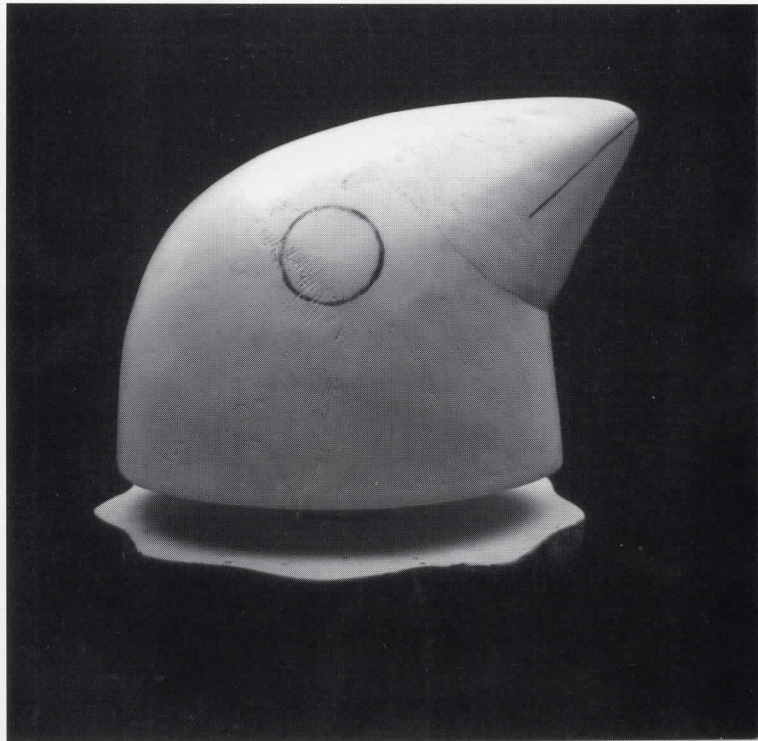


CHRIS POWELL

animalia



HAGGERTY GALLERY UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

April 20 - May 23, 2001

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Animal: 1. any living organism except a plant or bacterium . . . 2. any such organism other than a human being, esp. a mammal or, sometimes, any four-footed creature.

Animal husbandry: the care and raising of domesticated animals, such as cattle, horses, sheep, etc.

Animalcule: a very small animal . . .

Bull: [. . . base . . . to swell up] 1. the adult male of any bovine animal, as the ox, buffalo, etc.

Organic: 2. of or involving the basic makeup of a thing; inherent; inborn; constitutional

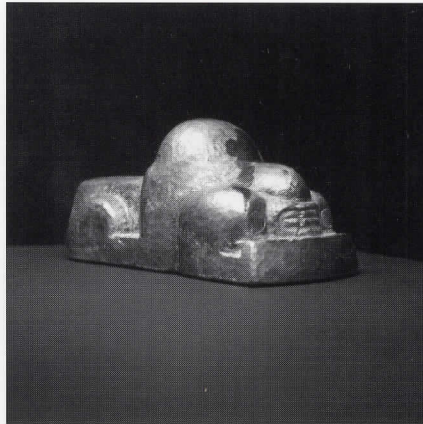
—*Webster's New World Dictionary*
(1972)

Animalia: living creatures, the process of emerging, coming into being, corporeal, material

We cannot escape their physical presence. No matter how large or small, they invade our space – or perhaps we invade theirs. A sweet mammoth *Bull*, with his heavy lidded eyes and down-turned ears, stares benignly at us. His dewlap urges him ahead like the prow of a ship cutting through the water with ease and grace. He strains his

massive bulk forward on his powerful, and yet delicately tapered front legs while his rear legs, with their downward thrust, act as a restraining anchor. He cannot fully contain the energy of his curving flesh: his tail whisks outward.

They may seem to look down upon us. A *Crane*, with its long neck, proudly surveys its surroundings. Its elegant lines are defined by the colored patterns of its wooden skeleton. Plaster acts like muscle and skin, filling out the form, while



never betraying the original skeletal armature. While registering as a crane, the form also reads as a cross-section of a wall. But this is a wall that has taken a turn; it has forsaken its verticality for a thrust forward into space. The domestic space has become animated.

They may nip at our heels. *Buster*, atop his stoneware mound, insists upon our attention, calling us down to his level. He seems to emerge from his round hillock, as though he has pulled the energy

evoked by his upturned nose and tail from the earth itself. *Buster* reminds us that smallness of scale should not deter us from recognizing the ability of such objects to command space and announce their presence. One cannot ignore *Pickup* as it squats over its territory, refusing to budge.

By refusing to employ traditional pedestals, Chris has ensured that his sculptures activate the space around them. *Lamb on a Stick* is resolutely directional, pulling the viewer along the shaft to the lamb's head. *Bird* forthrightly makes the work about the relationship of object to its larger context as the bird, astonishingly large in scale, is forced into dialogue with its surrounding space.

In addressing the problem of how to represent nature in ways that are both true to life and true to the nature of sculpture, Chris Powell's work draws upon many traditions. His work embodies the notion of sculpture as constructed form devolving from relationships established through mathematical principles. *Turtle Table (hillside)*, for example, is the outgrowth of a previous body of work about tables and chairs. Its origins in such constructed objects can be traced out in the wooden armature. This internal form, acting as a kind of grid, suggests mathematical geometry, which often lies at the heart of Chris's work. But this sense of strict precision, and of an abstract detachment from the

organic world, is offset by the plaster that wraps the wooden matrix. A pasty mixture of calcined gypsum and water, the plaster unites with the wood, calling up such images as rocky hillsides cloaked with sod. The surface of the plaster is unified by even polishing so that the resulting work is reminiscent of a stone rolled and washed endlessly in a river bottom. The title of the work insists upon both a constructed – *Table* – and an organic reading – *Turtle (Hillside)*. This sculpture represents, and even stands in for, animate being as well as principles of construction.

There is a sense of opposites at play in Chris's work. (And the notion of play is deliberately referred to here.) Forms evocative of fleshy softness are set against hard metal, as in *Cart and Bull*. In this work, form is also both defined and camouflaged as the linear checkerboard pattern distracts one's eye from the curves of the bull.

While the problem of uniting abstract mathematics with organic form may seem to root Chris Powell's work in exclusively modernist concerns, his work is also suggestive of pre-Classical sculpture. The large staring eyes, picked out in graphite, of works such as *Bird* evoke objects of ancient Turkey. Small lead objects, as in *Beasts*, or the small sheep's head mounted on a plinth in *Wee Kine* connote totemic objects, such as those that might be held in one's hand for good luck or deployed by shamans in mystical ceremonies.

While the exhibition setting affords us the opportunity to identify themes and issues, we must remember that this is a luxury of hindsight. When working, Chris is engaged in the process itself, with all its potential for discoveries, accidents, and detours. A case in point is the vertical *Turtle*. It began as a pedestal-like form and then the artist added a large rounded lump. He then turned the piece over and began to develop it so that the lump could become a turtle's nose poking



out of its shell. The plaster is built up over the wooden frame, a metaphor for the organic process of development. The notion of process is even revealed in the surface of the work. The nose-like shape is polished, in contrast with the scarred surface below it. These differing qualities of surface both register the process of work; one by effacing its presence, the other by leaving its traces in tool-prints.

The work never hides its constructed nature rather it reveals

it slowly and upon close observation. Sometimes it may only be detectable in rusty splotches — traces of steel armature that have worked themselves upwards — that animate the surface of some pieces, such as *Bull*. Sometimes the use of found objects is openly declared, as in *Bird*, where the sleek plaster head emerges from a metal culvert. The stoneware pieces, such as *Orville* and *Lilian*, are draped in multiple layers of liquid skeins of color. In glazing these pieces, Chris entertains serendipity. The notion of discovery that guides Chris' work is always tempered by his over-riding concern with honesty to materials. An ideal sculpture, according to the artist, is one in which material, form, and idea come together in a way that suggests a seamless unity and makes the whole greater than any of its parts.

The open-ended nature of Chris Powell's work carries over from production to reception. The artist is interested in how other people might impact his work; artist Terri Thornton, for example, coined the title of the exhibition. He invites us to look upon and interact with his work and propose our own readings, which he can confirm or deny. Meaning, like form, is an organic entity that is always in a state of coming into being.

— Anne Helmreich



HAGGERTY GALLERY UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

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Gallery Hours:
10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. Monday-Friday
12:00 noon-5:00 p.m. Saturday-Sunday

RECEPTION FRIDAY, APRIL 20, 2001, 7:00-9:00 p.m.