HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Reuben Kadish's Enduring Portraits of Human Anguish

Kadish's fossil-like heads, forms, and figures remind us that every civilization, including our own, eventually collapses.

by Tim Keane
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Installation view of *Reuben Kadish: Earth Mothers* at Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

Larger-than-life terracotta heads form an operatic visual finale in Eric Firestone Gallery's exhibition *Reuben Kadish: Earth Mothers*. An amalgam of human beings and some strange subspecies, these crenellated heads, which look as if they were built from jagged scree, radiate a silent nobility. Frozen in semi-repose or grim rumination, or perhaps caught in death throes, they loom like beatific elders from a civilization wiped out by divine ordination, or by some cosmic whim.

In fact, confronting the unimaginably real, and responding to premonitions of cataclysm and its aftermath, inform sculptor Reuben Kadish's art as well as his biography. Born in Chicago in 1913 and raised in Los Angeles, he attended high school with Jackson Pollock, a lifelong friend, and furthered his studies at Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design) in 1930 before apprenticing under Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. Amid the political despair of the mid-1930s, he traveled to Morelia in Mexico and, collaborating with Philip Guston, created a 1,000-foot mural, "The Struggle Against War and Fascism" (1934–35) — a nightmarish epic that rang alarms about global far-right political terror and its concomitant militaristic barbarisms.

But the mural project was only the first act in Kadish's artistic interventions based on humanity's universal inhumanity. During World War II, while in the US Army Artist Unit, he was commissioned to photograph civilian carnage in Burma and India, savageries that he further memorialized in pen-and-ink sketches. These acts of witness presumably gave rise to the artist's poignant, sublimated ethics of paying close, empathic attention to corporeal anguish.

The abundance of artwork in *Earth Mothers*, along with the works' varied scale and psychological tenor, make sculpture seem like Kadish's destiny from day one. But he only committed to it in full after a studio fire in the late 1940s destroyed most of his paintings. The surviving canvases — many done in what came to be known as an Abstract Expressionist mode — are featured here and underscore how, in turning from purely abstract painting to imaginative and figurative sculpture, he found a far more suitable métier for cultivating and refining an existential outlook.

Partly instigated by the archeological fieldwork of his wife, Barbara Weeks, who introduced him to ancient sculptures from far-flung times and epochs, especially from the Kingdom of Benin and the Aztec Empire, Kadish tirelessly produced one sculptural series after another until his death in 1992.

The gallery's main room in this gracefully curated exhibition situates his monotype drawings — cartoon-like portraits of humans and animals writhing in states of privation or torment — above a wall-length shelf that features 75 playful, fabulist figurines, mostly cast in bronze, from the mid-1970s. This juxtaposition between, on the one hand, Kadish's Jean Dubuffet-like pictorial brutalism and, on the other, the lithe metamorphic figurines' comic and theatrical poses, show how his art injects levity even when its subjects are — literally and figuratively — quite heavyweight.

The heaviest of all might be Kadish's frieze-like sculptures. These terracotta totems look like they were excavated from a muddy riverbank, or pulled out from beneath a ruined temple. Evoking the female body, and inspired by the ancient Venus of Willendorf as much as by Hindu statuary, these sacred and profane sculptures integrate eroticism and fertility, along with disruption and dismemberment.

Yet even Kadish's most oppressed creations manage to project a life-affirming charisma. In an untitled bronze double portrait, an avian-and-human duo appear to be leaning into one another in poses of quizzical solace or sudden condolence after some environmental disaster. Still other figures seem poised to act against untold odds. In "Grace I" (1971), a bulky androgynous figure sits cross-legged, exuding a sense of blasé authority and hulking willfulness.

Other small mid-career sculptures, often stylized to poignant effect, are identified as mythic or literary characters that symbolize the human potential for better, and for worse — for instance, the geometric terracotta "Seer" (1966) and the contorted and anguished "Jocasta III" (1967), whose body twists and turns, writhing amid a devastating realization. An abstract spherical figure on a tiny wood and wire platform is titled "Gregor" (1971), a reference to novelist Franz Kafka's traveling salesman-turned-vermin in *The Metamorphosis*, as he lays helpless and horizontal, unable to maneuver his insectile body out of bed.

Reuben Kadish at his studio in 1985 (photo by Regina Cherry)

Kadish's focus on the body's dignity despite — or even in response to — the indignities visited upon it by the universe, and by others, become more fully realized and grander in his later career. Clues about how he arrived at this high-water finale might be found in that late-life biography. In the 1980s, he visited a memorial exhibition about the United States' annihilation of Japanese citizens in the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima. It's likely that this somber cultural event reminded Kadish of his firsthand witnessing of corpses amid war and genocide decades earlier.

The large heads displayed in the gallery's back room all seem both approachable and infinitely unreachable. Their fictive anonymity belies their physical proximity to the visitor and generates dramatic tension. Each features partly closed eyes and pacified countenances that could reflect either exhaustion or the dawning of a new mode of consciousness, a contemplative state of grace available strictly to them. With large mouths and thick lips sometimes pursed or half opened, they also suggest would-be oracles, a status foregrounded by how intricately Kadish has carved and mapped their stony muteness.

Overall *Earth Mothers* reveals how Kadish made good on the much-maligned Modernist ambition to challenge cultural boundaries and shatter historical frameworks while managing a present-focused aesthetic newness, one that may seem old fashioned because of its moral urgency and ritualized mood. Although they appear to have been unearthed from some long-gone religious sect or unknown evolutionary species, Kadish's fossil-like heads, forms, and figures remind us that every civilization, including our own, eventually collapses.

The need for this humanitarian theme may not be obvious, but it is urgent. For the past three decades, as life on earth has become increasingly precarious, Hollywood's global myth-making machine has been entertaining us with profligate lies about intrepid humans prevailing through futuristic wars and global ruin. In contrast to those big-screen triumphalist fantasies, Kadish's work in *Earth Mothers* — following in the creative footsteps of earlier 20th-century stone-cold truth tellers like sculptors Julio González, Alberto Giacometti, Louise Bourgeois, and Germaine Richier — makes bodily catastrophe and suffering incarnate, tactile, intimate. It's an art that also warns us that acting with care for our bodies' common defenselessness remains humanity's long unfulfilled obligation to itself.

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