

South Bend, Indiana

Georgia Strange

South Bend Regional
Museum of Art

Georgia Strange's life-size clay and steel sculptures are strikingly dysfunctional. *Malady*, a portrait bust of a middle-aged woman, eschews the traditional pedestal or body for support. Summarily posted on a fabricated steel cart, the head sits on a platform at eye-level. The woman is modeled in clay, executed in the Roman tradition, with a direct frontal gaze. The expertly formed wrinkled skin betrays no concession to beauty, and the black patina covering portions of the face contrasts vividly with the polished quality of the light-reflecting flesh. A recessed hairline exposes a tapering forehead, and the hair, pulled back into a tight bun, is covered with pustules or sores that gradually develop into nails on the nape of the woman's neck. A thin metal pole attaches the bust to the cart, which has a piano-shaped seat, two large immobile wheels in the back, and one equally motionless smaller wheel in the front. The historical reference to Etruscan incense burners and Egyptian battle chariots is immediately apparent. Yet, with Strange, the bust and cart create a morbid duo, a ghostly combination of disembodied motion evocative of Giacometti's wheeled sculpture *The Chariot*. Like Giacometti, Strange crafts the mood of a detached or alienated civilization, and her work is particularly timely, having been recontextualized by recent acts of war.

Building on the tradition of figurative sculpture, Strange brings the genre into the post-industrial age. Fabricated steel chairs or coat racks replace the trunk and limbs of the body, avoiding any trace of its organic qualities. Removing the flesh and replacing the malleable substance with an inflexible material suggests the alienation of the intellect from the banality of physical life. The



Georgia Strange, *Flame*, 2000. Clay and steel, 76 x 18 x 15 in.

idiosyncrasies of the busts, some with tongues extended (*Head Burn*) or missing an eye (*Turbulence*), raise issues of illness, especially as it relates to portraiture, a genre that often idealizes the sitter. The deftly modeled heads, however, are not always in harmony with their armatures, and the query into the relationship of body and mind frequently remains vague. The totemic *Mr. Casual*, a carefully crafted bust with a dusty powdered surface posted on a fabri-

cated chair/bottle rack, gives primacy to the portrait over the architecture of the body. Works such as these exude a detachment, enhanced by the merciless steel that pushes the poetry out of the work and moves it into a clinical analysis that keeps emotion and empathy at bay. *Malady* avoids this trap by combining a marginally disfigured portrait bust with an ineffectual armature. The sculpture allows the viewer to make the relationship between illness and its ability

to incapacitate and the ensuing personal humiliations the body can inflict on the mind. Speculation on both the personal and the public level of this mind/body alienation easily segue into the global preoccupation with the dehumanizing effects of technology.

—Julia Morrisoe