

# An Anatomy of Melancholy

*In her human and animal sculptures made of low-fire clay and wood, Daisy Youngblood eschews the classical and the romantic in favor of disproportion, injury and emptiness.*

**BY JANET KOPLOS**

---

*This page, Daisy Youngblood:  
Torso Triptych (Elbow),  
1991, clay and wood,  
26½ by 12¾ by 15½ inches.*

*Opposite, Torso Triptych (Still),  
1991, clay, 24 by 10 by 10½ inches.*





In Daisy Youngblood's infrequently exhibited sculptures, recently seen at the Tom Cugliani Gallery in her first New York solo since 1985, wood and low-fire clay are used to depict humans and animals. One might think that female and male nudes, a gorilla head, a monkey and an elephant formed from these visually warm materials would come across as familiar and easy. But the truth is something else. Youngblood's works are loaded with portent or suffused with melancholy, perhaps because all the figures, although realistic to a degree, are lacking parts and are so obviously hollow. Even on a sunny day, in an open, airy gallery, the five wall works and two pedestal pieces seemed peculiarly autistic.

Not just the objects themselves but the exhibition as a whole produced a sense of unease. The broader disjunctive effect comes in part from the absence of a consistent scale. The largest (in nature) of Youngblood's subjects, the elephant, was the smallest object in the show. No penchant for miniaturization accounts for that; the three individual works that Youngblood titles "Torso Triptych" are close to life-size, while the much smaller *Running Man* is the same size as *Monkey with the Leg Out* (and rather similarly simian). The result, then, was a wide gamut of disproportions, and each work was isolated within its own frame of reference.

A principal expressive feature of Youngblood's approach is the way she fragments her figures. Not one is naturalistically complete. The wall-mounted gorilla head, slightly smaller than life, consists of crimped facial features on a humped skull without any further delineation of the animal's body; this piece reads as simply partial—a three-dimensional sketch that the artist chose to stop at a certain point. But more often the figures are redolent of loss. The parts are not just undepicted but seem missing, even mourned. The three female torsos—sculpted fully in the round, although they may flatten where they touch the wall upon which they hang, with their backs toward the viewer—lack all or part of their heads, arms and legs.

As naked and mildly erotic female bodies, these works bear comparison to the incomplete figures Mary Frank made in the early '80s out of segments of clay that overlapped like waves, communicating a flow of surface sensation; their fragmentation could be read either as orgasmic release or as bodily decay toward union with nature. Youngblood's torsos, on the other hand, can conceivably be seen as intellectualizations—economical three-dimensional "drawings" of the figure; but they more persuasively convey priva-





Torso Triptych (Kick),  
1991, clay and wood,  
22½ by 29 by 12½ inches.



tion. The integral but unclosed forms suggest an emptiness that longs to be filled. The limbs are gone, and their stumps point outward toward the absent resolution. Thus the tone of these sculptures is closer to the stoic endurance of pain expressed by Stephen DeStaebler's massive clay (or bronze) figure fragments than to Mary Frank's essentially lyrical ones. Youngblood also captures a living archaism that is nearer to the ancientness that DeStaebler's broken and eroded figures convey.

Sometimes Youngblood provides her figures with wooden limbs. In the elephant (and a small horse sculpture that was in the gallery office) the dark, leathery surfaces of the twig legs are at least as convincing, as representations, as the clay portions. But one is conscious of discontinuity, unrightness. The two dark torsos have wood appendages that are considerably less natural. The crotch of a peeled branch provides a flexed arm for *Torso Triptych (Elbow)* and a thicker, decaying bent branch substitutes for a leg in *Torso Triptych (Kick)*. While the combination of wood and clay might bring to

mind a Daphne-like transformation, these torsos are anything but romanticized, and anticlassical in the extreme. The gnarled wood and its graceless abutment to the clay suggest, rather, that these bodies have, as a result of grievous injury, been fitted with prostheses that are neither suitably flexible nor complete.

**T**he torsos were the most compelling of the pieces on view. In their sensitive, idiosyncratic surfaces and detailing, they communicate a certain poignance: the small, pointy breasts suggest youth, while the slightly protuberant bellies imply a ripening maturity. The latter inference is reinforced by a degree of distortion in each figure—they are twisted, rather thick at the waistlines, and their backs bend or bulge unexpectedly—as if they were damaged by experience.

On the wall the dark torsos are most representationally integrated when viewed from straight on, or from just slightly off center. Their distortions are accented as one



Gorilla Head,  
1990, clay,  
6 by 4 by 6½ inches.





*Running Man,*  
1990, clay,  
20 by 5 by 5 inches.

**Facial features, cut into the hollow clay shell, are dark, eerie absences. Here, confronting dumbness or horror as in a bad dream, one doesn't want to believe that the eyes are the windows of the soul.**

moves to look at them from a more oblique angle—buttocks are then seen to be unsplit, hipbones protrude unevenly, legs or arms are clearly of different sizes. The peach-colored *Torso Triptych (Still)* is utterly transformed by a change of viewpoint as the other two aren't. From straight on, it seems to fan out at the shoulder blades, which makes a form rather like a hammerhead shark's. But from the side, the impossibly long and curving spine—a variation of Ingres's celebrated odalisque, perhaps—leads to a head canted forward, as if bowing or sorrowing. The head seemingly vanishes into the wall at a point just below the bridge of the nose. The armless figure is incomplete in a helpless, submissive manner that Rodin

never proposed but that Magdalena Abakanowicz has explored thoroughly.

*Monkey with the Leg Out* perfectly captures the strange fascination of the apes, so near and yet so far from human. This one huddles triangular as a squatting, serapedraped peasant, except for one extended, froglike leg. Arms melt into the adobe mass of rounded planes that is the body. The face—a blank of dumbness or horror that you might see in a bad dream—twists away from the leg to stare with a slightly opened mouth. The facial features, cut into the hollow clay shell, are dark, eerie absences. Here one doesn't want to think that eyes are the windows of the soul.

The elephant, with its amusing stumpy twig tail, is a little too charming and loses the edge that makes the other works memorable. The *Running Man*, on the other hand, is so much on the edge that it seems Youngblood may have changed her mind about what the small figure represents. This was the most crudely hung work, suspended from a nail by a few windings of wire around the upper left arm (the other works' hanging mechanisms were concealed). The man does not, in fact, seem to be running; his knees are splayed but his ankles join just above the missing feet. Both his elbows are raised, one forward and one back, in a posture more like swimming than running. This pose also has an art precedent: imagine him reclining on his right forearm rather than hanging on the wall and he resembles the Dionysus from the Parthenon pediment, albeit with a vastly less heroic body. He has a tiny and finely detailed head and the same nearly howling facial vacancy as the monkey.

Youngblood is a native of North Carolina who now lives in Costa Rica. Her distance from her roots might seem to have something to do with the intense yet somehow removed emotional tenor of these works, contrived with such acute and clinical control, except that her work in this vein—same subjects, materials, methods, forms—predates her relocation. She lived in Manhattan for some years, and despite opting for the isolation of a rain forest she still has a following from her '79 and '81 shows at the Willard Gallery and her '83 and '85 shows at Barbara Gladstone. Youngblood has always worked with clay, and, although a pertinent two-dimensional comparison might be the horse paintings of her peer Susan Rothenberg, she has followed her own distinctive path. In her distillations, the animal subjects are not exempt from the worries and laments of humans, and her human subjects confront their times with a mute animality.

*Art in America* 127 □



*Monkey with the Leg Out,*  
1990, clay, 14 by  
21 by 12½ inches.

All photos this article  
courtesy Tom Cugliani Gallery.