

## **Berlin, Berlin: dualities of a city through glass**

Densely layered, the works of sculptor Jehoshua Rozenman are at once both brutal and beautiful. Through the astute use of glass not only as material but also as metaphor, he creates a multifaceted dialectic between observer and object that manages to evoke ephemeral feelings of optimism amid sentiments of anguish.

Through the methodical employment of glass, Rozenman's work brings sculpting in a new direction. Initially, the pieces seem to bear tendencies of Neo-Expressionism in that they are figurative, yet remain abstract with forms only taking shape by referencing cultural commonalities. Certainly personal, there remains a perfunctory air about the work, a sort of detachment that stops short of apathetic and instead encourages the viewer to investigate the combination of perplexing aesthetic and emotional curiosities.

Surely his oeuvre, and especially *Berlin, Berlin*, breaks with conventional art practice. Precedents, both in terms of process and result, are few and comparisons to artistic eras, movements or individuals are often only applicable when extended or stretched. Discovering glass almost by chance, his work is a refreshing mix that oscillates between the propensity for subjectivity found in Expressionism and the controlled chaos increasingly seen in Postmodernist strands of Deconstructivism.

### **Duplicity in material and process**

Viewed from a distance, Rozenman's sculptures are easily mistaken for something they're not. The colour, form, finish, protuberances and apparent strength lead to the illusory conclusion that the medium is metallic. Looking closer, detail gives way to the truth; areas of translucence refract light, cross sections show interior polish and the gleam is not that of metal, but rather that of glass. This moment of recognition also signals the beginning of a process of negotiation as the viewer must reconcile the discord between characteristics and material: instead of strong, the work is fragile; instead of permanent, transient; instead of harsh, empathetic.

This disjunction in perception is the result of a new take on a familiar substance. In a departure from the more traditional modus operandi of blowing, Rozenman has instead adapted the lost-wax casting method to glass. Carefully constructed, Styrofoam models are recreated in wax and sprued with additional appendages to allow for the release of air during the melting, draining and subsequent refilling.

It is in these initial steps that intuition founded on years of trial and error becomes evident. Unlike the more familiar bronze, silver or brass, molten glass flows, fills and reacts differently in the moulds. Along with variations in temperature, the technique demands that the artist develop an alternative, more assiduous design process to ensure the sculpture's final form is as envisioned.

This also means the characteristic fragility comes with a caveat: once the molten glass is poured, there is but a single chance to remove the artwork intact. As if extracting a fossil from limestone, the cooled plaster is chipped, shaved and chiselled away with tremendous poise. Only through the destruction of this shell is the sculpture freed.

Add to this already complex practice the variations in colour and inclusion of translucence. Displaying an increasing mastery over the material, the different shades of glass must be broken, arranged and meticulously poured into designated chambers to avoid unwanted mixing. The translucence further distinguishes the work: its interspersion and reaction to light offers an additional visual dimension that thwarts conventional processes of how sculpture is perceived.

The results of this creative process are shapes dissociated and seemingly contradictory to glass: sharp squared edges, isolated curvature and a labyrinthine mix of recesses, layers, cavities and delicate masts. The elaborate technique used to create the piece is hidden in a faux simplicity that occludes the viewer from immediately recognizing the true medium. This duplicity is representative of how the works of Rozenman provoke the contemplation of wider themes through a destabilizing play of visual characteristics that juxtapose appearance with conventional (cognitive) associations.

### **Forms, failures and dualities**

Take, for example, the intelligibility of the works. Determining what a given sculpture *is* based on appearance is akin to a three-dimensional Rorschach test. Depending on who is asked, a myriad of objects could be applicable. The subjective openness of the pieces only adds to their allure. Inspired by quotidian elements found in contemporary cityscapes, the forms shrewdly play to psychological familiarities of promulgated historical narratives and events found in collective memories, thereby encouraging the identification or association of certain structures capable of stirring emotional responses.

Acting as microcosmic models, the forms and colours recall residual objects of post-industrial societies that remain after production is abandoned. Tightly packed ovals

with obtruding, jagged edges allude to piping essential to manufacturing; vertical steps lead to a pavilion that hints to a redundant building; the mangled interior of a dome atop skeletal supports insinuates a shell of what once was.

Seen from one angle, depressive feelings of failed architectures, societies and ruins overwhelm. Combined with the darkness of many of the objects, the harsh forms can induce a melancholy for traumas that stem not only from large-scale events, but also from the awareness that carcasses of the built environment are proxies for livelihoods, ideologies, expectations and efforts that go into such constructions. The proximity of the object, in combination with the delicate material, suggests the inveterate fragility of the human condition.

Walk further, step back or view the pieces in an alternate light and suddenly the shapes seem to shift and, with them, their implications. Reframed, the ruined pavilion morphs into an outdoor stage, the steel dome into a futuristic model, the shell of a gear into a decorative casing. What formerly begot melancholy suddenly harkens to new beginnings. The meditative process that such a sculpture provokes encourages internal reflection. Although the initial reaction may radiate negativity, the longer the object is considered, the clearer the scope for potential becomes. Just as in society itself, the human ability to counter (potential) traumas with perseverance is manifest in the mental transference from an ethereal angst to a place of optimism, an achievement of cognitive reframing.

### **Sculpture and emotional transference**

These induced emotional transferences are a testament to the strength of the work. The prudent unintelligibility of the forms, as they can never fully be identified, encourages the viewer to imagine, to labour for interpretation. Playing shrewdly with cultural commonalities and blurred referencing, there is a beauty that emerges from the context of aesthetic brutality.

By juxtaposing beautiful and brutal, one of the more difficult aspects of the human condition is examined: our temporality. Creating a complex relationship between façade, perception and truth by using glass, viewers are confronted with a mix of emotions. Left to contemplate how even the sturdiest of appearances can actually be incredibly delicate (and therefore susceptible to destruction) metaphorical connections are made to the individual (sickness, death) and society (war, disillusionments).

However, drawing on a moment of strength, the viewer is encouraged to seek hope, a potential for finding a light within that dark space. As glass allows light to penetrate,

this abstract optimism physically manifests in the pieces. Ever so subtly, the viewer is brought back from a point of melancholy to a negotiated comfort felt after dismay. The vulnerability of the material also demands consideration as fragility works on two fronts; even what may appear to be the sturdiest of structures, institutions, ideologies or conceptions is capable of being broken down, changed, rebuilt or reappropriated.

Expanded to a societal scale, feelings associated with discourses of utopias and dystopias surface. While the idea of one is born, the other fails. Cyclical, utopian models for ideal societies are predicated on perfection, where everything functions as it should. Yet, never far behind are the conflicts and disillusionments that cause collapse; the scenario where the failure of society is such that it fundamentally alters the quality or nature of existence.

The sculptures of Rozenman reflect a frozen moment in the utopia-dystopia relationship. With an ink black colour, harsh edges and what looks like a damaged site, an impending dystopian scene looms. Yet, in a case of art reflecting reality, it remains unclear precisely what point in the utopia-dystopia relationship is portrayed. It could very well be the beginning of a sanguine reconstruction or adaptation process; the move away from dystopia towards the ideals of some other notion of utopia. It is this representation of the symbiotic nature of the relationship between nihilistic scepticism and an innate perseverance for progress which makes the sculptures so effective: they highlight the human capacity to find hope amid despair.

### **An ode to the city**

Abating the degree of abstraction is the title of the exhibition, *Berlin, Berlin*. Straightforward and succinct, the solemn repetition recalls the duality, or rather dualities, found throughout the work. Just as the city itself, the title can be read and re-read with alternate stresses conjuring different understandings. A wistful emphasis on the second "Berlin" and the sadness of a landscape subject to the scars of persistent failings comes to mind. Change tones and the utterance of the second is an affirmation of the city's unmatched will to try again, a drive to excel and refusal to be forgotten.

The simple act of naming provides the source for inspiration. No other city represents the historical developments of Western society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century better than Berlin. The series of ideologies, wars, economic systems and sociological philosophies have all, for better or worse, left a physical mark on the city.

What Rozenman accomplishes in his sculpting is the difficult task of reflecting these scars as they are: polarizing, layered and conflicted. Unpacking the works of

Rozenman is to analyse the city itself. Just as it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what a given sculpture represents, so too is it difficult to identify the buildings, structures and objects in contemporary Berlin: war time bunkers are now nightclubs, massive factories are now intimate restaurants, abandoned churches now host contemporary art. Even the most painful of sites have become spaces of negotiation; an acknowledgement of what has been, but with an eye looking to what will be, what can be.

The duplicity in perception qua glass also gives a nod to Berlin. Over the course of a century, the remnants found in the built environment stand to counter narratives of permanence: ideals, ways of life and causes that once seemed so irrefutably stable inevitably gave way to their own delicacy, metaphorically revealing their inner cracks and frailty. Mimicking the spirit of the city, the sculptures of Rozenman are at first sight solid, heavy and immutable, but it quickly becomes apparent that they are in fact delicate, fragile and require care. In both cases, facades of permanence are peeled away to show the transience that plagues humanity.

Yet this temporality only becomes visible when considering the cyclical nature of the city's development. Like the sculptures, Berlin is a city that seems to be perpetually trapped between utopia and dystopia. From the freedoms of the Weimar Republic to the horrors of the Third Reich and the false promises of Communism, Berlin's structures have been destroyed, rebuilt, adapted and transformed according to predominant attitudes. What results is a landscape that holds endless potential for compassion, malevolence and everything in-between. This fluctuating nature is the foundation for the fleeting feelings evoked by the exhibition. The spaces of Berlin exist as an accumulation of not only what was, but also what is to come. The sculptures adopt this shape shifting characteristic, constantly torn between representing elements of what appears to be sombre, but what could also be a new beginning.

What is taken most vividly from Berlin is a marked feeling of negotiated optimism amidst an impending pessimism. The works are methodically designed to confront viewers with a range of emotions that are at first conflicting, but in actuality go hand in hand.

Employing dualities through material, form and themes, the work destabilizes conventions associated with glass, sculpture and methods of perception. Punctuated with nihilistic undertones, the exhibition emphasizes that, just as in the case of Berlin, there is solace to be found in acknowledging that facades are never quite what they seem and although moments of darkness may occur, time and notions of continuance bring with it a source of light capable of assuaging momentary angst.