

Reliefs (Monkeys)

While it would be inaccurate to call Peter Fischli's monkeys self-portraits, they do however involve a degree of autobiography: the sculptures are based on a watercolor the artist made in 1962, at the age of ten. Fischli had already revisited this youthful image in 2016, when he reproduced the monkey as a series of lithographic prints. A couple of years later, he decided to try yet another remake of the watercolor — this time as a three-dimensional object.

Fischli first rendered the monkey as a relief in clay. From this positive form, a silicone mold was then produced. And by pouring liquid construction foam into the mold, where it fixed and hardened, a one-to-one copy of the clay model was created. The resulting monkey was now a dry, yellowish and lightweight object that could be further manipulated by adding and finished with sand paper and knives. A material consisting mostly of air and holes, polyurethane foam is normally used for insulating homes. It is the ideal substance for filling difficult gaps within existing structures and materials. A chemical reaction causes the foam to expand into free space — in this case, monkey-shaped voids. Fischli had to physically trap the expanding foam inside his molds using weighted-down sheets of plywood. Twelve different molds were made to cast a total of twenty-six reliefs.

There is something modest and a bit hesitant in the way the monkeys now step into the third dimension. The reliefs inhabit a sort of threshold between the flatness of the watercolor and a full commitment to the sculptural realm. Scaled up to a more adult size and cast in this puffy material, the monkeys really are sculptures now, but not totally: they remain oriented in a frontal display, with only a little bit of thickness on the sides and nothing much happening behind.

The representation has a recto but no verso. Recalling the ornamentation on architectural façades or perhaps tombstones, the monkeys seem to be taking one small step from their two-dimensional starting point, as if tip-toeing into the bunker-like vastness of the world.

If the monkeys are not self-portraits, we can at least agree that they have a way of standing in for the artist — or for the absent ten-year-old watercolorist he no longer is. The young Fischli returns here in the same way that the foam copy emerges from its silicone mold, as these works go from positive to negative to positive again. Moving between mediums — from watercolor to lithograph to sculptural relief — the monkeys meanwhile travel across time and space before arriving, finally, in Bregenz. A form made of countless tiny bubbles, the monkey is a sort of sculptural ghost, still carrying the hollowness of the gap it briefly filled while in its liquid state. It also still carries the aggressive formlessness of expanding foam, which had to be captured and compressed inside a mold in order for the monkey to appear.

If it's going too far to qualify foam as aggressive, we can at least say that, in its moment of expansion, foam seems to express an utter and joyful indifference to form. Like shaving cream squirted out of a can in the morning, polyurethane foam is not looking for a shape, it simply wants release... like an exhaled breath or sigh.

After the hardened foam positive was removed from its mold, the resulting relief was further reworked by the artist, who cut, carved, and otherwise altered the object. Sometimes elements were deleted or shifted, sometimes extra bits of foam were added. Repeating and varying the steps of this process, Fischli ended up with twenty-six different monkeys.