

ABOUT

Carol Bruns (b. 1943, Des Moines, Iowa) is an artist based in Brooklyn, New York, focusing on sculpture and drawing. She earned a degree in Fine Arts from NYU in 1966, subsequently studying at the Art Students League in New York City, and l'Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. Bruns began exhibiting her work in 1975 at OK Harris Gallery, where she presented wall pieces crafted from found materials, cloth, and thin layers of colored plaster.

In 1980, she was a guest artist at the Caraccio Etching Studio, and her prints were later published by Orion Editions. In 2002, she received a printmaking fellowship from the Women's Studio Workshop. Between 2000 and 2006, she participated in four two-person exhibitions at the Tew Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia, while continuing to exhibit in group shows and engage in community and curatorial projects. Notable efforts include organizing *Dumbo Open Studios*, curating *Persona: A New Look at Portraits* (1997) and *Festival of Political Pleasure* (2017), publishing artists' books (*Pages*, with Robert Jacks), and creating stage décor for the Bellerophon Dance Company.

Bruns was featured in a 2013 interview by *Gorky's Granddaughter*.

Her recent exhibitions include *The Parlour* Bushwick (2015), *Sculpture Space* in Long Island City, SRO Gallery in Brooklyn (2017-18), and *Zurcher Gallery* (2021 and 2023). She also held a solo exhibition at *White Columns* in 2023. In 2024, she published *A View*, a 100-page book of drawings and photographs.

Bruns has received numerous grants and residencies, including the recent: 2025: Monson Residency, Monson, Maine 2024: MyMA Grant and VCCA Residency, Amherst, Virginia 2023: Saltonstall Residency, Ithaca, New York 2019: Tree of Life Grant 2018: Artists' Fellowship Grant

STATEMENT

Personifying public life in my figurative art is a way of processing the chaotic, violent world of crisis we live in, taking its forms from global art history. I attempt a paradox: through nuanced beauty, to see the truly ugly. Its hand-made forms incorporate the language of head, bust, full figure with the invention of paper laminates, malleable sheets of newspaper layered with rice paste followed by a finishing plaster. The sculptures juxtapose opposites---organic forms with the geometric, joined by a single neutral color. Discarding the armature in Western sculptural tradition, I work spontaneously to symbolize the political freedom to act.

NARRATIVE

I attended NYU in Fine Arts, Washington Square 1962-66. There, I took class with the Abstract Expressionist painter Milton Resnick. Another professor Robert Kaupelis was known for his dynamic teaching in creative approaches to figure drawing, incorporating Kimon Nicolaidis' long influential *The Natural Way to Draw*. It featured something new in the long

history of gesture, the concept of the body's total sense of movement. Around 1968-9 I had a studio visit from Eva Hesse whose work was far more influential. Her work changed the boundaries between painting, drawing, and sculpture, inviting new unusual materials into an improvisational process. I also share with her art the inclusion of both the logical and the absurd, and a psychological dimension both detached and engaged.

At the time, no one did postgraduate studies unless they aimed for a job in higher education. Instead, I went to the Art Students League for a year, yet the moment arrived to work alone in the studio. Isabel Bishop told the interviewer Cindy Nemser of this time in her painting career: "...I couldn't stand the isolation. I was desperate. I thought of just disappearing, just dropping out of the world. I thought of suicide..." She also returned for a stint at the League and gained her footing. After the Abstract Expressionists, who lived and worked near to each other near Greenwich Village, this desperation of isolation could be explained by a new condition of the art world in New York: artists had to survive in relative isolation due to the predations of the real estate industry whose relentless, crushing rent increases continually scattered tenants. In the previous highest period of art vitality, the School of Paris, artists derived a great measure of synergistic creativity from their communal proximity in the low rent district of Montparnasse, then almost a farming area on the outskirts of Paris.

In the 1980s while living and working in Soho my work participated in ideas of deconstructing the stretched canvas, questioning the picture as a window, ideas continuing into today with many artists, set against the prominent foreground of postmodern styles such as pop, op, conceptual, body art, minimalism, happenings, and the pictures generation. The energy of this deconstructive idea led in my case however, to a cul-de-sac. Absent was the visibility of inspiring figurative painters Alice Neel, Elaine de Kooning, and Frida Kahlo and others. Thus, I came to seek elsewhere a space to develop my vision--- sculpture, and began to work in small wax models which I cast in bronze. When I realized that they were taken for decorative figurines instead of models for enlargement, I sought to develop new materials for full-size models, and invented paper laminates with a formula for finishing plaster, my primary materials today.

My art-making is an integrative process, gathering diverse, meaningful yet surprising components into a whole, as does the dream. This conception of sculpture is a dramatic turn from the era of Rodin 1840-1917 and from the American modernists working in fabricated steel in recent times. Rodin declared that sculpture is very prosaic, not a matter of inspiration or emotion, with the only principle to copy what you see. Yet, he maintained, he sees with eyes grafted on the heart. American Modernists up to the present time embraced abstraction, the so-called truth to materials, and the utilization of industrial manufacturing processes, its philosophy believing that abstract shapes could communicate psychological and emotional truths or that they didn't matter.

In contrast, my view of sculpture developed in another direction, evolving from my experiences and temperament, by means of two hunches: that the figure as a subject still had juice after Giacometti, despite all the subsequent decades dedicated to pure abstraction, and that I could improve on the tendency for sculpture to look stiff and formal. I worked from no theory but from the inspiration of other art, especially taking cues from wartime German painters such as Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, who

were surrounded by the most intense social subject matter, and the Ab Ex value of spontaneity in art-making. I looked at art from pre-history, outsiders, the archaic, and the indigenous choosing figure forms of totem, head, bust, and full figure. I sought a similar feeling found in some African sculpture, one which felt natural, unforced, un-polemical, alive, open, and at the same time meaningful in a deep way that's never illustrational or obvious. I discovered that by being in the moment intensely and openly, the creative force lets something new, heretofore unseen and unexpected appear. Thus, my sculptures are not a "series" but each one unique and un-programmed. Some common threads are: an aspect of the human figure, surprising shapes and textures, and the suggestion of social content by means of titles.

For example, the sculpture *Corporate State* takes the bust form, and instead of a solemn rendering of a fragmented vaunted leader sitting on a marble pedestal, it hangs on the wall, not only a part figure but one sliced in half, front to back. It's sensuously formed as a hilly landscape of head and shoulder shapes, finished with bitumen, a dark brown form of petroleum, looking paradoxically unexpected, sensuous and sinister. Another example is, *Archaic Man, New Man* a life-sized, standing figure in the tradition of personifying elements of history as "man". In this instance, the human reaches back to the archaic beginning, by a construction of simple and primal forms including glass eyes, and faces forward toward a new era in expectation of better conditions. The bust form *Gaia* is a personification of the earth, of nature, and by its human figuration reminds that we too are of nature---that our presumption to dominate is a distortion. Its forms are composed of an interplay of the rounded and the flat, organic and geometric, opposites which partake of each other by means of texture and the same color, white. Cubist painting might come to mind, but long before, the artist Ingres wrote that flat planes and rounds are an essence of sculptural form.

From 1994-2018 I lived in the then warehouse-loft district of Dumbo where Styrofoam packing materials were in the trash everyday, which I gathered as a material to add lightness and strength to the paper laminates and finishing plaster. Discarding the traditional armature which locks in the concept/pose, I worked from the ground up improvisationally in a montage-like way. The freedom of its cutting and pasting, adding and taking away, on a full figure scale with light materials enacts freedom, a characteristics visible in the result. Being fully alive in the moment, dwelling with the unknown, unexpected forms emerge from the reciprocity of self and materials, from collaboration rather than through dominance and control. The figure's theme emerges along the way, suggested by surprises in the process, a contrast to executing the worked-out plan and theme. The last stage is a lengthy contemplation during which jarring aesthetic off-notes can emerge into view and undergo alteration. This can take years.

I grew up in a politically engaged household and came of age in the 1960s---- the last large-scale surge of students and workers who imagined and believed in the possibility of social evolution. I marched for civil rights in Selma, protested the Vietnam War, witnessed the May 1968 student and worker uprisings in Paris, and participated with the feminist movement. In once instance, we women artists picketed MoMA to protest our gender's exclusion, and ironically my donated photographs of those actions are preserved in MoMA's library, but not my sculpture.

This political consciousness acquired another dimension in 2018-20,

when I lost my live-work loft in Dumbo and spent eighteen months living among homeless women in New York City shelters. Witnessing the administrators' casual sadism gave the shortcomings of our social policies a vivid face, and I was inspired to make some drawings of my fellows. Yet, it took two readings of Howard Zinn's *A History of the People of the United States*, including dozens of other authors, to open my eyes to the actual texture of oppression in our nation and times. The New Left of the 1960s faded yet left a marker of hope for the future of solidarity for emancipation.

My 1960s formative era celebrated the speaking, writing, and theory of immigrant intellectual Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School and its Critical Theory. Its larger intellectual landscape is set within the contested Enlightenment "man" who possessed agency, will, and consciousness, rejected by the philosophies of structuralism and poststructuralism after WWII due to the atrocities committed by said mankind. In contrast to throwing out both baby and bathwater, I seek to present a balanced image of the ethical human within the prominent themes of remembrance and critique despite its unimaginably destructive and hateful deeds. Without remembering the past, despite its vast biases and unknowable dimensions, we are left without origins, without communal memory. The value of critique is to question the status quo in the face of the incomprehensible degree of human suffering. My view sets aside the common ridicule of the human as beyond redemption, and suggests a kernel is there.

Now age 82 and having lived a long-ish time, my process remains as before: to begin with a thought and sketch, serving as a launchpad into the unknown, an adventure without a guarantee of success, on a path littered with past failures for the sake of an art with social meaning, paradoxically merged to aesthetic pleasure. Its figure operates on a continuum between abstraction and bodily legibility, representing the ethical subject against a background of global human rights catastrophes and anti-humanist philosophies. The sculptures are intended to provoke new thoughts and conversation in its audience.