

SET IN STONE: MAURO PERUCCHETTI'S MODERN HEROES

By Peter Frank

Life is never so complex that acts of heroism, individual and societal, can't break through and set, or re-set, standards of ethical thinking and moral behavior. But life can be complex enough to obscure what constitutes heroism. Who are the heroes, who are the false demigods, and who are the mad actors presuming themselves heroic but doing the devil's work? Describing heroic nobility is easier than identifying it – and identifying with it is easier than behaving according to its principles.

In his marble sculptures Mauro Perucchetti does not simply ponder these age-old questions, he invites, even seduces, us into contemplating them with him. He throws our false gods and anti-heroes back in our faces. He asks us whom we consider true heroes and whom mere idols. He challenges us – by carving marble, that most obdurate of traditional materials – to consider which heroes are real, and which are mere images, legends, myths.

Perucchetti's ancestors worshiped statues like this, setting a precedent that persisted almost until our time; and the fact that present-day objects of our devotion are overwhelmingly two- (and four-) dimensional does not rob the stone of its ability to compel, certainly not when Perucchetti's figures assume our dimensions as well as occupy our space. Indeed, the relative scarcity of sculpted bodies in contemporary art, especially in public space, gives an exotic flair to the realness of these marble apparitions – and, one could project, portends a new era of the solid.

Even now, three-dimensional imaging is rapidly bringing that era to fruition. But Perucchetti's work involves no such technology. He has repurposed a millennia-old method to modern artmaking, in order to give bite to its expression, a bite both ironic and prophetic, ethical and aesthetic. To hand-fashion marble in this day and age is to transcend anachronism and superannuation; rather, it is to invoke the very condition of idealism, pointing as it does at a model of reasoning and decorum so antiquated that it just might be new again.

At first glance, seeing Batman and Superman – ultra-post-modern versions of heroes – rendered in an ancient stone, and enacting hyperbolic, and homoerotic, gestures of salvation Michelangelo would recognize, seems a thorough capitulation to the lens of modern civilization. But snark actually loses here to passion. Such literalized, if frozen, drama vindicates rather than vitiates the innocent pretenses of cosplay participants, suggesting their imaginary heroes can take form in space as well as time, and in the most exquisite of materials. The more dubious heroics, and even more certain sexual frisson, that pairs Catwoman with Medusa asks us to consider both Perseus' nemesis and Batman's frenemy as complex personae, representing not fearsome evil but fear itself, the result of psyches damaged by trauma and injustice.

The duo of superhuman, yet compromised, women reveals a feminist subtext among Perucchetti's Modern Heroes, one that repositions the female with regard to her pedestal. She is no longer passive. She may make grave errors, as *The Role Model* does, but they are errors of commission; she is responsible for her actions and their victim, no longer the victim of men. Conversely, Perucchetti

heroicizes woman by having her usurp man's pedestal, subjecting *David* to a Tiresian (not just surgical) conversion. The *Tribute to Women* assumes the original's dynamic poise, conflating the subject of heroic action with the object of desire. The unseen Goliath will be toppled, in a victory for women everywhere.

As we do, Perucchetti reads constantly of women fighting back all over the world. And he reads of men driven insane by their own circumstances, their medications, their fantasies. His version of Rodin's *Thinker* modifies the original only slightly, but drops it thereby into the maelstrom of contemporary angst. Perhaps Perucchetti is asking would-be murderers and suicides to contemplate their actions; or perhaps he's depicting (one of) them brooding over the impending, or even realized, deed. Whatever the narrative here, it is not that of the original's existential speculation – or, if it is, it is of such speculation endowed with deadly force, the ultimate anti-heroic act. We can perhaps bear anti-heroics of the type indulged in by the couple bathetically taking advantage of being *Home Alone* (Miss Piggy, no feminist she, is a hero mostly in her own mind); but *The Thinker* hits close to home.

The Sin of Man – and Woman – gets measured against a higher power, whether the Word of God or the connivances of gods. And of course, s/he is going to be found wanting; whether or not sin is original, it is eternal. Mauro Perucchetti ponders this metaphysical bind in his marble sculptures, employing a medium as timeworn as the stories of sin and redemption themselves. Maybe the most ironic thing about the series “Modern Heroes” is its title. Behind those costumes, those poses, that delicious and impervious material are beings that are neither heroes nor modern, just modernized. Ecce homo.

Los Angeles
June 2014