

# Thomas Park

New York | Seoul

*"Thomas sat down and looked at the sea. He remained motionless for a time as if he had come there to follow the movements of the other swimmers. Then, a powerful wave reached him, he went down onto the sloping sand and slipped among the currents. The sea was calm, and Thomas was in the habit of swimming for long periods without tiring...."*

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## **MAKING ROOM for REAL: On two exhibitions of Bruce Gagnier**

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Two exhibitions of sculpture of Bruce Gagnier ran concurrently, all figures. At Thomas Park, plasters half-life-size and smaller, and at the Gallery of the New York Studio School, a crowd of ten life-size bronzes.

The bronzes from 2009-17 are more familiar. The selection from 1983 to 2019 at Thomas Park includes four quite recent plasters. They depart so decidedly from the

bronzes that, in effect, all the works exhibited in both spaces make a setting for the newest. Gagnier's figures have long been famously difficult. The NYSS exhibition, *Stance*, could have been called "Leaning Precariously," "Tilt" or "Shamble." *Good Figure* at Thomas Park takes a bounce from the Italian *Bella Figura*, the not-untranslatable expression for appropriate, graceful and perhaps even comely appearance in public. A *Bella Figura*, however, was not the artist's intention. His people tend to do everything but.

In reviews thus far, their perhaps most frequently cited epithet is "disconcerting." But the artist did not mean to shock. He is, against some obvious appearances, a realist. Some realists claim in all innocence to paint just what they see, and wind up far beyond it. Realism is sometimes a visionary enterprise that, no apologies, unmakes the world to find room for itself. In his own soft-spoken way, Gagnier certainly does not shrink from intervention to get to what he sees.

These pieces startle and throw us back before we can come nearer. Their physical features wander awkwardly out of place, limbs shorten unaccountably or lurch toward the ground, perhaps failing against gravity. And then so many paunches, small and large, and unseemly gaping hollows between them; why? When people ask the artist do we look like that? He answers *look in the mirror*. You may be taken aback, but this artist seriously means to hold a mirror to life. He disrupted ordinary appearances by literally feeling his way around the body, wrangling pointed questions of being, as experienced from the inside out. How steady, really, are we on our feet? How long will we keep this up? And seriously, do we look anything like how we meant to present ourselves and how we presume to see each other?

Yet among the bronzes at the Studio School Gallery (they are ten, in two rooms, but one feels they are surely more than ten altogether) one notices that however disconcerted at first, visitors approach them readily and with familiarity, their social-distance melts away. In fact, the figures become more comprehensible within the artist's original arms-reach in fashioning them. Their construction could have been as haptic as it was visual as if the maker had felt his way down their limbs hand over hand. One feels the artist and the figure worked together bodily, shoulder to shoulder. What they did is not sensuous, but it is the quite literal impress of an intimate confrontation, all closeup. As if the two had refused to back off, or back up. No longer views: they risked "composition" and bet everything on their physical contest. Little wonder the figures finally totter, seemingly exhausted.

For all his awareness of the past, Gagnier doesn't want it in his work. When a figure underway accrues some classical aspect, he considers himself obliged to fight it off, preferring the chaos (his word) of his reality to any borrowed semblance of poise. The visibly present life, episode by episode unique, rules his method. No compromises, none he can help. The emergent figure's humanity is all, and, at least to start, it is lurching, uncertain, golem-like.

But a figure that “awakens” begs a question: was our “realist” an observer, or not? Although Gagnier has a long history of observation from models, every piece in both exhibitions was accomplished without a model. Each figure is essentially a character study, not a portrait. Each involved plenty of experience—we could only guess where and how and whom, but not an observation from a model. Instead, each is character-driven, with life filling up to accord with an invention. The artist wants life, he insists on it absolutely, but he has a job for it.

We know his figures begin top-down, with a head (he has a special gift for heads-- a select bunch was seen in the Thomas Park backroom, one or two of them might be distantly portrait-ish, but they all feel freely riffed-- no two alike). Gagnier has to “get” the head before he can fashion a body. So presumably each figure began with the armature as an empty rack, a bare platform for a bust, before a body dressed it down to the floor.

Artists know that in the absence of a model, things happen. Stuff gets in and it wanders. Gagnier has been open to that exchange for years: inside for outside —one kind of life for another— but in the most recent plasters, one feels that his impulses took a different walk. They entered another door and breathed a lighter air. The newest figures have one foot on a stage. Each entailed a vital comic share and with that, they became perhaps more real.

Gagnier has said flatly he doesn’t like fantasy. He’s no fabulist; he’s a *foible-ist*. His real, now more comic, is tinged or weighted to an incipient misstep—not merely leaning. The new personages are long sums of gaucheries indulged and gently enjoyed, approaching satire, but not going there. Is there ever satire without malice, however delicate, and a better idea, denied? He savors weakness, and weaknesses, but he is no critic, as he is no historian, though he remembers. Having leaned so very far from calm-grandeur-and-noble-simplicity classicism (Goethe’s for one), he’s landed in something more like a corner of Fellini’s *Satyricon* (let’s say the Roman comedy episode), not raucous but a bit sweaty, a bit brutish and mildly hilarious. The new figures are no solitaires, and quite far from statues. They’ve become social, loiterers hanging out somewhere beyond their pedestals. One could catch up to them, like people in the street, or call to them from the wings. The newest four seem the first arrivals in a forthcoming Greek chorus. Wandering-eyed and close-mouthed as before, these new figures are just coming into a say. Lately their existential unquiet may be just heard, at a low murmur, a whisper or a lisp.