

**ANDERS KRISÁR:
EMBODIMENT
BY SANDHINI PODDAR**

It is heartening to follow the creative path of an intuitive mind. For Anders Krisár, this pathway initially deviated from the mainstream art world and found its coordinates in the multiple, diverging worlds of graffiti, music composition, advertising, and tournament chess. Largely an autodidact, Krisár decided to become a visual artist only in his late twenties. Despite the near-instantaneous recognition he garnered with galleries in Europe and the United States, his position in this self-enclosed world remains that of an outsider. Krisár's output—primarily in sculpture and photography—may be seen as hermetic or even morbid, playing as it does with casting, molds, and deformation. Yet the artist's skillful and poetic deployment of a deeply felt intuition has, in a short period of time, given rise to a body of work that reveals the physical, experiential, and societal yearnings and limitations of man, making it altogether human.

The artist's studio in Stockholm is an intimate sunlit space with white walls, a central high window, long table, and rows of shelves. It is as sparse as a production area can be. *M* (2008–10) is installed along one of the walls; opposite it lies *The Birth of Us (boy)* (2006–07). Krisár walks me through the painstaking process of transmogrification by which these sculptures come to life. The casting process involves a variety of materials, such as clay, wax, plaster, polyester resin, fiberglass, and oil paint, which each undergo several states of mutation in order to assume lifelike qualities. Once formed, the surfaces of these hand-painted torsos have the luminosity and density of human flesh, made all the more real through countless illusionistic pores. Krisár's relentless perfectionism in the way that these sculptures are made (an attitude he also applies to his film-based, hand-printed photographs) is a necessary means to an end. It is through this quest for perfection that the artist seeks to touch the sublime, where violence and beauty reside. The protective and yet irreversible imprint of adult hands on a child's torso is achieved with immense sensitivity and technical prowess. As in *Bomb Suit* (2006–07), in which a seemingly protective garb has nonetheless been shredded to pieces by an atrocity that may have already occurred inside the body, Krisár's flesh-toned hands and torsos bear the indelible trace of influence, whether necessitated from without or within.

We sit at the long table and the artist opens his black Moleskine diary to show me his haiku-like sketches that often serve as forerunners to finished works. The first sketch for *M* dates to 2003, whereas Krisár only embarked on the production of the sculpture in 2008, after many years of internalizing and processing the implications generated by the idea of the work. Each succinct yet evocative drawing also relates to the next, just as each completed photograph or sculpture relates to the next, like a protracted chess game. It is not without cause that Krisár uses chess as a structuring principle. His continued understanding of this formidable but graceful game has enabled him to deploy it as a space for confrontation in his own life—with the self and with the Other. In our ongoing Sunday afternoon lessons, the artist tutors me on various conceptual strategies and tactical combinations, with the chessboard serving as a metaphor for the psychoanalyst's sofa or the narcissist's looking glass. Apart from slowly mastering the game, Krisár is also currently preoccupied with making sculptures that directly involve chess. This includes a work-in-progress of two casts of his mother's hands. Each downturned, clenched fist holds a chess pawn—one black and one white. The best examples of Krisár's works often involve simple gestures such as these, which develop into poetic ruminations on larger life forces involving chance, fate, or intuition.

Recall the lives and works of John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray, or the Fluxus artists Shigeo Kubota, Yoko Ono, and Nam June Paik. Each of these artists influenced the course of art history in the twentieth century through meandering interconnections among art, chess, and life. Kubota's iconic black-and-white photograph, Marcel Duchamp, Teeny Duchamp and John Cage playing chess (1968) documents *Reunion*, a historic performance/chess game in which Duchamp participated on March 5, 1968, at the Ryerson Theatre in Toronto, and which made use of an electronic board connected to live musicians whose sounds were either activated or cut off depending on each move. Following that came her video sculpture *Duchampiana: Video Chess* (1968–75) a seminal video sculpture and homage to

Duchamp, who had died in 1968. For Krisár, these examples serve as important intellectual markers as well as points of departure for his own series of sculptures and installations utilizing chess.

Krisár's opus also evokes the worlds created by Robert Gober, by way of his themes of domesticity, nature, and eroticism; Kiki Smith, through her ideas on birth and regeneration; Ron Mueck, in his usage of hyperrealism and casting; and Richard Dupont, via his use of technologies involving replicas and body scanning. Yet what defines Krisár's particular worldview is his keen sense of aesthetics, which manages to balance his need to investigate deep-rooted traumas with stringent conceptualism. Looking further back in time for art historical referents and connections, Hans-Peter Feldmann's seventy black-and-white photographs in *All the clothes of a woman* (1973) and suite of one hundred and eight images in *Photographs taken from hotel room windows while traveling* (1975–99) are akin to Krisár's works—tinged with humor as they investigate the systems through which we try and make sense of the world. Venerated in Germany as one of the progenitors of Conceptual art, Feldmann has been making use of repetition, ordering, and appropriation to mine contemporary culture for over four decades. Krisár's sculpture *Sonja* (2007–08) also makes use of accumulation, but toward another end. While Feldmann's woman in *All the clothes of a woman* remains anonymous, serving as a sign for an image archive, Krisár's *Sonja* becomes a cast of a person once living, an embodiment of the life she led. In building her torso through interlacing a large selection of clothes she owned, the artist created a memorial for this woman whom he had never met. The sculpture becomes a stand-in or proxy for *Sonja*'s body, and her personification in absentia. This becoming, however, is limited, since the torso is amputated from the rest of the body—Krisár perhaps reminds us that we can only remember in halves or quarters and that every attempt at recreation or restitution is ultimately incomplete.

As we continue to peruse drawings at the studio, words such as birth, chrysalis, coffin, death, and trauma rise to the surface of my mind. Krisár's practice could perhaps be summed up as a lifelong exploration of the meaning of death, but not without its corollary—life. His series of chromogenic prints from 2006, *Janus*, as well as the iconic portrait *Mist Mother* (2006), involve views of the body in various states of becoming: invisibility and visibility; vapor and flesh. The rubbing out of the body through long camera exposures works symbolically in tandem with erasures of culture, history, and memory, as exemplified in the abandoned domestic settings of these pictures. Krisár photographed the *Janus* series in a doctor's apartment in Stockholm, replete with its peeling paint and empty canvas supports, a testimony to the sixty years the doctor spent there from birth. "You can feel his life in the walls," says Krisár, "just as you feel it in *Sonja*'s clothes."^[1] *Janus*, the Roman god of the past and the future, and therefore of time, stands at the threshold between two rooms, leaving us to decide which way he will go.

The question of restitution, of incompleteness, is central to Italo Calvino's magical realist novella, *Il visconte dimezzato* (*The Cloven Viscount*, 1951), in which Medardo, the Viscount of Terralba, is divided vertically in half by a cannonball on the battlefield. As the story unfolds, readers become aware of the importance Calvino places on an examination of morality, empathy, and what it is to be human. Pamela, a peasant girl, becomes the object of love for both Medardo's halves (personifying good and evil). At one point, the benevolent Medardo says to his beloved: "That's the good thing about being halved. One understands the sorrow of every person and thing in the world at its own incompleteness. I was whole and did not understand, and moved about deaf and unfeeling amid the pain and sorrow all round us, in places where as a whole person one would least think to find it. It's not only me, Pamela, who am a split being, but you and everyone else too."^[2]

The evil Medardo is equally aware of the insight this cleavage provides him, and says to Pamela: "Every meeting between two creatures in this world is a mutual rending. Come with me, for I have knowledge of such pain, and you'll be safer with me than with anyone else; for I do harm as do all, but the difference between me and others is that I have a steady hand."^[3] Calvino thus stresses that the very meeting or conjoining of two beings is the occasion when nature's essential incompleteness or split is laid bare.

Krisár's physically and emotionally exacting polyester resin and fiberglass sculpture *M* is another such embodiment of this existential state—albeit a material one. The young boy (named Johan) who has appeared in several other works by the artist and is the nephew of Krisár's wife Jeanette, tenderly holds hands with his other half, and yet remains fatally and inexorably cloven. This vertical splitting of halves is a violent counterpoint to the vulnerability of the boy's gesture and demeanor. Is this an allegory of the artist's relationship with himself, Johan, or even the artist's mother? The sculpture points toward several possible readings: one indicates Krisár's mother, who is perpetually halved due to her bipolar disorder, another a son endlessly halved in his attempts to reconnect with her. This somber and poignant portrait, with its open-ended iconography, is thematically central to Krisár's practice.

The series of three cast-aluminum sculptures *One as Two* (2003–05) consists of magnetized facemasks of Krisár and his mother as they caress, encircle, or confront one another. The tensile quality of the suspended wire (used in two of the three arrangements), and the way that these sculptures are installed across adjacent gallery walls or suspended from the ceiling above, catalyze a visceral response. The forces of attraction and repulsion are equally at work as the codependence that brings both safety and pain is exposed. The artist refuses to shy away from revealing the underlying ambivalence in this very personal relationship, personified in the strained but compelling magnetism between these two protagonists, and the use of suspension wires heightens the sense of instability, drawing attention to how it is embodied in our own relationships with our bodies, inner states, and familial relationships—each could snap at any moment.

The autobiographical quality of Krisár's practice and his focus on familial concerns connects him to artists working in the same lineage, such as Surrealist and feminist sculptor Louise Bourgeois, whose work Krisár deeply admires. During a visit to her retrospective exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in summer 2008, I found the artist keenly observing several sculptures, which included Bourgeois's *Arch of Hysteria* (1993), a hanging male torso in polished bronze. The ferocious sexuality and power of Bourgeois's sculpture, alongside its acute physical vulnerability, manages to subsume both pleasure and pain. Krisár's torsos exhibit a similar eroticism and despair as they challenge us to engage with our emotional lives.

Krisár's father, who suffers from schizophrenia, has rarely appeared in his oeuvre. We could interpret the aniconic cube in *Family Matter* (2003) as a signpost for this lost, irrecoverable figure. For this iterative series, Krisár first cast his aunt Maria's face in pewter, and then photographed and melted it down in order to make each successive cast in the series. The final installation includes a set of five photographs and one object—a pewter cube. The relationship between the dematerialized, ghostly visages that continue to exist only as images and the materialized, residual object touches upon the subtle relationship between matter and memory. The artist made a more direct portrait of his father in 2006, but the test print for *Fog Father* was only attempted recently, in early 2011. It serves as the emotional twin to *Mist Mother*. In each photograph, during the long camera exposures, Krisár and his elder brother Johan walked back and forth in front one of their parents, simultaneously wiping away and overlaying their images with traces of their own bodies. The results are starkly different: *Mist Mother* is an idyllic image cast in a romanticist mode while *Fog Father* is far more challenging. In the latter, Krisár captures the faint silhouette of his father as he stands against a series of obsessive notations made directly on the interior walls behind him. The father's markings in his room seem to highlight an idiosyncratic but desperate need to address the self, communicate, and engage with experience in some manner when confronted by mental and social isolation. "I took the photograph in 2006, but just couldn't connect with the image afterward," muses Krisár. "I found it recently in a drawer and felt like I was able to see it for the first time. It isn't easy to make a portrait of someone you can't really see. Now my father is appearing to me."^[4]

What seems most relevant at the end of an encounter with one of Krisár's works is the tactile knowledge gained. Our skins are the daily reminders of the boundaries of touch and experience, of mortality and solitude.

For Arnold M. Cooper

[1] Anders Krisár, telephone conversation with the author, February 20, 2011.

[2] Italo Calvino, *The Nonexistent Knight and The Cloven Viscount*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (Orlando, Fla.: Harvest, 1962), 216.

[3] *Ibid.*, 196.

[4] Krisár, telephone conversation with the author, February 20, 2011.