



Donald Baechler: *Figure (Walking Figure)*, 2003-04, bronze, 10 feet tall; at Cheim & Read.

Donald Baechler at Cheim and Read

Like Art Brut, Donald Baechler's seemingly ingenuous depictions of everyday objects and simple figures succeed in large part by tapping into our nostalgia for childhood, that period of life before the rivening onset of self-consciousness and guilt. It's a myth, of course: children are hardly angelic, and alienation is the state of humanity—while Baechler's art works hard to achieve its trademark appearance of prelapsarian sincerity and artlessness.

But perhaps because kids do not typically make bronze sculptures, Baechler's latest exhibition only fleetingly evoked a sense of childhood naiveté. Instead, 12 grayish-black bronze cutouts depicting some of his familiar images (flowers, body

parts, animals, etc.) alluded more to the rustic esthetic of folk art, a kind of *cultural* innocence. With pitted surfaces and rounded edges, as if created in cookie molds, the pedestal-mounted sculptures combine the deadpan earnestness of Baechler's painting with the appeal of objects unearthed in rural junk shops. For example, *Tree #1* (all works mentioned, 2003-04) is a 7-foot-tall pine that seems like an archaic monument designed for purposes now obscure. Just over 24 inches tall, *Hand* (like his imagery, Baechler's titles have a no-frills directness) could once have been a sign marking the headquarters of some long-forgotten occult society.

Having worked in bronze for over a decade, Baechler animates his forms with suppleness and grace. This is especially apparent in the sculptures of potted flora, such as *Flowers (Tulips)* and *Plant*, whose stems and leaves,

etched by the superb lighting of the gallery, seemed to quiver in an invisible breeze. This forthright but delicate approach to sculpture continued with three additional white plaster works, two of which portrayed flower bouquets, the third a rabbit with ears erect.

One might be excused for appreciating Baechler's black and white cameos less as independent sculptures than as concretized images detached from his paintings. Not that the show lacked works that more fully exist in three-dimensional space—for example, six busts ranging from 18 to 27 inches high. Here, though,

Baechler's uneven globes, with their seemingly slapdash placement of small noses, eyes and lips, look too much like *Saturday Night Live's* Play-Doh hero "Mr. Bill." More successful is the 10-foot-tall *Figure (Walking Figure)*, a bronze diamond-shaped torso set upon an inverted V of legs and topped with a woman's round head. With arms swinging, the work seems almost alive in its purposeful stride. Unlike Baechler's other sculptures on view (which, like his paintings, have about them a shy, almost autistic introversion), the woman seemed to dominate the gallery space allotted to her. After decades of child-like imagery, one wonders if the artist's inner adult isn't coming out at last.

—Steven Vincent