

# JOHN DeANDREA

December 7, 1996 - March 16, 1997

## GALATEA AND COMPANY

BY JANE FUDGE

*Good form does not show. A statue representing a woman is a woman, not the shape of a woman—this holds true for a Roman Venus or a Gothic Madonna, and also for an African wood carving or the reclining figures of Henry Moore. And, in fact, even the woman... disappears in order to leave only the pure visible embodiment of meaning or character. If, instead of meaning and character, you see a human body in the flesh, or if, instead of the human body, you see formal relations, something is wrong with the figure.*

*Rudolf Arnheim, Toward a Psychology of Art*

"I always believed in the real thing," sculptor John DeAndrea says of his ultra-lifelike work. "If I could make it breathe I'd say, 'I've done a good day's work now.'" For more than twenty years, John DeAndrea's sculpture has extended realism, his inheritance from ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy, to its extreme. His figures remain the last word in illusionism, enduring chilly gallery settings with serenity.

Yet the artist's own myth is Promethean. His is the legend of the creator who challenges the gods themselves to favor or condemn his intentions. Dedalus makes a statue of a hero so lifelike that Hercules takes it for a rival and knocks it down. Aphrodite breathes life into Pygmalion's ivory Galatea. There are Dr. Frankenstein's furtive experiments and Coppélius's wonderful doll.

DeAndrea's astonishingly realistic figures are cast from life and rendered in minute detail. Hair is set into plastic scalps, brows, and pubes a few strands at a time. The oil polychrome "skins" reveal moles, tiny veins, and scars. For draped works, garments are taken apart and reassembled on the fully painted bodies. In the nudes, pressure marks on the flesh made by clothing are preserved by the casting material.

These amazing simulacra are among the most enduring legacies of Photorealism, and they have gained John DeAndrea an international reputation. Usually the viewer's first reaction to DeAndrea's work is shock at seeing an unclothed person in the decorous space of museum or gallery. If there were nothing beyond this startling evocation of the human *gestalt*, DeAndrea's figures would offer only a superficial, transient, and vaguely erotic sensation. They would be three-dimensional

pinups, but they are not. DeAndrea's work has an abiding fascination that derives from the way it reconciles apparently conflicting esthetic tendencies.

On one hand, much of DeAndrea's work perpetuates the artistic tradition of the idealized nude. *Linda* (1983) and *Joan* (1992) are sisters of the long-legged, high-breasted Aphrodites revered by the Greeks, and the recumbent nymphs and goddesses of Titian and Giorgione. DeAndrea continues this tradition by choosing youthful models who are slim and well muscled. They are individuals whom nature has fashioned close to the Western canon of beauty.

On the other hand, the fact that the sculptures are cast directly from the models' bodies ensures that every birthmark and wrinkle, every flaw, however small, will be reproduced in plastic and paint. This insistent individualism and deviation from perfection run counter to every notion of an ideal art. Realism is by definition opposed to idealism, yet they harmonize in John DeAndrea's work.

In the most fundamental sense of the term, DeAndrea's art is also Classical. His sculptures are direct descendants of the rouged, gilded, and waxy idols we know (though we scarcely believe) the great stone sculptures of Classical antiquity to have been when new. The artist's sensibility is at the same time peculiarly Mediterranean—another paradox, for this is an anti-Classical tendency—and his figures likewise are related to the illusionistic madonnas and saints of Spain, Italy, and Mexico with their "real" clothes and hair, and crystal tears. However, DeAndrea's figures are wholly secular, with none of the sentimental passion that typifies these religious images.

Indeed, the poignancy of DeAndrea's sculpture derives from its very coolness, its lack of eros. Dressed or naked, the figures make no attempt to engage the viewer. Even those with energetic or agonized poses remain self-contained, introverted. Eyes are downcast or closed—or look into an indefinite middle distance as if *their* world is another dimension in which the visitor has no reality. Even the exquisite *Mother* (1995) gazes at her sleeping child with reserve. It is as if these enigmatic icons meditate on what the flesh—that is, *our flesh*—is heir to.

A Denver native, DeAndrea studied foreign languages and art at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In undergraduate school, he mostly painted. He admired the work of San Francisco Bay Area artists like Nathan Oliveira and sculptor Manuel Neri. Although his practical experience in building and remodeling made him feel more comfortable working in three dimensions, sculpture remained a sideline almost until the end of his undergraduate days.

On finishing his work in Colorado, DeAndrea got an assistantship at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He had already made a few plaster body casts in Boulder and experimented with pouring them up in wax and other unsuitable materials. He learned the use of fiberglass for making positives from a friend who built kayaks in New Mexico. "When I got a piece to come out of the mold," DeAndrea recalls, "it was like an archaeological dig. The figure wasn't the color of a person, but it was *very like* a person—the shape of the limb, the texture of the skin."

As he did not want a college teaching career that graduate school was preparing him for, DeAndrea left Albuquerque with a carload of fiberglass "body parts" and returned to Denver. He first attempted to finish the surfaces of his plastic "people" with automotive paint. When a friend casually suggested that DeAndrea might color his figures in flesh tones, he began coating them with hand-tinted latex. The effect was convincing, but the surfaces were incredibly fragile. He switched to oil paint, which he still uses. The illusion of lifelikeness was soon augmented with natural hair and glass eyes.

Throughout much of his career, John DeAndrea has been represented by Ivan Karp's OK Harris Works of Art in New York City. In the late 1960s, DeAndrea sent Karp photographs of his realistic work and later a couple of pieces. Karp did not immediately realize that the sculptures were cast from life, but he was seeing a widespread, apparently unconnected renaissance in illusionism and *trompe l'oeil* work—shortly to be dubbed Photorealism, or Superrealism, or Sharp-focus Realism, depending on which publication you read.

Karp was already in touch with painter Ralph Goings and DeAndrea's "social superrealist" counterpart, the late Duane Hanson. DeAndrea first mounted a one-artist exhibition at OK Harris in 1970, and since then has shown his work worldwide.

John DeAndrea's pursuit of heightened realism has led him to new materials, including the durable, slightly resilient polyvinyl that replaced fiberglass for his figures. Because it is somewhat more translucent than fiberglass, it lends a fleshy quality to the castings. In the 1980s he turned to bronze, especially for portrait heads and busts, like *Liv* (1983). Next to marble, it is the material most evocative of Classical art.

It is in the busts that DeAndrea's synthesis of realism and idealism is most dramatic. The convention of the truncated head and shoulders derived from Roman portraiture (often funerary in purpose) should be unsettling when combined with life-cast elements or realistic painted details—but DeAndrea's heads and busts preserve the same graceful esthetic distance as the full-length figures.

From time to time, after attaining an extraordinary degree of illusionism, DeAndrea has shifted to the formal rigors of black-and-white painting, doing figures clothed and nude, groups, and even self-portraits in *grisaille*. The tones of black, white, and gray emphasize the abstract qualities of the sculptures and relate them to *two-dimensional* images reproduced in magazines, on television, or in art books.

The restriction of color allows DeAndrea more freedom to explore novel and emotionally charged subjects, like *American Icon* (1991), or to make postmodernist allusions to the icons of art history, as in *Released* (1991). John DeAndrea says of these works, "If I make them black and white no one spends a lot of time peering at the skin because it doesn't look real in the first place. They have to look more at the composition. . . understand that it is a made object."

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Portions of this essay were previously published in *Artspace* magazine.

This exhibition is made possible by the citizens who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District.