

Pygmalion Duane Hanson's "Ugly Americans" at the Whitney

by Glenn Looney

<http://victorian.fortunecity.com/plath/392/curator/lonm0122.htm>

When the controversial sculptor Duane Hanson made his American museum debut in 1978, many visitors to the Whitney Museum were astonished. It was almost impossible to distinguish the Hanson sculptures from the museum personnel—or from other viewers.

Already known in Europe, where he had made some formative experiments, Hanson delighted many with his almost lifelike and certainly life-sized sculptures of Americans from many walks—or slouches—of life. Hanson for *After Dark*, I was permitted to photograph various seated and standing figures. Just as I snapped an immobile statue of a guard, he moved!

Observing an overweight and overdressed couple staring at a similar Duane Hanson pair, I wasn't sure which was which. Until the Hanson couple moved on.

But is it Art?

That was a question often asked then and now, especially by critics. And more especially by those who despise figurative art of any kind.

Had the late Duane Hanson reduced his people to Abstract Amorphous Blobs, he might have become the darling of these tastemakers.

It is instructive that the current show—some twenty years after Hanson's first at the Whitney—has only four venues. Aside from New York, none of them are major museums.

It originated in Fort Lauderdale, appropriately enough, for Hanson spent most of his later career in sunny Florida.

Despite the apparent lack of interest in this Hanson Retrospective in San Francisco and Los Angeles, as well as in other important cities, Hanson in his lifetime had numerous solo shows. And his works are in most major museums.

There are those who think Hanson merely made casts of real people's bodies and then glued the parts together, inserted body-hairs, glass-eyes, and teeth, to make human copies.

Hanson's figures are composites of castings from various people. They are New People. Even if they do come perilously close to stereotypes and generics.

While it is true that the attention to physical detail which Hanson used in creating his people indicates fantastic craftsmanship, he was no latter-day Madame Tussaud.

Although some of the figures' skins do look waxy, this is no waxworks show.



Duane Hanson's *Body Builder*—created from auto-body filler, fiberglass, and mixed media, with accessories.

In fact, Hanson's people look much more real than those to be found in any branch of Tussaud's.

Had Hanson been as infatuated with his creations as was the legendary sculptor Pygmalion, he might have prayed for the gods to breathe life into them. But what kind of Galateas would that have produced?

Hanson's people are not beautiful, *per se*. Certainly some have the dignity of their humanity, like *Seated Artist*. Or their labor, as in *Lunch Break (Three Workers with Scaffold)* .

But Hanson's Humans are often overweight, garishly dressed, and overtaken by lassitude. Some seem merely tired out. Others suggest people who are even tired of living.



Ugly Americans on the Grand Tour—Duane Hanson's visual satire, *Tourists II*, from the Saatchi Collection, London.

Those Hanson fatties armed with cameras and shopping bags look very much like the Ugly American Tourists so derided abroad.

Because the figures' eyes cannot move or focus, there is something strange about their almost vacant expressions.

Are they in despair? Lost in thought? Or merely lost in life?

The initial one-on-one encounter with a Hanson human sculpture can encourage the viewer to marvel at his technique.

But, on stepping back a bit, it becomes apparent that the bodies Hanson has chosen, how he has posed them, how he has dressed them, and what environments he has placed them in do constitute an artist's

comment on the individual human condition. At least in America.

So there is more than at first meets the eye. Hanson is not Pygmalion. He is a social commentator. He can be considered a satirist, but his people are not really caricatures.

There are too many live ones in the Whitney galleries who resemble Hanson's people.



Skin/Deep by Alison Saar—devised from nails, copper, & ceiling-tin—now in the Whitney Museum's permanent collection.

Note: This reading assignment also includes [The Really Big Art of Claes Oldenburg, Smithsonian, August 1995](#)