

SUSAN HAGEN

SOCIAL STUDIES

JUNE 7 - JULY 20, 2013

I have a deep interest in the human condition and in all of the subtle manifestations of its beauty and perversity. Much of my recent work has involved studying the unique attributes of individuals and defining features of a community—and I'm interested in everyone from the most heroic to the most troubling representatives of humanity, including soldiers, adolescents, criminals, the homeless and other misunderstood, under-appreciated or marginalized people.

My sculptures are made primarily of carved wood (burned, bleached or painted), which is combined in some cases with mixed media. I see my work in the context of narrative wood sculpture: medieval European altarpieces, German Expressionist sculpture, Japanese Kamakura sculpture, and American folk art. These visionary wood sculptures inspire me with their truly articulate form and pure expression of pain, joy and other emotions.

Though my techniques are mostly traditional, my desire is to explore human reality and socio-political themes through my experience as a woman in contemporary America.

—Susan Hagen

CURATOR'S ESSAY

SUSAN HAGEN'S SCULPTURE

CITIZENS: ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY

The first time I saw Susan Hagen's sculpture I was reminded of a pair of life-size polychrome Japanese statues I'd seen a couple of years earlier in Nikko, Japan. They represent court dignitaries seated at either side of the stunningly elaborate Yomeimon Gate, rich with gold and vivid spring-like colors.



Each nobleman is a real unique individual in a traditional guise: one old, one young; one breathing in, one breathing out. Even after four centuries on duty, in imperfect repair, and not illusionistic in a Madame Tussauds vein, they are momentarily convincingly alive. Hagen's sculpture has many similar qualities although its accessible scale adds a dimension that links it to popular art forms and permits us to experience the entire figure within a context that we viewers can control.

Like the gate guardians, Hagen's subjects—even those in historic scenes from Eastern State Penitentiary—are accessible in attitude and situation. They are people like ourselves who embody mythic or archetypal themes. One consistent aspect of Hagen's work is the way in which it invites us to see that we, like the carved figures, live out motifs or patterns that are intrinsic to the human experience through history and across cultures.

Bruce, "Citizens (People of Philly)," 2013

Figure from Yomeimon Gate, Toshogu Shrine, Nikko, Japan, ca. 1617–39

Hagen consciously aligns her practice with traditions of carved wood sculpture that flow through many societies and countless generations. It is understandable that wood carving might arise spontaneously in multiple locations. With unsophisticated materials like a sharp rock or another piece of seasoned wood, one can begin to shape wood. Function and decoration are not far away. Indeed the forms of trees, patterns of bark and interior grain are visual pleasures that one might want to enhance.

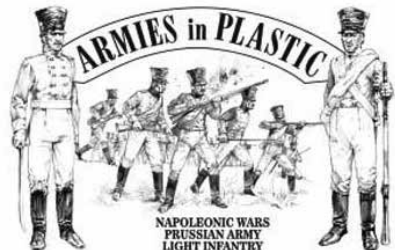
Wood as a source of warmth and shelter is deeply ingrained in human experience. This truth informs the almost universal spiritual significance of trees. Deciduous trees mark the seasonal cycle with striking and unmistakable changes. Their roots in the earth and their branches in the sky, their tall upright forms challenge the horizon and more ground-hugging plants. The verticality of trees seems to echo the stance of the human being, upright, bold, and unusual among animals. Large, ancient trees—some survive today that are thousands of years old—are living beings. They were known to our ancestors and knew them.

Perhaps the first sculpture ever made was wood. It has not survived because wood like flesh decays more readily than tougher stone and bone, but very ancient wood sculptures do remain. Linden, also called lime wood, has long been the choice of sculptors. Its fine grain is ideal for details. Its pale color darkens over time as wood does, but it can be painted, tinted, oiled, waxed and gilded.

THE LOST ARMY, 2004-05

In many places burial rituals for an important person once included living sacrifices to accompany the dead on its journey. Replacing real people with model figures as after-life companions and helpers was undoubtedly a popular decision in many quarters. Examples of tomb figures include vast Chinese armies of terracotta warriors and similar Egyptian wooden troops.

Toy Soldiers: Napoleonic Wars Prussian Army Militia, Armies in Plastic:
Napoleonic Wars Vol Infantry 20 1 32,
Model number: AIN549, Sears.



Hagen's *The Lost Army* was a response to the dispatch of US troops to Iraq. Respect for individual combatants is reflected in her research and accurate reproduction of combat gear. These details specify a historical conflict and link the soldiers to all the armies—so many armies—of the past. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy described a young inexperienced soldier's difficulty in attacking a man when he sees an enemy face so much like his own, fearful and unsure about killing. Military uniforms intentionally suppress personalities transforming individuals into ciphers of war, subsumed by a mortal situation not of their devising.

The Lost Army originally consisted of seventeen figures, each vaguely G.I. Joe height. Like toy or tomb soldiers they can be placed in different configurations. The men and one woman stand and move under the weight of government-issued paraphernalia. Black wood surfaces are literally charred, as the psyche perhaps of a combat veteran. Each one tells of a soldier as a placeholder that in the aggregate group is a pin on a map to be moved toward life or toward death by someone who will likely never look into their collective faces. However Hagen's record of small gestures and her iconographic specificity tell us that these are individuals in a place and time. She helps us to know them. Although the details and postures are authentic it is the psychological as well as physical isolation of the soldiers that affects the viewer.



Eight soldiers from "The Lost Army," 2004-05

Soldiers detail, Mesehti tomb, 11th dynasty, Asyut, Egypt, 2025 B.C.-1700 BC.

RECOLLECTION TABLEAUX, 2006-07

In contrast to the blackened, fire tested soldiers, the wood in the Eastern State Penitentiary project is bleached ghostly white. The ten miniature dioramas represent specific moments in the history of the penitentiary. The all-white monochromatic settings include mixed-media props and furniture, multiple figures as well as plants and other items of decor. Hagen originally made the tableaux to be displayed under spotlights inside unlighted, abandoned prison cells at Eastern State, now a historic landmark and art exhibition site. Operated 1829-1971, it was the first "modern" prison. Its plan of radiating cell blocks was the architectural basis of 300 prisons all over the world. Hagen based these vignettes on archival material in the prison, including photographs, written accounts, and interviews.

The people represented are mentioned, perhaps not by name, in archival documents at the prison. Some are based on contemporaneous photographs. Some were posed by living people. Like the soldiers, many people at ESP did not choose their location. In spite of a criminal and prisoner status, their kinship and interaction with prison employees and relatives of employees who made the prison home is documented and interested Hagen. In some works she explores known instances of camaraderie in the form of social activities or the expression of a shared response to an event.

The accurate representation of the daily, yearly round of toil for prisoners and staff links these scenes to the naturalism in Gothic art, like the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* or the realistic sculpture of Tilman Riemenschneider (ca. 1460-1531). Medieval artists were increasingly interested in the way the quotidian can be understood as sacred. The discipline and dedication of a person of any station: knight, baker, fisherman, tradesman or even sculptor is meaningful. The repeated cyclic patterns of a craft resonate with the cycles of the natural world.

The bizarre-made-mundane is also evident at ESP, as in the image of the hooded man at the front of a cell. In the early years, prisoners were moved around the prison with their faces covered so others could not know their identities. This was intended as a kindness protecting the individual from being stigmatized as a criminal.



TEENAGER PROJECT, 2006–12

Nothing could be more everyday and matter-of-fact than portraits of young people made over a period of six years for the “Teenager Project.” Some of the models were friends of Hagen’s son Henry, a teenager at the time. Each piece is based on interviews and photographs. Clothes, stance and gesture were self-selected by people at an age in which defining one’s identity is a primary concern.

From a couple of standpoints this project was risky. Of all age groups in North America, teenagers are regarded as the most problematic. With no intention of editorializing, Hagen’s representation of their attributes might appear negative or opinionated to some.

A contrasting potential pitfall is sentimentality or nostalgia. Is it possible to document one’s own child’s milieu without becoming overly precious about the fleeting moments of youth and, Norman-Rockwell-like, casting a rosy haze over the transition from child to adult? Hagen deftly steers a course between these dangers of representation by allowing a fabric of truthful details to speak for the individual.

Construction Workers, “Recollection Tableaux,” 2006–07

Marcie qui fut de Varron (detail of manuscript), Jaia of Cyzicus combing her hair with mirror and sculptor’s tools, *De claris mulieribus*, France, early 15th century.

CITIZENS (PEOPLE OF PHILLY), 2012–PRESENT

In her current project, the emphasis on surfaces and their ambiguity continues to be an asset. Hagen struggled to find an apt title that would embrace the several groups she plans to record. She finally settled on “Citizens” as a term that would locate the project, which will include skateboarders and utility workers, dog walkers and more, in this society and share dignity and power equally among the participants. The truth of each component as it records an individual and a particular time is essential to Hagen’s satisfaction with the work. She says: “My intention is for viewers to take with them a deeper understanding of this moment in the life of our city as well as a more compassionate appreciation of human diversity.”

The painted panels depicting Adam and Eve in Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece* are sometimes described as the first modern portraits because they do not idealize, sentimentalize or glorify the mythic parents of our species. In the contemporary period, portraiture by artists as dissimilar as Alice Neel and Duane Hansen has confirmed for Hagen the validity of many approaches to accuracy. In this series she will enhance the sense of the present moment by including objects like newspaper boxes as social documents.

For the first group of figures in the series (a few are in this show), she turned to Project Home and Our Brother’s Place to help her connect with with people currently affected by homelessness and those in transition.

Clothing choices that communicate membership in a particular group are called tie signs. Military uniforms such as those worn by *The Lost Army* are tie signs. Tie symbols, in contrast, are less formal, more fluid. They unite people who share an attitude, orientation, or opinion; however, they do not indicate that people share core allegiance to a group. The similar fashions worn by *Olivia*, a Teenager, and *September*, a Citizen, sculptures that Hagen has described as “Barbie doll size,” are examples of tie symbols. We recognize that Olivia and September could be people we see everyday. Each is posing for a photograph and their similar understanding of appropriate behavior is reflected in their casual postures with weight balanced between left and right foot. Olivia seems a bit self-conscious with a tentative smile. Her shoulders are relaxed but she protectively holds her arms close to her body. September, a 2011 Occupy protester outside City Hall, expresses her

consciousness of being looked at by adopting a slightly jaunty air with a hand on her hip, like the similarly clad fashion doll, Barbie. Barbie, the perennial clothes horse, is, of course, camera ready band-box perfection while Olivia's and September's clothing is old and rumpled.



Olivia has chosen tie symbols that unite her with the deliberately understated fashions of her relatively affluent peers. Her bare feet indicate that she is in a comfortable, safe place. September will spend a lot of her day outdoors. She does not have the luxury of bare feet; however, she looks as put-together as possible and her outfit unites her with other urban women. Her earth-toned color palette is tasteful. She wears a warm on trend Tibetan wool cap with ear flaps and tassels. On the other hand, she is smoking, perhaps a rebellious or defiant choice, certainly something most women today would avoid when being photographed.

Olivia, "Teenager Project," 2001-12

Barbie outfit sold in 2011 by Debbie of Raleigh, NC on Etsy

September, "Citizens (People of Philly)," 2012

The tension between the familiar exterior and unknown interior life of these women is provocative, often encountered and often overlooked. How easy it is to assume we know how everyday faces really feel or what subtleties can be found in the thoughts of those whose lifestyles we think we can label.

The relationship of Hagen's sculpture to figurative Gothic sculpture and other medieval art is one key to her work. An ordinary uneventful workday was recognized as cause for gratitude in that age of war, disease and enormous contrasts in personal autonomy and power, poverty and wealth. Like the Gothic artist Hagen believes in the value of the individual, that as a part of the whole each one merits nonjudgmental understanding and recognition. Although the four projects in the "Social Studies" suite are historically anchored, each individual work exists in a moment in time in which it is timeless. This exploration of what some would call the soul could take a dark turn but Hagen moves forward unflinchingly.

—Robin Rice

Exhibition Curator of *Susan Hagen: Social Studies*

May 18, 2013, Philadelphia, PA

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