas. Neither figure makes eye contact with the viewer which heightens the self-containment of this artwork.

Realism

John de Andrea wants his sculptures to be able to breathe. He obtains this high level of realism combining the use of modern materials with a technique of casting which goes back to the bronze casting of ancient Greece and Rome.

Colour

De Andrea eliminates the skin tones in this artwork which is reminiscent of black and white photography. He depicts the figures in *grisaille* which is monochrome shades of neutral grey. This reminds the viewer that the figures are painted with the shades and tones heightening the form. The colouration of the figures is also reminiscent of the gradation of the colour of marble statues. What effect does this absence of colour have on the viewer?

Is it art?

The sculptures of John de Andrea can be controversial with some detractors viewing him as a replicator of life rather than the creator of sculptural artworks. He continues to be inspired by artistic themes and traditions, creating his virtuoso sculptures out of contemporary materials.

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conversation points



Inspiration

The pose of the model is based on the 19th century painter Gustave Courbet's *Interior of my studio, a real allegory summing up seven years of my life as an artist*.

Courbet's work, painted in bright colours, represents the clutter and excitement of his studio. The scandalous representation of the naked model amongst the clothed men caused a great stir at that time.

De Andrea isolates the artist and his model who is holding a draped cloth in front of her, like the model in Courbet's painting. She stands upright and aloof, looking towards the artist as he contemplates the mask he holds in his hand. In an allegorical sense, both de Andrea and Courbet regard their models as their artistic muse.

Process of creation

When creating his sculptures, de Andrea first decides on the subject matter, then looks for the appropriate model. His pre-conceived ideas about the final artwork often change as he includes his models in the decision making process.

Materials

This artwork is created in sections from polyvinyl which is moulded and cast from the live models. A thin casing of plaster covers the body parts. The artist then creates an outer mould and pours the liquid polyvinyl into the gap. When it solidifies, the moulding is then removed. The parts are then seamlessly joined and painted to show every mark and blemish of the skin.



Gustav Courbet, *Interior of my studio, a real allegory summing up seven years of my life as an artist*, 1854 -55

The mask

Notice how the artist gazes intently into the mask. The inside reflects the negative image of the youth and beauty of the model whilst the textural exterior reflects an older more ravaged face. Is this a study of the artist's own mortality?

