

# Manuel Neri: The Figure in Relief

November 8, 2008 - January 17, 2009



Detail, *Arcos de Geso (Cast 4/4)*, 2004, Bronze and oil based pigments, Image Courtesy of the Artist and Hackett-Freedman Gallery, SF, Photograph: M. Lee Fatherree

The ICA is proud to present *The Figure in Relief*, a comprehensive exhibition of painted sculptures, maquettes and works on paper by preeminent Bay Area sculptor Manuel Neri. This is the first time that this body of work has been shown together in California. Neri has been exploring the human body in his art for more than four decades. He is known internationally for his life-size sculptures in plaster, bronze, ceramic and marble as well as for his association with the Bay Area figurative movement during the 1950s and 1960s. Since his earliest figurative sculptures, Neri has used color to add gestural and emotional depth to the work, creating pieces that merge contemporary sculptural considerations with classical forms. He has worked with the same model, Mary Julia Klimenko, since 1972. Over the decades, she has become as much his muse and collaborator as his model.

*The Figure in Relief* includes work from the last 25 years that focuses on Neri's use of the fragmentary and partial figure. Due to the enormous expense of production, the bronze editions often required periods of several years to complete. The relief format has coalesced into four series: *Arco de Geso*, *Mujer Pegada*, *Maha* and *Isla Negra*. Each series was preceded and often accompanied by a substantial number of drawings. The reliefs recall ancient Greek

temple pediments and metopes as well as medieval altarpiece carvings and Renaissance relief sculpture. However, unlike the multiple figure scenes and narratives depicted in these historical references, Neri's sculptures are more minimal and abstract. The reliefs often depict a single figure in various states of emergence from the background, sometimes gazing out at the viewer but more often turning away. In his Introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Maxwell Anderson suggests that the single figure is one of a pair – that someone else is missing or just out of sight.

Manuel Neri was born on April 12, 1930 near Sanger, California. He studied briefly at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland and later attended the University of California at Berkeley in 1952 when Mark Rothko was teaching there. Neri withdrew from Berkeley after his freshman year, only to be drafted for service in Korea from 1953 – 1955. Upon his return to the Bay Area, he enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts (now known as the San Francisco Art Institute) where Richard Diebenkorn, Nathan Oliveria, and Frank Lobdell were among the influential artists and teaches at the school. He taught at the California School of Fine Arts from 1959 – 1964 before becoming a visiting lecturer at the University of California at Davis. In 1976, Neri was appointed Professor of Art and continued his tenure at Davis until his retirement in 1999.

Related Talking Art Program at the ICA  
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*Figuratively Speaking: Tracing the Influence of a Teacher, a Program, a Movement, and a Place*

Figurative artists Robert Brady, Christopher Brown and Fred Snyder are among Neri's long roster of students during his tenure at UC Davis. While each artist has a distinctive career in his own right, together they will reflect on their common influences.

\$5 non-members / FREE for ICA Members

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Drawing is an intrinsic part of Neri's practice and inherent to his conception of the figure. He tends to work out construction problems by shifting between the sculpture and the drawings and back again, thereby generating new perspectives on the formation of the work. Because the drawings are integrated into the sculptural process, Neri does not regard them as secondary to the sculpture.

In many of the relief sculptures completed during the mid-late 1980s, Neri used opaque, oil-based enamel on the bronze sculptures. Color became a way to communicate the figure's character more than its figural form. In a number of these works, after applying the enamel, Neri went back and removed fairly large areas of paint to re-expose the bronze. This process is apparent in the intricate grooves and areas of texture in the sculpture that become more visible as a result of the residual paint left in the crevices.

The understated, earth-based pigments of the Maha maquettes emphasize texture and form above all other elements. The ridge-like texture on the background surface is created by pressing a cloth against the moist clay prior to firing and then a lightly speckled salt glaze is applied to the work. The "walls" are evocative of 15th and 16th century terracotta relief sculptures from northern Italy.



Maha - Ceramic Maquette XI, 1986, Ceramic, Image Courtesy of the Artist and Hackett-Freedman Gallery, SF, Photograph: M. Lee Fatherree

The ICA is honored to present Manuel Neri: The Figure in Relief, the first California presentation of this remarkable body of work. This ambitious project would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of a number of individuals. First, I would like to thank the ever-responsive staff at Hackett-Freedman Gallery who patiently and good naturedly responded to our numerous requests and helped to facilitate the complicated installation of these monumental sculptures. I would also like to acknowledge the dedicated and tireless efforts of Anne Kohs, whose tenacious oversight and astonishing attention to detail resulted in the exquisite catalogue that accompanies the exhibition. And, finally, last but certainly not least, I would like to thank Manuel Neri for his heroic dedication and commitment to this decades-long project. This monumental effort has resulted in an extraordinary and stunning exhibition.

Cathy Kimball  
ICA Executive Director

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