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Sidney Geist

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Sidney Geist's recent exhibition included sculpture ranging from circa 1930 to 1992 and some drawings. Geist's deep interest in the history of Modernism is evident in his many articles and books—all but one of the latter devoted to Brancusi—and in his sculpture fraught with art historical allusions. Like the late Philip Johnson, Geist migrates from one style to another, experimenting and testing ideas, and is unable or unwilling to develop a distinct imagery and manner of his own. He embraces eclecticism, which some see as a lack of direction while others view it as boundless curiosity, a desire to experience the multiplicity of sensations that life has to offer. This exhibition included both biomorphic and geometric abstract work, as well as strongly stylized figurative sculpture. The works are modeled, cast, carved, or assembled, and executed in wood, marble, terracotta and aluminum—wood being Geist's material of choice. A high percentage of the sculptures were partly or completely painted in one or more colors. One had the impression of walking into a laboratory where a series of tests were run—not all of them successful. The density of the installation and the desire for inclusiveness reinforced this impression.

Naturalism is not Geist's forte, and when he comes closest to achieving it, as in the cast aluminum *Girl Arranging Her Hair* (1938), the result is oddly wooden. The highly attenuated figure is seated low, with her bent legs

spread wide apart and both hands raised behind her head as she turns her torso. The academic pose, combined with the bluntness of the cast aluminum and the sweetness of the subject, gives this sculpture the look of mass-produced kitsch. However, we recognize even here Geist's will to reduce form to essentials (he is thinking of Lehmbruck), particularly in the treatment of the torso and hips. This desire comes to the fore in the highly polished marble *Mask* (1937), with narrow slits for eyes and without a mouth, which harks back to Olmec sculpture.

Like Brancusi, Geist appears almost from the outset to have had an abiding interest in the sculpture of certain non-Western cultures. The lovely *Needles* (1936), with its slender dark wood cones attached to a string to suggest a necklace, needs only feathers, shells, or gold in place of the wooden cones to become a relic from a distant tribe or empire. Geist's caricatural, monumental *Goddess* (1948–61), carved out of wood and painted sienna, stands with ritualistic stiffness, both raised arms merging on top of her head. The frontality and symmetry of this statue, with its enormous breasts and heavy arms but otherwise narrow proportions, bring archaic fertility images to mind. This featureless *Goddess* is the ancestor of *Femme-Fleur* (1989–92), a wooden statue painted green, beige, and red that develops Picasso's 1946 idea of turning a woman into a long stem bearing a flower. Here, a bud crowns the green stem of the body, and large beige breasts marked with huge red nipples grow into hands encircling the "head."

Geist further explores totem-like verticality—dear to Brancusi—in several planks with wavy outlines,

Top: Sidney Geist, *Red Eye*, 1948. Wood, 55.5 x 141 cm.
Bottom: Sidney Geist, *Palette*, 1951. Painted pine wood, 55 x 139.7 cm.

