

ART LIES



L. *Anatomies* installation view, 2010; courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston; photo by Eric Hester

R. Darren Waterston, *Schooler Stone No. 1*, 2010; oil paint and clay; 13 x 13 x 12 inches; courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston; photo by John Wilson White

HOUSTON

Darren Waterston  
Inman Gallery

For Darren Waterston, the past comes down to us in shards and heaps of body parts. The artist's task, he implies, is less that of novel creation than a labor of selection and sorting of the inherited past: clearing pathways through thronging clutter, adding relief and void to flatness, opening passages within uniform deposits. Amid an image-saturated world, as Gilles Deleuze wrote in reference to Francis Bacon, the artist is compelled to create space among images rather than produce new ones. Waterston's cosmos, like that of Bacon, is disquietingly replete with images and objects, reflecting the density of art history and his own dark baroque sensitivity to the oppressive nearness of creatures and worldly things. In response, Waterston takes up artistic exile in a unique negative space that he has hollowed out around masses of objects and beneath an expanse of found pictures, a space where he can dwell in weightless contact with these like a shadow projected from a body in light.

The word "anatomy," from which he takes his exhibition's title, derives from the etymological root "to cut." It is an appropriate name for the creative scission that brought these works into being. It evokes not only the cutting-room floor, where siftings of an editing process gather, but more especially the tradition of artistic dissection extending from Leonardo and Rembrandt through Thomas Eakins to Damien Hirst. The title, moreover, evokes the literary genre of the anatomy in which name-bearing figures speak and debate not as realistic living characters but as mouthpieces for ideas, ideologies and polemical positions—most famously in the seventeenth-century compendium assembled by Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. The subject matter of Burton's tome, like that of Waterston's exhibition, is not accidental: anatomies express our troubled awareness

of time and its losses. They remind us of the skull beneath the skin, the worm gnawing at our temporal achievements, how the accomplishments of history fall back into natural history as ruin.

Waterston's *Anatomies* interweaves three components that reference the baroque jumble of the seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosity (*Wunderkammer*) and the self-dramatizing disorder of Burton's melancholic encyclopedia. At the center of the show is a veritable altar to artistic melancholy, disposing over a full wall a plethora of small drawings (including those set down on actual seventeenth-century French letters), watercolors, animal pelts, seashells and corals, and other objects and modified archival images. Across the other spaces of the gallery are displayed Waterston's larger canvases and tondi, including the ravishing, white-on-white impasto relief landscape *Netherlands*, and several sculptures that achieve an uncanny combination of pululating life and deathly rigidity by proliferating fixed forms till they vacillate on the threshold of the *informel*. The composite effect is properly baroque in its excess and in its eschatology: into collapsing worlds and worlds in formation, Waterston's *Anatomies* extends a bony hand to capture outline, shade and shape for a fleeting moment. A black sun, low on the horizon, shimmers over all.

Tyrus Miller is Professor of Literature and Associate Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz.