

Sculpture

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St. Louis

Charles Long

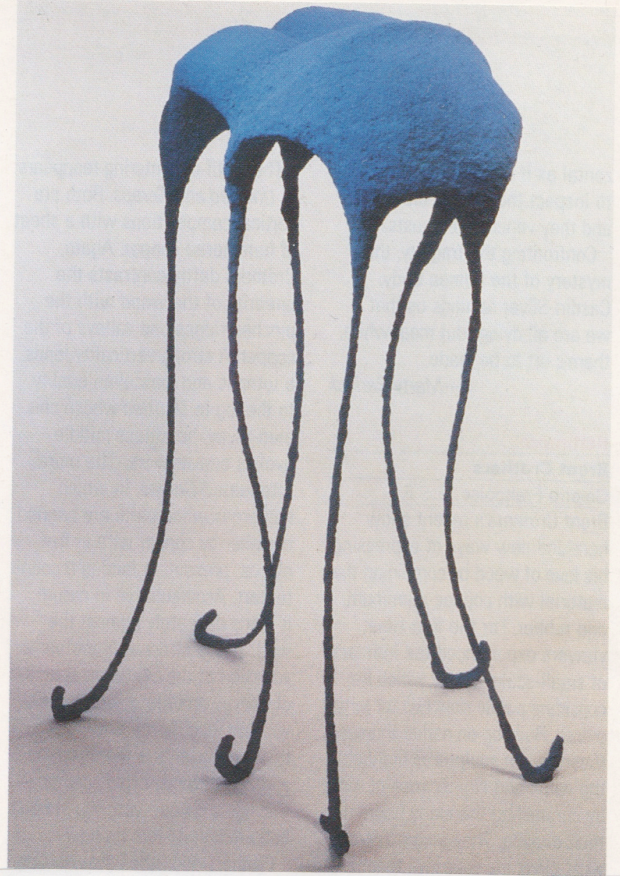
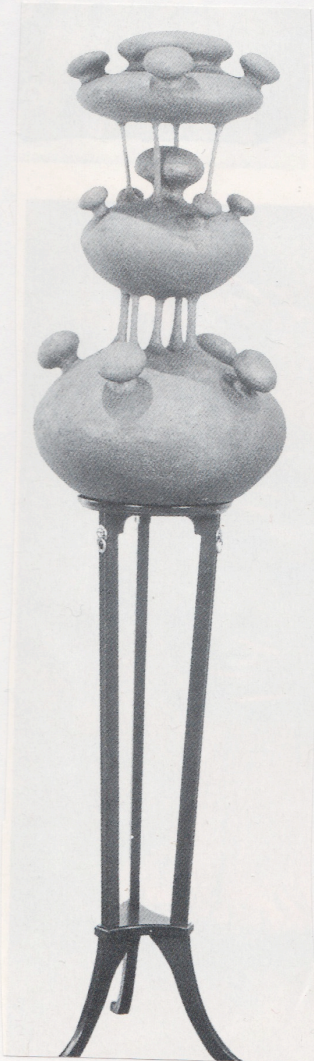
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St. Louis Art Museum

The target of Charles Long's wacky sense of humor is American art and its postmodern reincarnations. The works in the exhibition are takeoffs on art's relation to its base, pedestal, or ground, and, in addition, are inversions of movements including Abstract Expressionism, retro, funk, punk, Pop, Op, new age, and more. It is nothing short of amazing that 13 works can cover so much territory, even including a music loop from Stereolab to complete *We Love You Big Dummy* (1995), a rubberized old Victrola form on a stereo cabinet. The smooth, redundant, synthesized Muzak, interrupted by bubbly sounds and an occasional recognizable syllable, is as non-functional as the lovable Victrola.

M.N.O. (1997), a title whose meaning is hidden, is a triple-tiered, shining, bulbous object with doorknob-shaped protrusions. The form rises with the effervescence of a yeasty dough, and its matte texture has an inviting bronzy glow. This other-worldly construction of Styrofoam, coffee grounds, and acrylic is as whimsical and out-of-date as a '60s sci-fi B-movie. It sits on an imitation antique three-legged plant stand, decorated with metal lion head medallions and lion paws. This fake pedestal with its Bombay Company label still attached is a study in falsity; its derivative design seems to encapsulate the history of Western art from ancient Egypt to the British Empire. Even though the name, the incongruous time-warped forms, and the odd combinations of cheap materials do not seem to make sense, they add up to a merry caricature about art on its pedestal.

The forms in the show were created between 1992 and 1998, and many have been exhibited previously. Together, they point out a range of accepted attitudes about art in relation to its ground. In addition to the plant stand pedestal and the stereo cabinet base, one work leans over a minimal frame, one sits on four crossed chair legs, three are on curving spider-like legs, one is on a looping wire, and several works sit on the ground on rounded or flat bottoms. The artist seems to accept many possible ways of placing the work onto its site.



Color or its absence is another convention that this show addresses. Three forms, *Hello, Fancy*, and *Maker, Maker*, colored in solid red, yellow, and blue hues, enliven one corner of the gallery. Shaped like huge spider legs wearing pith helmets, their bright colors contrast with the more conventional black, bronze, and off-white tones of other works.

Preciousness is also highlighted: *Blowup*, a bronzed popcorn kernel on a curving wire; *Untitled (Special)*, a bronzed typewriter ball on a big black base with a narrow neck; and *Abe Lincoln*, a giant teardrop holding a single hair—each elevates reverence to absurd levels.

For me, the strongest work in this show was *Miranda*, an

expressive, gouged abstract form whose shape was so ambiguous that it could have been a bouquet or a lion. This chunky white bronze abstraction leaning over the edge of its glass-topped, minimal, rectangular steel base, like other forms in the exhibition, sets up a contrast between its biomorphic and geometric properties. Long manages to be a pliant jokester. He successfully juggles multiple sculptural conventions: metals that are precious or industrial, material that is transparent or opaque, forms that are light or heavy. —Jan Garden Castro

Left: Charles Long, *M.N.O.*, 1997. Coffee grounds, acrylic, wood, and Styrofoam, 73.5 x 19 x 19 in. Above: *Maker, Maker*, 1993. Pigmented paper pulp over steel, 65 x 36 x 28 in.