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Carter

“I see a therapist every week, and a while ago I started bringing one of the sculptures with me to therapy”

Interview: Morgan Falconer

CARTER, who works in a studio amidst a warehouse warren of concrete corridors in New York's Long Island City, has come to prominence recently with a varied yet cohesive range of work that suggests Oliver Sacks-like themes of real versus fictional identities, both mental and corporeal. His quasi-figurative landscapes, combining pen and ink with collaged elements, are dominated by rock-like human heads. His videos and Polaroids feature mannequins and prosthetic limbs appearing to do the work of the artist – drawing and arranging papers. And his glossy sculpted busts, enlivened with little moustaches and spare coverings of hair, bear teasingly autobiographical titles such as 1949, Self Portrait as a Homosexual, 1965, 1970. Carter's unsettling simulacra and confabulations seem forever to be offering up a portrait of the artist – and forever withholding it, too.

Go on, tell us your name. I don't think it's necessary. Carter is my last name, it's what people have always called me. But it's become an interesting issue. People wonder who I am, whether I'm a man or a woman, how old I am. Recently, I produced a card for a show in New York that contained a photo of the back of my sister's head – some people thought it was me. I thought that was really great. My sister is obviously a woman, so by looking at that image on the card I guess people either thought that I was a drag queen or a middle-aged woman with long hair. If you have a sibling, they are basically half of what you are, so it's kind of interesting. I don't mind that there may be some mystery as to who the artist is that created the work.

Why did you start using prostheses in some of your

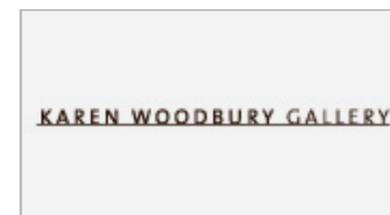
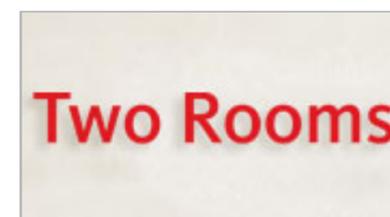
photographs and videos? It just started one day when I needed to photograph someone doing something in my studio, and I wasn't able to use myself, but I needed a model or an actor. Occasionally, if I'm doing mundane things in the studio – drawing or cleaning brushes or answering the phone, shuffling papers – I'll use this life-sized dummy to re-enact the activity and photograph it. It's like a fantasy of having two of me to do more work, to have twice the life.

Is your work autobiographical? It was never my intention for it to become autobiographical. I can't blame people for thinking that it is – maybe the work is more about self-portraiture than I'm willing to admit. The work is intended to be about everyone's treatment of their own biography, be that through drawing themselves, or just presenting themselves to other people.

Is that human hair in the paintings? No, I don't use real hair because that would make the work too corporeal, as opposed to being a representation of the corporeal. It's like the difference between, say, a model in the Museum of Natural History, where real hair and bone and skin might be used, and a Charles Ray sculpture, or a Duane Hanson sculpture. They



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operate in different spheres, but both represent the figure. Anyway, everything in an artist's studio is unreal, or false, so the hair doesn't need to be real. I also use glass eyes in the sculpted heads. I buy them on eBay. They're antique – hand made from blown glass. They were originally made as medical prostheses for the eye. They're very expensive, people really fight over them.

The heads in the paintings seem hard, rock-like. Is that intentional? Do you mean they look like rocks? Often there is a hint of landscape in the paintings. Sometimes it's abstract and barely noticeable but I like that, where the figure and the landscape compete for prominence.

Do you see yourself primarily as a painter? No, I see the paintings as more sculptural and performance oriented – they just happen to be on canvas. Some people have described them as collages, though I don't feel a need to categorise them one way or the other. What the imagery is doing is the point – how you get there isn't important. That said, it's true that many of the thick brushstrokes in the pictures are cut out and then applied to the canvas, as opposed to actually being directly painted on – having that step in between is thrilling to me. In part, they refer to Lichtenstein's brush-stroke pictures, but more generally I'm interested in that whole period in art history when abstract painting was being attacked. Those Lichtenstein works for me are so interesting because they really took painting, and stopped it in its tracks... right down to the physicality of the brushstroke itself. It made a mockery of abstract painting, but also celebrated it.

How do you make the sculpted heads? They're made out of plastic, papier-mâché, plaster – then they're painted several times. I add the artificial hair and glass eyes and then an epoxy resin is put over the top. Some of the newer busts have a hidden, conceptual element to them.

I see a therapist every week, and a while ago I started bringing one of the sculptures with me to therapy. It's my idea that all the conversations I have with the therapist will be "put upon" the sculpture, making the head more real, or at least somehow affected by the "therapeutic" surroundings.

Is it true you're working on a performance with an American actor? Yes, I'm working on a project with James Franco. He's a great actor – he's currently acting opposite Sean Penn in Gus Van Sant's film about Harvey Milk. My project includes film and sculpture and part of it is based on Robert Gober's leg sculptures. I'm going to take a mould of Franco's leg and recreate it: in that way I'll recreate those Gober sculptures at the same time. It's just furthering the idea of portraiture as well as performance... portraying a talented actor "acting" as an inanimate, iconic, modern sculpture. I'm still working on it and I couldn't be more excited about the whole thing. Some days I think it's a crappy idea, full of holes, but most days I think it's the best thing ever. We'll see.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be? It would either be Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning Drawing [1953] or a Gober leg. And I love Thomas Friedman's 1000 Hours of Staring [1992–97] – it's a blank piece of paper that he supposedly stared at for a thousand hours. Or any David Hockney.'

Exhibition: *Yvon Lambert, Paris, October 2008*

CV

Born: 1970, Norwich, US **Studied:** Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, US; University of California, Davis, US **Lives and works:** New York **Represented:** Salon 94, New York; Hotel, London; Yvon Lambert, Paris; Georg Kargl, Vienna **Artist's website:** www.carteroffice.com

