THE HORRIFIC VISIONS OF A SMALL-TOWN SURREALIST:

Hermon Finney's "Cripido Museum of Horror," Then and Now

(1989)

"WELCOME TO FANTASTIC ART. COME AS OFTEN AS YE MAY. STAY AS LONG AS YE LIKE."

Thus read the handpainted sign over the door to Hermon Finney's sculpture-crammed one-man art museum in Arlington, North Carolina. Flanking the doorway were two identical, painted-plaster reliefs of a woman's severed head, with trickles of red paint like blood dripping from the corners of her mouth and a gory stub of neck.

Finney was in his early fifties when I met him in 1985. He had spent his entire life in Arlington, where he operated a concrete lawn-ornament business alongside U.S.Highway 21, selling birdbaths and tacky statuettes to the neighbors and the tourists who came through on their way to the Southern Appalachian mountains. Most of his inventory consisted of generic sculptures made from mass-produced molds, but he also made a few of his own molds, which he used to manufacture the ominous cartoon alligators, malevolent-looking eagles, and stony-faced sphinxes that he sold for forty dollars apiece. The one-of-a-kind pieces in the "Fantastic Art" room that adjoined his shop weren't for sale, and Finney routinely denied visitors permission to photograph them.

With only about fifteen by twenty feet of floor space, the little cinderblock museum was an amazing chamber of horrors, containing a series of carved-and-painted wood dioramas in homemade vitrines, the earliest dating back to Finney's adolescence in the mid-1940s, and a more recent series of really disturbing, painted-plaster

sculptures. Portrayed in the dioramas are horrific scenes such as one in which “Jasper, the Red-Headed Butcher” is dismembering human bodies with a meat cleaver; another in which a panic-stricken white adventurer in the tropics attempts to escape from the alligator that has just devoured the lower half of his body; and an unusually elaborate one that depicts a torture chamber in which a fatigues-clad soldier whips a voluptuous, nearly naked woman shackled by her wrists to the ceiling, while a human corpse rots in the corner. The figures in these dioramas are three-dimensional horror cartoon characters, between one and two feet tall, and meticulously crafted.

Finney toured the dioramas around the South during the 1950s and ‘60s in a trailer as the “Cripido Museum of Horror.” Stationing his trailer for a day or two at a time in shopping-center parking lots, he would distribute handbills advertising this unique traveling show and collect small entrance fees from those curious enough to investigate. In photographs from those years, the trailer’s exterior is decorated with science-fiction- and fantasy-related murals and emblazoned with teasers promising “WEIRD WOODCARVED CREATURES” and “SANGUINARY SCENES OF HUMAN CARNAGE.” In describing the variety of reactions of those who paid the admission fee, he told me, “Some people laughed, some people cried, and some got sick. There was two or three of them that threw up. One man couldn’t quit laughing. One lady fainted.”

Comic and gory as the early work is, it looks folksy and whimsical compared to the carved and painted plaster sculptures that Finney produced after he took the Cripido Museum off the road and opened his lawn-orament business. Exquisitely crafted, displaying a keen sense of scale and proportion, and skillfully painted in lurid, comic-book colors, these later works give form to the bizarre twists and turns of Finney’s

fertile, macabre, sexually charged imagination. Among them are a piece that depicts a wicked-looking satyr crouched over the prone body of a scantily clad, apparently unconscious Amazon woman; a relief-sculpted, blue-tinged demon mask whose features are made up of intertwined nude figures; and a columnar sculpture that Finney titled *Tree of Life* .

The roots and trunk of the latter piece are composed of interconnected forms that suggest talons, human limbs, entrails, sexual organs, eyes, and blood vessels. Clinging to the trunk, about a third of the way up it, is a sort of mutant rodent with a vulva-like appendage on its snout, and in the crown of this grotesque tree is a bird's nest from which protrudes a gaping, blood-drenched, fanged mouth. Perched on the nest's edge is a truly evil-looking vulture whose long, veined, phallic neck and head are curved downward and inserted into the gruesome maw in a disturbing parody of a mother bird feeding its young. It's a dark, grim vision of the cycle of life and death, and as such, it ranks as one of Finney's two or three most remarkable pieces. It's also one of several that incorporate barely disguised images of sexual organs in unlikely locations. The nose and brow of the previously mentioned, Amazon-ravishing satyr, for another example, form the distinctive shape of an erect penis and testicles.

There are plenty of people who would regard Finney's work as the product of a sick mind. Many of these same people would likely feel that judgment to have been confirmed by Finney's death from a brain tumor in the spring of 1988. But the historical annals, of course, contain many accounts of important artists whose treatment of taboo subjects prompted accusations of deviance, perversion, and insanity from their contemporaries.

I visited Finney half a dozen times during what turned out to be the last four years of his life, and I found him to be consistently mild-mannered and good-humored, if initially a little hard to read. Picture Don Knotts doing Tony Perkins as *Psycho* 's Norman Bates.

Finney's sculptures rank as strikingly imaginative examples of latter-day surrealism, but he was apparently unaware of his art-historical predecessors. He was more conscious of his work's stylistic connection to certain aspects of popular culture. When I remarked that his art reminded me of horror movies, he brightened up and said he'd been a horror-movie fan ever since he was a kid, but that his all-time favorite film was *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* . I later discovered that, during the early 1960s, he and his brother, Desmond, scripted and filmed a very low-budget eight-millimeter horror movie titled "The Cat Man," about a grave-robbing mad scientist who is transformed into a fiendish creature that's part feline, part human.

The last time I visited Finney was in the company of record producer Mitch Easter, who had heard me describe Finney's work and wanted to see it for himself. As Finney was taking us through his latter-day, non-mobile version of the Cripido Museum of Horror that afternoon, Mitch asked him if he got his inspiration from nightmares.

"I've never had a nightmare in my life," Finney said. Then he added, "I wish I could."

During that same visit, Finney took us into a back room and showed us what would turn out to be his final artistic statement, a piece that he had finished only a day or two earlier. It was an in-the-round sculpture depicting a pyramidal pile of emaciated, jaundiced-looking, naked human figures with bulging eyeballs and hairless heads that

poked out, along with buttocks, arms, and legs, from this suffocating heap of humanity. As Mitch and I stood there with our mouths open, marveling at the thing, Finney gazed at it and proudly exclaimed, “Ain’t that a mess!”

On the most obvious level, Finney’s work indicates that he never outgrew the common adolescent male fascination with grotesque and sexually titillating imagery. In the final analysis, though, it stands as a humorously startling, surprisingly sophisticated, philosophically mature commentary on humankind’s historical propensity for violence and predatory behavior.

It will be interesting to see what happens to Finney’s singular artistic legacy now that he’s no longer around to take care of the work. His widow and son take a lot of pride in his accomplishments, and since the sculptures are now in their care, it will apparently be protected for the time being. The family allowed the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem to borrow eleven of the pieces for a small, posthumous exhibition in the spring of 1989. But it would be nice if there could be opportunities for the public to see a lot more of the work than was included in this exhibit.

I miss Finney’s inscrutable grin and his wonderfully twisted slant on the world. But his viewpoint was eloquently embodied in the art that survives him. I don’t know what will ultimately become of Finney’s sculptures, but I do know they make up a formidable body of work that deserves to be preserved intact and put on permanent public display. That way, we could come as oft as we may, and we could contemplate Hermon Finney’s Fantastic Art for as long as we liked--or as long as we could handle his horrific vision of life, death, and desire.

(revised composite of an editorial in the Arts Journal*, November 1988, and a review of Finney's posthumous exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in the* Arts Journal*, April 1989)*