

BRUCE
GAGNER
ART FOR
OUR
SAKE





Photography by Antonio Ysursa
 Words by Siobhan O’Leary



Bruce Gagnier is not a household name. This might be because the eighty-four-year-old American sculptor has never created art for households. Speaking from his studio in Brooklyn where he has been sculpting, painting and drawing for nearly thirty of the sixty years he’s been an artist, Gagnier reflected on the advice he never took; “*Some people have told me, you know, Bruce, if you would make a beautiful figure, we would buy it.... I always say to them, ‘you have a false idea about beauty’*”.

Gagnier’s bubonic-bodied sculptures tower behind him like a terracotta army of everyday men. Even in photos, these figures are unsettling. Their presence disarms us, held up by an improbable gravity. They are honest about what it feels like to be in a body, and also seem to show us what our bodies might look like if they were moulded by our thoughts. Strange proportions and storied faces speak to something beyond appearances: the beauty of our messy and often misunderstood internal world. This is what makes them so jarringly contemporary. Yet they

are defaced in ways that recall the sculptures of antiquity, seemingly fractured by a passage of time too immense to comprehend. These are not the highly refined, polished sculptures of mid-20th-century minimalism; they appear to exist somewhere beyond the crass categorizations of art history.

As a young artist living and working in New York from the early sixties, Gagnier went against the grain. While Clement Greenberg wrote in his 1961 seminal text *‘Modernist Painting’* that the pinnacle of all art is formalist painting exploring the medium’s flatness, Gagnier was incessantly lumping plaster into unheroic human forms, advancing his practice as a figurative sculptor in a time where the figure was proclaimed as more dead than sculpture itself.

“When I started in the Sixties, the art world was one thing. That was formalism... and later, Colorfield, which became monotheistic across the board. That was the gospel.”, Gagnier tells me. For better or for worse, the apostles of *“Art for Art’s sake”* became the ruling class, championing line, color, and looks over meaning. For Gagnier, their works erred too quickly towards the Pleasure Principle, where *“the art looks nice on a wall. It works above the couch, but it doesn’t challenge.”*

Gagnier’s own work is not unpleasant, but it does not adhere to the decorative nor bend to the commodification of the art market. It sustains a firm belief in art’s ability to convey a message, to ‘image’ the concepts, thoughts, and feelings about ourselves and our world that we are sometimes unable to articulate through words. Art’s ability to ‘image’ the big questions is a concept borrowed from the philosophy of Hegel, which Gagnier cites as a long-standing inspiration to his work. Gagnier was *“attracted to Hegel right away because of the way he spoke of this thing that we cannot touch, we cannot actually see, but that the artwork can image for us”*.

Creating was a way for Gagnier to iron out questions of existence characterized by what he calls “the search for the singular self” – our shifting yet unified personhood. It was an obsession that took shape at the very beginning of his career. *“Already at the age of 21, the singular self appealed to me very deeply... I was attracted to metaphysics in art”*, he said. Turning inwards for inspiration presented what Gagnier considers a common fork in the road for many artists who have *“two choices: they can be attuned to the outside world... or they can mine the problem of the Self”*. Those belonging to the latter – the metaphysical camp – were a vast minority; *“The other artists my age I met along the way...90% of them were tuned to the outside world. To the art world. I’m sure there are many artists like me, or similar to me. They’re not usually successful.”*





Being in the metaphysical camp to Gagnier means creating works that arise from unpredictable, subconscious action; that are resolutely right-brained. His process - which requires what he coined as *'the Plastic Consciousness'* - is instinctive and unpredictable. Working from memory, he churns and tears at plaster until a body emerges, shaped as much by chance as by intention.

Growing up in Massachusetts, Gagnier worked alongside his father as a butcher, and he still uses some of those same tools today. *"I think that's something going back to Rodin, he was one of those tear it apart, put it back together kind of people."* While Rodin does come to mind when thinking about Gagnier's realist human forms, comparison to him presents a false friend. *"When you're young, you look at Rodin... He is such a source of process and search that I think his romantic realism appeals to a young artist. I didn't have to get much older to divorce myself from that male romanticism, that heavy-handed heroism in his work and drift towards somebody more like Medardo Rosso",* says Gagnier.



Rosso, a 19th-century Italian sculptor, is an apt reference for understanding Gagnier's work in more ways than just the two artists' similar materiality and unconventional treatment of the figure. In 1896, Rosso came across Charles Baudelaire's text *"Why Sculpture is Boring"*, where the writer skewered sculpture as a *"bumble associate of painting"*. The text lit a fire under the young artist who sought to disprove Baudelaire's sweeping claims. Rosso's impressionistic sculpture went on to revolutionize the medium, rendering the art form anything but boring.

While Bruce did turn away from the mainstream, he cannot be accused of burying his head in the sand. In New York, he was always rubbing shoulders with the crowd. Reminiscing, he recalls how everyone in the art world *"went to the same bars, two or three times a week. We're in Max's Kansas City, or Remington's... I sat at the same table with all the conceptual artists, listening to them talk endlessly about anthropology, mathematics, anything but painting or sculpture"*.

In 1979, Gagnier took up a position at the New York Studio School, teaching drawing and sculpture and engaging in group criticism with his students and colleagues. It was here that the artist could formulate and flesh out ideas, like the Plastic Consciousness — Gagnier’s belief in the importance of engaging the unconscious and bringing it forth when drawing or sculpting. *“When I taught sculpture with my main colleague, Garth Evans, we had a wonderful relationship. We disagreed on almost everything, but we found a way to mesh through the figure. Because even though he was a formalist, he taught through the human figure. We worked it out in criticism”*, he says.

Gagnier tells me that his students weren’t interested in the figure or in sculpture, and he wasn’t interested in converting them. They were taken with collage, or found-object art, or all kinds of different media. *“And that brings us to an important conversation”*, Gagnier quipped, *“The end of art.. One day I went to a lecture Arthur Danto was giving and I met him. I said to him ‘Arthur, what does one do at the end of art? Is it over?’ And he says, ‘No. From now on you can do whatever you like’”. Sculpture has fared remarkably well in the afterlife, “It came back with a vengeance. It’s very alive. You really can do whatever you like”*.

Throughout his sixty-year career, Gagnier recalls one pivotal moment where he did bend to external pressures. The artist moved on from small-scale busts and travel-friendly figures and experimented with life size forms. *“I never saw any reason to work big. Morandi never worked large, and he was one of my favorite artists. But at one point, a dealer, Bill O’Reilly, said ‘Bruce, you have to make big things.’ And it upset me so much. I said ‘This is corrupt. This is not important’. And he kept after me. And one day I said, ‘OK, I’m going to make a life-sized figure’. And it changed everything for me. And I had to tell him he was right.”*

The singular self has suffered quite a blow in the age of social media, where our consciousness appears split between online and offline personas. The search for meaning has become increasingly necessary, and yet Gagnier senses its dissipation; *“The problem of the self has dispersed today. I’m not sure anyone believes in it”*.

Regardless of how the rest of us choose to spend our time, the artist is still searching for something, still making a record of being, every day in his studio. Summarizing his work today, the 84-year-old told me: *“What I might be searching for would be the ordinary, everyday with no eternal life, no beauty, no sublime. What if you took all that out? And didn’t end up with realism?”* Gagnier reminds us that while the trends of art history will continue to come and go, there will always be artists making art in their own way and thinking, all the while, about existence.

