

BUILDING AND DESTROYING THE PSYCHE:  
THE SCULPTURAL WORK OF ANDERS KRISÁR  
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The photograph gives a view that is directed over a curtained threshold. Through the curtains, a cloud of flesh is visible. The source is unknown, the outline indistinct, but the sense of something happening, of some unknown drama taking place, is apparent everywhere in the image. A faded stretch of wallpaper, the worn edge of a doorframe, a set of velvet curtains—through the careful composition of elements, a theater set is created from the image.

This photograph and others from the *Janus* series (2006), by Swedish artist Anders Krisár, are both a literal and pictorial entryway into the work of an artist who creates dense and mysterious narratives out of simple means. Krisár tells stories through his work, restaging Gothic themes and narratives in contemporary ways. He does this by carving out dramatic narratives through implication and association; the results are images that do more than they logically should, and an art that tells more than it initially seems.

Krisár's practice spans a variety of mediums, including photography, sound, and performance, but his recent projects are increasingly sculptural in form. These sculptures are challenging, both in aesthetic and conceptual terms. They can evoke a complicated reaction in the viewer, not least because they confound the standard formulations of ugliness and beauty or even like and dislike. The response they inspire is more complex, mutable, and less constant; Krisár's sculpture is likely to be described by a series of adjectives that might range from compelling and fascinating through to horrifying and even repelling. Krisár combines the impeccable reproduction of the human figure with an often violent intervention: the perfect cast marred by a heavy handprint (*The Birth of Us [boy]* and *The Birth of Us [girl]*, both 2006–07) or the severing of the torso into strips (*Cuirass*, 2005). These works attack the integrity of the body, creating a visceral and immediate response.

The sculptures are successful because they are products of painstaking perfection (Krisár has developed his own methods of casting and often produces and then rejects multiple casts as imperfect). The casts are virtually flawless, which is why the effect of the intervention is powerful and uncanny rather than merely disturbing. It is through this coupling of careful perfection and deliberate imperfection that Krisár's sculptures become objects of genuine fascination. They embody a vast collection of desires and anxieties that are both acknowledged and unacknowledged, from abuse and violence to purity and beauty. They ferret out and burrow into the deepest recesses of the unconscious mind, but they are also sculptures and objects of sociological observation. For all their visceral power to fascinate, they represent a diligent, methodical exploration of social structures and conditions.

Krisár's works functions in both sociological terms and also in deeply personal, psychological ones. As a result, the network of ideas and locations he explores is notably broad. His work roams from the schoolyard (as in *You're Going Nowhere*, 2007, a sculpture comprising a child's school backpack rendered immobile by its load of lead weights) to the drugstore (as in *Medicine Mom*, 2003–05, a cast of the artist's mother's face composed entirely of the prescribed medications she takes), often delivering critical observations on the mechanism of various social institutions.

Indeed, the point at which the sociological and the psychological coincide is where Krisár locates his sculpture. For him, the psychological can only really be understood in terms of how it is shaped and influenced by the sociological, so that in the pieces just cited, the educational and the pharmaceutical are reformulated in terms of how they weigh and render the spirit, or how they make the composition of the

psyche fragile and brittle to the touch.

The duality between external and internal realities is present in many of Krisár's sculptures. For example, *Bomb Suit* (2006–07) is about a twinned catastrophe: an external disaster that is located on our imaginary horizon and an internal one of which we are only dimly aware. The link between the two is formally rendered in the sculpture, a bomb suit that has been exploded from the inside. What we perceive as catastrophic threats from the outside (geopolitical, ecological, nuclear) function as constructs of our inner imagination. More deadly are the unknown internal bombs, those whose narrative and threat we cannot yet perceive.

The partner piece to *Bomb Suit* is the sculpture *Sonja* (2007–08), another piece fixated on sociological conditions. But in *Sonja*, it is the role of these conditions in the enunciation of the self as individual that is of interest to Krisár. This second sculpture is an almost perfect inversion of *Bomb Suit*, featuring the female rather than the male, the act of accumulation rather than destruction. Like *Bomb Suit*, *Sonja* is another vacated pile of clothing. But in contrast to the former, which is located on the precipice of a postapocalyptic and ahistorical world, *Sonja* is grounded in a specific historical timeline and the painstaking construction of the past.

*Sonja* is a life-size doll, made up only of her clothing, and built in layers; she is the vivid rearrangement of a single wardrobe. The wardrobe belonged to a woman, identified here only by her first name, who saved her clothes over the course of her entire life, from her birth through to her death. Beginning with the unknown woman's baby clothes and leading up to the coats and dresses of her old age, *Sonja* is stuffed and stiff and a direct counter to the deflated absence of *Bomb Suit*. Here, it is the material excess of our life—the accumulation of things, the irreducible clutter of our lives—that is evoked. In this case, what is most palpable is the way in which social structures shape the formation of our individual being. In the sculpture, social pressure is materialized in the clothes of the anonymous woman. Gradually, over time, in the transition from infant to child, to adolescent, to adult, and finally to old woman—in the layering of experience—the figure grows in substance until it is at last recognizable as a character in all its totality. The question posed by *Sonja* is the question of how and at what point we become who it is we are. It is only at this point, of course—at the completion of the sculpture, at the donning of the final coat and the fully achieved and recognizable shaping of the human figure—that the anonymous woman is transformed and is, so to speak, “named.” The anonymous undergoes the transformation into *Sonja*. One of the earliest subjects that Krisár explored in his work is family; and it is often overlooked that family is one of the most powerful social institutions in our culture. Through the family, Krisár captures the complex processes by which identities are both articulated and fall apart. The body of his family is repeatedly used in his casts, and the family structure haunts the psychological nodal points of his work.

Krisár casts the complex relationships between family in concrete physical and sometimes literal terms. Family dynamics are rendered in the scientific language of magnetic attraction and repulsion, which leads to a distinct form of sculpture. For example, in the series *One as Two* (2003–05), Krisár configures the relationship between two masks. One is a cast of his mother's face, the other of his own. Each of the sculptures in the series places the two masks in different formations by way of magnets and wires. In one, Krisár's face is suspended a mere fraction of a centimeter away from that of his mother. In another, the mother's face rests on the ground and the artist's hovers in the air above. And in yet another, contact between the two is achieved in what looks like a portrait of maternal benediction. Each of these is spatially choreographed and demonstrates the physical tension—the language of attraction and separation—operating in the primal relationship between mother and son.

That notion of contact is crucial because it is a visually immediate way of exploring the manner in which we affect one another. *The Birth of Us (boy)* and *(girl)* feature children torsos, impeccably cast, with two adult handprints pressed into their flesh. They are sculptures that are literally about impact, both physical and psychological. Yet another work, *Bronze/Wax #1* (2005–06), involves the same two facial casts from Krisár and his mother, elaborating upon this idea of contact. In *Bronze/Wax #1*, the mother's face is literally burning to the touch (the bronze warmed by way of an internal heater), and the artist's face is rendered not in bronze or aluminum, but in an all too malleable wax. The wax cast of Krisár's face is placed a centimeter away from the heated cast of his mother. Slowly, as the mother's face heats up, the artist's face grows lax and loose. It begins sliding downward in a slow cascade of disfigurement and is finally altogether unrecognizable.

There is something almost painfully intimate here, and while the sculpture has elements of damage and distress, it also carries with it a deep sense of longing. In this way it recalls Krisár's photograph made in January 2006, *Mist Mother*. To produce the image, Krisár and his brother ran naked in front of their mother while the camera's shutter remained open. What is visible is only a single blur of flesh before a second shadowy figure, but the image is fundamentally one of the children performing for, and seeking recognition from, the figure of the mother. The photograph carries many of the same visual motifs and communicates the same high theatricality of the *Janus* images. The task in these pieces is one of performance—a performance that might also be categorized as the search for recognition from the parent.

But the relationship between mother and son, parent and child, or indeed between other diverse members of a family, is never one that is static, and it is not even one of schematic shifts of position. Rather, it is a constant process of becoming (and also unbecoming). The melted wax mask is an ideal expression of that becoming and illustrates the way in which the point of disintegration can also be a point of emergence and self-articulation.

Krisár captures the complex flux of metamorphosis as messy process rather than simple rebirth. His first foray into sculpture, *Family Matter*, (2003) is an experiment in repeated metamorphosis. The piece integrates photographic and performative elements that in many ways continue to circulate through Krisár's growing oeuvre. For it, Krisár produced a cast of his aunt's face. He then melted the cast and produced a cast of another aunt's face and his mother's using the same material, and so on, creating and destroying the faces of his family, including those of his brother and himself. Krisár recorded each cast (made in heavy pewter, but rendered ephemeral by the project's underlying concept) in a photograph. He then melted down the final cast one last time, and produced an abstract pewter cube. That mysterious cube is, in a sense, the reduced embodiment of the many complex questions of familial inheritance and influence that are at play. Not surprisingly, the cube reappears in works such as *You're Going Nowhere*, as precisely the leaden matter that keeps the child's satchel rooted to the ground.

This circularity is crucial; ultimately, the strength of Krisár's project lies in the totalities it creates, rather than the fragments it employs. The uncanny horror of *The Birth of Us (boy)* and *(girl)* is not wrapped up in the seeming fragility of the children's torsos, but rather in the way the disfigurement acquires the quality of a totality. In *M* (2008–10), fragment and whole are again equalized as a child's figure is spliced in half, the two halves reaching out to join hands. The eeriness of *M* is not in the cutting, but in the uncanny sense that it is as such, irrevocably split and then doubled, that the figure is truly made whole.

*M* thus marks itself as a key piece on the subject of self-definition. In contrast to the sunken torsos in *The Birth of Us (boy)* and *(girl)* or the melting face of *Bronze/Wax #1*, the figure in *M* is active, grasping

outward. That gesture of self-definition is double-edged, tempering violence with an almost giddy and defiant exuberance. That violence, rooted as much in life as in destruction, is increasingly at the core of some of Krisár's new work.

As a body of work, Krisár's sculptures also convey various stages of life, from the final moment of naming and assessment (*Sonja*), to the early stages of self-definition (*M*), to the painful moments of damage and separation (*The Birth of Us [boy]* and *[girl]*, *Bronze/Wax #1*). Krisár's interest in family is therefore not to be separated from his interest in generation, and everything the word implies: from generations within the family to nature's cyclical patterns of life to the act of creation itself. Krisár stages incompleteness, damage, fragmentation, and morphosis as totalities in and of themselves. They are Krisár's answers to the fundamental questions of where we come from and how we perceive ourselves. They posit the idea that there is a kind of being in disintegration. The masks in Krisár's art—static, immobile, frozen in time and place—are of interest for the way they can be altered and undermined, broken down and then reconstituted.

Behind the social selves we present—through masks, ritualized codes of behavior, and our integration into the institutions of society—there is a far more fragile, more radical core of being. Anders Krisár captures the palpating life of that being, both its messy flux and its points of fixity. He is a skillful storyteller, and the breadth of his narrative imagination is considerable, but it is ultimately the story of the development of self—the psychoanalytic *Bildungsroman*—that is most urgent to him.