

Abstract

The Figure in Fine Art and Commercialism

By
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SCULPTURE AREA

This body of sculpture is an exploration of the human figure through personal, public, and commercial works. The following thesis report will explore these various categories and how they play a role in the sculpture's aesthetic appearance, contextual meaning, and societal role. With each category comes an array of technical and conceptual challenges that must be solved in order for the sculpture to be a successful figure. My thesis will cover these various technical and conceptual approaches to modeling the figure, while also explaining how the intended overall purpose of the piece directly influences my choice in materials, scale, and sculptural style.

THE FIGURE IN FINE ART AND COMMERCIALISM

A Report of a Creative Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

In the personal works category of my thesis, the various sculptures portray family, friends, and other close relationships. These portraits are a collection of my interpretation of these peoples' personalities through their characteristic expressions as well as their visually intriguing physical features that have captivated my interest. The portraits also serve as examples of various archetypes in society. In this aspect, viewers that have no direct relation with or knowledge of the subject being portrayed can relate to the art object through their own concepts of these various archetypes.

In the public works category of my thesis, the sculptures included were commissioned by a client for a specific purpose to be displayed and viewed in a specified space. These works were also created with an adherence to set parameters that dictated scale, materials, style, expression, and attire. However, despite these guidelines, my approach to these portraits was very similar to the approach towards creating my own personal work. Through conversations with friends, coworkers, and employees and an array of reference photos of the subjects, I was able to develop a sense of their individual personalities and key gestural expressions. Since my level of familiarity with these people was on an acquaintance level, I had to associate them to my own concepts of the archetypes that the client was requesting them to be portrayed as. Taking this into consideration, these projects allowed me to be both the viewer without the personal connection to the subjects, and the artist interpreting the subjects being depicted.

In the commercial works category of my thesis, the figures included represent both commissioned works and personal works. These sculptures were used as masters for serial production intended to be collectibles. This dictates the scale, materials, pose, expression, and style of the work. The commissioned works depict specific fictitious characters from narrative

films, as portrayed by certain actors. These characters represent specific archetypes in society that the collector relates to through their own understanding of those archetypes. Along with the commissioned portraits, I have also included personal works of the same nature.

SECTION 1: PERSONAL WORKS

This section focuses on my interest in various archetypes that exist in my personal life. I am intrigued by these prescribed labels and how everyone exists as multiple archetypes during their life. I am also interested in how these classifications play a role in an individual's life and development. How does a person's character evolve as they assume the roles of different archetypes? How does one define them self individually and keep a sense of self if each role requires differing or conflicting personas? Of particular interest for me in this body of work are the various archetypes that exist in nuclear and extended families, as well as those in other close personal relationships.

When creating a portrait, I try to convey the subject's unique personality through a narrative expression. Recreating and often times exaggerating their distinctive physical features also plays a key role in the success of the portrait. My primary goal is for the work to exist as a "speaking image" of the person depicted. It is very important for my work to tell a story and draw the viewer into that narrative. For this body of work, each portrait is my interpretation of people close to me, and what I find iconic or symbolic about their personality and individual character. One of the primary challenges for me is trying to summarize a person's key attributes through a single expression of thought or emotion.

From a technical aspect, I approached these portraits with total creative freedom. The final aesthetic appearance of these portraits is a result of this freedom to explore various techniques and materials. With each portrait or figure that falls into this category of work, I try to explore different modeling styles and mark making in the clay in order to find a technique that best conveys my desired aesthetic vision intended for the work.

THE IRON CASTER

This was the first sculpture I completed as a graduate student, as well as, my first large-scale figure. I had the opportunity to apply for a research grant to fund the making of a sculpture. Knowing that the final location would be the sculpture garden in front of East Carolina University's School of Art and Design, I sought to create a figurative piece that had relevance to the school's sculpture program. Since East Carolina University's sculpture program has a long tradition of iron casting, I decided that this would be the theme for the sculpture.

I used sculpture professor Carl Billingsley as my model, portraying him in his casting attire ready to strike the furnace. In reality, the pose and depiction are idealized from the actual stance and motion used to tap a furnace. I felt it was important also for the portrait to be revealed, showing the intense focus towards the task at hand.

The final materials for the sculpture are cast iron and steel. While the figure depicts the process of iron casting, it also exists as an example of cast iron sculpture. The design of the base was created to specifically reference Carl Billingsley's cast iron and welded steel sculptures that are also a part of this sculpture garden.

As a work of art, I feel that the final sculpture functions on many different levels. It is a literal representation of the iron casting process at East Carolina University and celebrates the history of iron casting. At the same time, it is also an honorific piece depicting artist and professor Carl Billingsley. On another level, it is the only realistic figurative sculpture in the sculpture garden at East Carolina University, representing a traditional approach to sculpture while incorporating modern materials and techniques.



PLATE 1 "THE IRON CASTER" 9 x 3.5 x 4 FEET IRON AND STEEL

LAUREN

This piece was created with the intention of exploring the traditional approach to modeling the portrait in water-based clay. At the suggestion of my professor, I used this method and limited myself to only one day to model the head. The fluidity of the clay allowed me to work quickly, mapping out the key features and expression of the subject. I have always been inspired by the looseness of Rodin's work, especially his female portrait studies such as the one he did of Rose Beuret. I wanted the portrait I was sculpting to have a similar spontaneous quality about it. Therefore, I used as few tools as possible and left the surface loose and unrefined.

The resulting portrait is of my close friend Lauren DeSerres. I have always enjoyed her company over the years and have found her personality to be of great interest. Physically, Lauren is a thin-framed girl and short in height. What her appearance lacks in presence though, her grand personality makes up for. She is also one of those people whose face never hides her real emotions or feelings. Every expression is completely true to how she feels at that moment in time. When she disapproves, Lauren often casts a distinctive side-wards glare with eyes narrowed. Since she often disapproves of many things surrounding her and that particular glare is sometimes directed towards me, I decided to try and capture that expression in the limited modeling time I had. The recognizable "Lauren" glare was more important to capture than an adhering to an accurate portrayal of her features and proportions.



PLATE 2 "LAUREN"

18 x 10 x 11 INCHES

IRON AND MAHOGANY

JOURNEY TO ANDISTAN

This is a portrait of fellow figurative sculptor Andy Denton. This portrait was created as a response to harsh criticism of my work by Andy. During a critique, Andy voiced his opinion that the portraits I sculpted were not art. He informed me that my portraits were boring, unimaginative, lacked creativity, and that they “did nothing” for him. In his eyes, I was the equivalent of a “wedding portrait photographer”. Unfortunately, his harsh criticism was also fueled by another student’s ill disposition towards me. What could have been a helpful and positive critique of my work instead turned into what I felt was a personal attack.

I was extremely angered and upset with this incident as well as other similar ones that occurred during this class. I decided to sculpt the two individuals and myself and display them as one piece. The intention was to publically make fun of their ideas and beliefs towards art, essentially belittling them as artists through my own art. This piece started out as a very negative and hateful piece of art. I hated working on it and the sight of it was a constant reminder of the incidents that occurred. However, an interesting chance occurrence happened and I met Andy’s mother.

Not only did I meet her, but I also received a critique from her on my portrait of Andy. She was a critical observer in the way I modeled his features, especially the key ones that she personally was fond of. She even talked about what side of the family these came from. I could tell she was reminiscing about her past experiences with Andy and the rest of her family while she looked over my work. She offered her thoughts on correcting the errors she saw, but overall she was pleased with it and gave me her praise. She had no idea that I intended to use the portrait to cast Andy in a negative light. At some point shortly after meeting Andy’s mother I realized that her response really reinforced what my work was about. I create portraits to elicit a positive response. They are to be viewed as a reminder of the subject’s positive qualities. I want my work

to bring a sense of joy to the viewer, not leave a negative taste in their mouth. For this reason, the portrait sat on my studio shelf for over a year.

The final portrait was finished in aluminum and steel with a white and orange colored finish. I included elements of Andy's artwork, such as, his symbolic aura, the color safety orange, and a cloud shaped base. I also modeled Andy with a towel on his head to reference to his trip to India. The title "Journey to Andistan" was used to reference the title of the radio show Andy hosts for the campus radio station.



PLATE 3 "JOURNEY TO ANDISTAN" 31 x 22 x 14 INCHES ALUMINUM AND
STEEL

Athlea

This portrait depicts my Great Aunt Athlea. She is the oldest living relative in our extended family and is quite the character. Her personality is extremely warm and kind, always supportive in nature. She also has a wonderful sense of humor and is well known for teasing and taunting everyone in the family with humorous disapproval. I wanted the portrait to convey these aspects of her personality, so I sculpted her with a caring smile.

I created this piece to celebrate her long life as the eldest members of our extended family. She is a source of constant love, support, and entertainment for all family members. I also created this work because of my interest in the concept of family unity. She and my grandmother, her sister, are extremely close. The fact that the two of them have been a family for 90 years is something that intrigues me greatly. My immediate family consists of four brothers and I cannot even begin to fathom what the next 50 years with them will be like.

For this portrait, I decided to explore a new casting technique using resin-bonded granite. After the rubber mold was created, I mixed a clear resin with “white diamond” granite dust and hollow cast the portrait. The resulting finish reads as a semi-translucent white granite, appearing as if it was carved from a block of stone. The casting was then mounted on a mahogany base.



PLATE 4 "ATHLEA"

21 x 12 x 10 INCHES

FAUX GRANITE AND

MAHOGANY

SECTION 2: PUBLIC WORKS

These figurative sculptures are a result of both public and private commissions intended for publically accessible spaces. The works deal with archetypes that exist on a broader societal scale, both real and fictitious. The function of these portraits and figures is to be as iconic as possible, embodying the ideal characteristics for each archetype represented. In designing and executing works for publically accessible spaces, durability and sustainability are primary concerns.

Similar to the portraits that fall under the personal works section, the portraits executed for the public works category depict specific individuals. Each portrait must still accurately represent the subject's distinctive features and personality traits that make them uniquely recognizable. However, the context in which these portraits are displayed and viewed changes the purpose of the works. They exist primarily as honorific works of art, depicting virtuous, idealized attributes. In this sense, viewers not personally familiar with the subject can still relate to the concept of the archetype depicted as well as the personality traits being celebrated.

This section also explores fictitious figures created to embody ideal characteristics of certain archetypes. Since there is no specific person being depicted, I have complete design freedom to choose the iconic features and expressions that best convey the emotions and message that the viewer can relate to.

DR. FREEDMAN AND DR. HULL

These two portrait busts were created to commemorate the 25th anniversary for the opening of the medical practice Raleigh Neurology. Dr. Freedman and Dr. Hull were the founding partners for the practice, which now consists of several doctors and health specialists. I was commissioned to create two larger than life-size bronze portrait busts for this occasion. In addition to the bronze busts, two maple and ebony pedestals were commissioned for the busts to be displayed on.

There were several things to consider when I chose the expressions and attire for the portraits. The features of the busts needed to reflect their warm and caring nature and celebrate their accomplishments as leaders and mentors in the medical practice. For these reasons, I decided that they should both be smiling and dressed in their traditional white medical coats. The medical coats were chosen and designed to aesthetically and visually connect the two portraits.

I also spent time talking with other doctors, employees, and family members to obtain a better understanding of their unique personalities. I have known Dr. Freedman for several years and he is a very jolly person, always smiling and cracking jokes. After talking to his employees, they agreed that he needed to be sculpted with his memorable wide smile. Dr. Hull on the other hand proved to be more challenging. After speaking with his employees and other doctors, it became apparent that he was a serious man by nature. If he smiled at all, it was small and quick to disappear. With a little help from his receptionist though, we were able to capture a small grin while I was shooting reference photos.

The busts were modeled in oil-based clay from reference photographs. While the modeling was taking place, I also was collaborating with the wood worker creating the pedestals. The overall design and final look of the bronze busts and maple pedestals needed to compliment

one another. Once the clay versions were complete, I created rubber molds and made wax patterns. These were then placed in sand molds and bronzes were created. The final patina used was a dark brown to contrast the lighter brown finish of the pedestals.



PLATE 5 “DR. FREEDMAN” 64 x 22 x 22 INCHES

BRONZE, MAPLE, AND EBONY



PLATE 6 "DR. HULL"

63 x 22 x 22 INCHES

BRONZE, MAPLE, AND EBONY

THE PIRATE BENCH

This sculpture was a public commission from the city of Greenville, North Carolina. The city held a juried competition for sculpture students to design benches to be placed downtown. Since the city and East Carolina University have such a close relationship and relevance to one another, I chose to depict a pirate. East Carolina University's mascot, which was themed after the legendary figure Blackbeard, is a pirate of similar appearance.

Of all my graduate work, this is the only sculpture that does not incorporate portraiture. I was allowed full creative freedom by the city to design the pirate and bench in my own vision. I settled on a design in which the bench mimicked that of a ship deck and referenced "walking the plank" at the same time. For safety and sustainability the bench was constructed from steel and cypress wood. In designing the look for the pirate, I tried to incorporate elements of East Carolina University's mascot, Blackbeard, and other iconic pirate features. I chose bronze as the final medium for the pirate to be cast in due to its durability and versatile finishing options.

Since I wasn't sculpting a portrait, I was free to create my own narrative for the piece. Unlike traditional public sculpture, which is formal and serious by nature, I wanted to create something a little more humorous. I set the stage for my narrative by placing the pirate on a bench that referenced a ship. When someone sits on the bench, they are met with an angry pirate coming up from below deck to defend the ship with his pistol drawn. Visually, the pirate is quite haggard and gnarly in appearance. The whole right side of his body is covered in artificial limbs and bandaging such as a hook, peg leg, and eye patch. However, his mere three-foot stature completely undermines his ferocious nature and appearance, thus resulting in a slight sense of humor for the viewer.



PLATE 7 “ THE PIRATE BENCH”

5 x 9 x 3 FEET

BRONZE, STEEL, AND

CYPRESS



PLATE 8 “THE PIRATE BENCH DETAIL”

5 x 9 x 3 FEET

BRONZE, STEEL,

AND CYPRESS

SECTION 3: COMMERCIAL WORKS

This category of figurative sculpture is created with the intention of serial production. The work still focuses on portraiture and specific archetypes represented in society. The subjects usually created in this category are real people depicting fictitious characters from the motion picture industry. Once again my work depicts idealizations of certain archetypes present in our culture.

These works are created for serial production and monetary profit. Hence, the resulting objects are cast from materials that are less expensive and generally not considered “precious”. This ultimately raises certain questions about the sculpture. Since there are several of the same objects in existence, does this availability devalue the work? Which is more valued, a portrait of the actor, or a portrait of the character depicted by the actor? Depending on the actor in question and the role they are playing, is there really a difference between the two? In the following descriptions of the sculptures, I will address some of these questions.

Commercial sculpture also presents constant technical challenges that must be overcome. Since the item is made for collectability, every aspect of the sculpture must be created with reproduction in mind. This in turn dictates the scale of the work and its highly detailed finish. There is also a degree of engineering that goes into how the sculpture disassembles and reassembles after production.

Introduction to Model Kits

In 1961 Aurora Plastics Corporation released their first figurative plastic model kit depicting Universal Studio's Frankenstein. For the next 16 years Aurora produced some of the most notable Universal monsters such as Dracula, The Wolfman, The Creature, The Mummy, and The Phantom. The new hobby of assembling and painting model kits depicting people's favorite characters from movies, TV shows, and comics boomed during this period. Never before had there been such accessibility to collectibles for these genres. Aurora truly set the stage for the future of the collectibles industry.

However, in 1977 Aurora simply could not compete with the advent of videogames and other alternative pastimes that soon occupied the modeling community. They sold their company to Nabisco, which immediately ended their production of figurative model kits. Without Aurora leading the way and no other companies to fill its shoes, the hobby of building model kits became nonexistent. It wasn't until the late 1980's when model kits began to reemerge, but this time they weren't being produced by big companies. With the advancement and accessibility of new rubber and resin materials, many devout hobbyists learned sculpting, mold making, and casting on their own. A new form of model kit emerged known as garage kits. The term "garage kits" was coined as such since many of the kits were made artists in their garage.

The Phantom of the Opera

In the 1920's, Universal Studios released their second monster movie *The Phantom of The Opera* based on a mystery novel by Gaston Leroux. Actor Lon Chaney assumes the role of the Phantom, creating the most elaborate and extensive make-up effects for the part. In the 1970's Aurora Plastics Corporation released their first Phantom of The Opera model kit.

This portrait of the Phantom was commissioned to serve as a replacement head for the old Aurora model kit. Instead of basing the portrait on Lon Chaney's appearance in the film like the previous Aurora head, the client wanted to model it after the original model kit box art by James Bama. James Bama painted several fantastic illustrations for the box art of the various monster kits produced by Aurora. His work was so profound, that a whole series of model kits were created based off of his box art illustrations.

This project was an exciting challenge to work on since I was assigned the task of sculpting a new portrait that had to work with an original model kit. Conceptually speaking, it was the merging of the traditional techniques with modern garage kit techniques, resulting in a summation of the entire history of the model kit hobby. The original kit was carved from high-density foam and disassembled into 36 parts for steel molds. The resulting kit for sale during the 1970's was plastic and snapped together. I was not limited with the concerns of draftability or undercuts since the mold was going to be made of flexible rubber. I modeled the portrait from wax and incorporated as much detail as I could. The final copies for sale were cast in urethane resin.

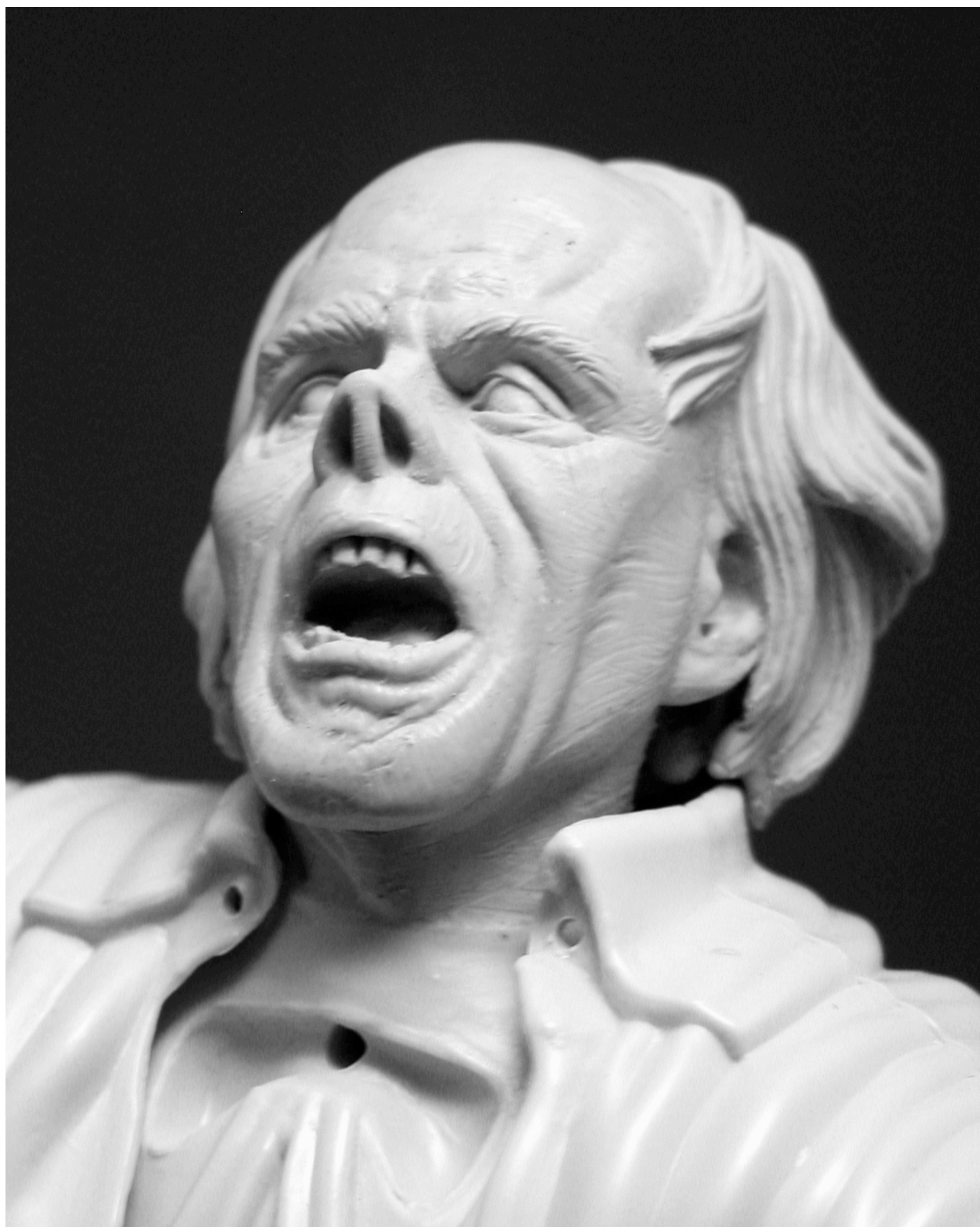


PLATE 9 "THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA". 1.5 x 1.5 x 1.5 INCHES RESIN

CLINT EASTWOOD AS DIRTY HARRY

In 1971 director Don Seigel made Clint Eastwood a Hollywood superstar starring in the lead role Detective Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry*. This movie and Clint Eastwood's performance created an entirely new genre of gritty police movies. His portrayal created a new era of police characters that took the law into their own hands in the face of a failing legal system.

The idea behind this model kit commission was to depict Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry in his classic firing stance with his signature .44 magnum handgun. Instead of strictly modeling him after his look in the first film, the client and I decided to combine his appearances from several of the Dirty Harry films. We agreed that an older portrait of Clint Eastwood would be more recognizable to the public, but that his attire should remain true to the first film in order to represent the 1970's.

I modeled the portrait from wax and the body from a polymer clay called Super Sculpey. a soft clay that allowed me to quickly sculpt their desired piece. Once the Sculpey body was finished, I baked the sculpture in the oven to harden and cure it. From there the body was cut apart, keyed, and sanded to a smooth finish in preparation for molding. The wax portrait was then modeled on the hardened body and keyed as well for serial production. After production, the end result was a resin model kit to be assembled and painted by hobbyists.

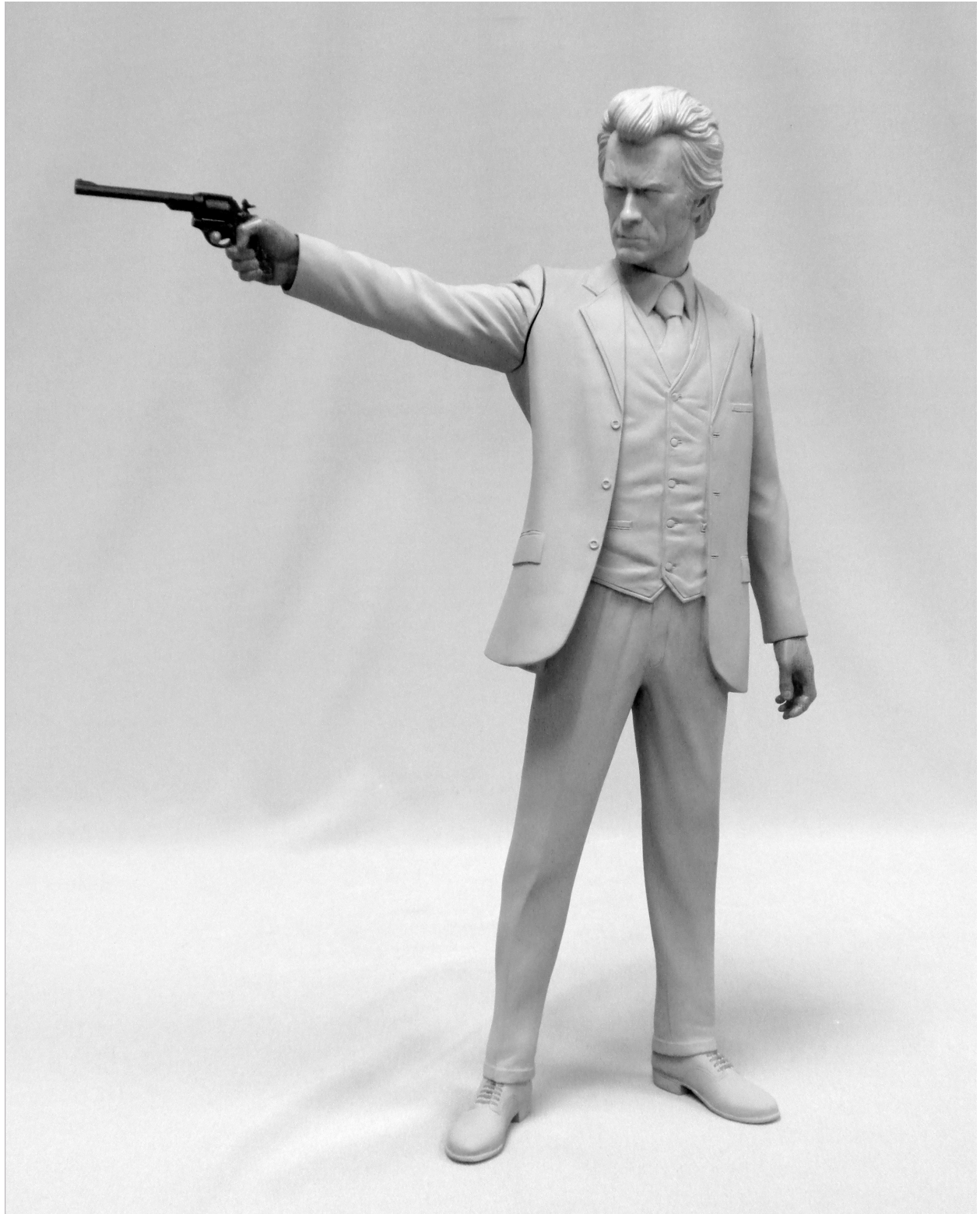


PLATE 10 "CLINT EASTWOOD AS DIRTY HARRY" 14 x 9 x 6 INCHES RESIN



PLATE 11 "CLINT EASTWOOD AS DIRTY HARRY DETAIL"

14 x 9 x 6 INCHES

RESIN

DANIEL CRAIG AS JAMES BOND

This piece was a commission for a small collectibles company with the intention of being reproduced as a resin model kit. The subject to be sculpted was Daniel Craig portraying the famous film hero James Bond as depicted in the movie *Casino Royal*. The parameters for the sculpture, such as the pose, scale, and level of detail, were established by the collectibles company. When modeling this work, my main goal was to accurately sculpt Daniel Craig's portrait, but to also capture the key expression and body language he employed to create the character James Bond.

I sculpted the wax master out of a hard modeling wax that holds detail extremely well. Once the wax master was complete, it was sectioned and keyed for easier production. The wax master was shipped off to the company to be molded in silicone and cast in polyester resin and marble dust. The image of this sculpture shows the produced model kit assembled and painted.



PLATE 12 “DANIEL CRAIG AS JAMES BOND”

14 x 7 x 6 INCHES

FAUX BRONZE



PLATE 13 "DANIEL CRAIG AS JAMES BOND DETAIL"

14 x 7 x 6 INCHES

FAUX BRONZE

THE MICHAEL EHLBECK COLLECTIBLE PEZ DISPENSER

Unlike the other works in this section, this is a portrait of someone I know personally. My intention was to model a hyper realistic portrait of the subject at a scale that would fit onto a candy PEZ dispenser. The conceptual aspect behind the project was to create a well-crafted art object, Michael Ehlbeck's portrait, and take it out of the fine arts context by humorously presenting it mounted on a PEZ dispenser.

As a teacher, Professor Ehlbeck has wealth of knowledge when it comes to techniques and processes pertaining to two-dimensional art. He also is extremely knowledgeable of art history and numerous artists. He is rarely unable to offer advice or point students in the right direction when they encounter challenges in their work. What sets Professor Ehlbeck's personality and teaching style apart from other faculty is his sense of humor. He has an array of jokes, ranging from hilariously memorable to pure cheesiness. When he combines his wealth of knowledge with a comedic delivery, students never know what will come out of his mouth next. For this reason, I chose to mount his portrait on a PEZ dispenser. The idea that the viewer tilts his head back and out comes a candy treat seemed appropriate.

In order to make the piece functional like a real PEZ dispenser, I disassembled one and modeled the portrait on top of the mechanism that connects to the body of the dispenser. Once the wax master of the portrait was complete, I created 3 sets of silicone rubber molds. I then produced 50 copies of the portrait using resin and marble dust. These casts were then cleaned up and mounted onto actual PEZ Dispensers and offered for sale.



PLATE 14 "THE MICHAEL EHLBECK COLLECTIBLE PEZ DISPENSER" 7 x 5 x 11

INCHES RESIN AND PLASTIC

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my thesis work is a summation of the various avenues available for figurative sculpture that are of interest to me. I have explored the figure and portrait from the Fine Art perspective as well as from the Commercial Art perspective. Ultimately, whether I am modeling a large-scale bronze figure or a small intricately detailed figure to be turned into a model kit, my main goals for the sculpture remain the same. I strive to make my figures and portraits embody as much “life” as possible, whether that is through hyper-realism, capturing key expressions, or depicting the essence of a subject’s personality. I also strive to incorporate an engaging narrative whenever possible for the viewer. My work is created to stimulate the imagination of the viewer so that they may not only revisit past experiences with their family, friends, loved ones, and iconic fantasy characters but to also introduce them to new characters and narratives similar to their own.