

NAN SMITH



sion (1991) the depth —radicality — of the change of consciousness is metaphorically conveyed by the oceanic depth at which the figure seems to exist. It suggests what has been called “cosmic experience,” in which the self feels it has escaped its material boundaries and lost its particularity, and is afloat in limitless space. This state has been connected with primary narcissism, but is also an attempt to have a purer, more intense feeling of being than one can have when one is “self-aware,” particularly when aware of being a particular self in a particular body in a particular society. Many of Smith’s figures seem emblematic of her own

spiritual ambition — her personal struggle to center herself in a “higher” consciousness of her being. The shrouded, meditating female figure of *Centering* (1984) and the similar standing apparitions of *Visionary* (1993) are one and the same inner person. The absence of face or head in these works is crucial: it suggests that meditation miraculously has worked. The everyday, material self has been transformed into the true, spiritual self. The figure has been dematerialized in recognition of this radically altered state of being.

DONALD KUSPIT

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Nan Smith’s ceramic sculpture is remarkable for its success in suggesting the opposite of what it looks like: her hyperrealistic figures are convincingly spiritual in import. She makes their external appearance suggest—strongly—not only their internal reality, but an inner life that seems radically different in kind from the changing flow of ordinary feelings that we usually think of as inner life. Smith takes a great risk in using materialistic representation to convey a spiritual sensibility. Since Kandinsky and Malevich, non-figurative abstraction has been the preferred way of addressing spiritual concerns through art. But abstraction has become academicized, and in general

tended to convey spiritual consciousness as some sort of disembodied state, remote from human existence. By showing spirituality rooted in the very real body, Smith makes clear that spiritual enlightenment is a human achievement, a real possibility of human life. Her realism becomes a kind of “control” on her spiritualism; it is a reminder that while something very “real” and self-transformative can happen in consciousness, the self that it happens in is bound to a very matter-of-fact world by its body. Thus Smith strikes a balance between inner and outer reality, suggesting how each informs and affects the other, and indeed, how they fuse. As a result, Smith’s work has a “surreal” aura, avoiding everyday realism. Two major devices sustain this aura of surrealism: Smith’s staging of her figures in a kind of

tableau, and her representation of them with their eyes closed, suggesting an altered state of consciousness. These devices are employed in *Guide* (1991) and *Observer: Searching for the True Self* (1992-93). (As in other works, talismanic hands signal and suggest the way.) In *Underwater Vi-*

VISIONARY

airbrushed glazed earthenware,
gypsum cement, stainless steel,
laminated wood
108" x 118" x 78"

1994

photo: Allen Cheuvront