

Inside the Museum : 'Approching Modern and Contemporary Art', by Lynn Zelevansky, August 9, 2010.

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Approaching Modern and Contemporary Art

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Once, when I was working at New York's Museum of Modern Art, I was in the galleries studying Pablo Picasso's 1930 *Seated Bather*, which shows a skeletal figure, with large breasts and a menacing abstract face, sitting on a beach. Recognizing from my badge that I was museum staff, a well-dressed young man approached me. "Can you tell me the deep significance of this painting?" he asked facetiously. (He wanted to impress two young women by exposing the work as a pretentious sham.) The painting clearly invites the kind of psycho-sexual interpretation that is rampant in our culture, so I thought he should be able to glean some understanding of it. I decided to throw the question back at him: "Look at the painting, and you tell me what it's about," I said. "No," he replied, "you tell me." We went back and forth like that until finally, exasperated, I said, "She has a face like a Venus fly trap, what do you think it's about?" His mouth dropped open, and I saw a light bulb go on over his head. He had assumed that the painting's meaning was intentionally hidden. Now he realized that—at least on one level—it had been available to him all along.

A quite different work currently on view in Carnegie Museum of Art's galleries could prove considerably more difficult than the Picasso for the uninitiated observer. The sculpture *Synthesa* by Franz West (1999) is a bulbous papier-mâché form that resembles an abstracted head covered with purple, blue, and white Jackson

Pollock-like splotches and splatters. Its orange cardboard neck is printed with the brand name *Synthesa*; the title, which at first seems like a high-brow foreign term, is actually the name of an Austrian company that produces ordinary household paint. The head, which is precariously propped on a pair of paint-splattered scissors, sits on a large dirty white base.

Appearing half-finished and messy, *Synthesa* isn't conventionally beautiful; rather, it embodies life in all its disarray. Museums formalize the presentation of art with frames and pedestals, which protect works but also divorce them from daily existence. By including the dirty base and scissors, and leaving the neck unfinished, West brings life back in, showing the work in the midst of creation, situated



Franz West, *Synthesa*, 1999, A. W. Mellon Acquisition Endowment Fund. Copyright Franz West

somewhere between the studio and the gallery. The emphasis on process also signifies the presence of the artist, and his ability to build or destroy (the scissors carry a threat of sorts). *Synthesa* is a favorite work of mine. True to its title (a pun on its commercial origins), it is a synthesis of form, content, and process, a complex whole formed by combining disparate physical and metaphorical elements. To me, it is also comical in its deliberately awkward, off-kilter, cartoonish shape.

Today's world is dominated by print and electronic images; but for the most part we are educated to interpret words, not pictures or sculpture, which we generally accept at face value as long as they depict something we recognize. Artists, however, typically create form from multiple perspectives. Many of their works are more accessible than they first appear, but a viewer's fear of not understanding can quickly turn to hostility, leaving no room for analysis. Carnegie Museum of Art engages this dynamic through **tours** and **other programs**, but success depends on the openness of the visitor. The conversation between viewer and artist—with museum as intermediary—is, like *Synthesa*, a work in progress.

Inside the Museum will be on hiatus next month. I'll be back in October.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lynn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and a trailing flourish.