



Life castings by Dave Parvin

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Life Casting, Fine Art Or Cheating?

By Dave Parvin

Note: for this article, the word "sculptor" or any derivative of it such as "sculpting" or "sculpture" will refer to three dimensional art that is produce in the normally thought of way or the artist who produces it. "Life casting," simply "casting," or "caster," etc. will refer to molding directly from a person or to the artist.

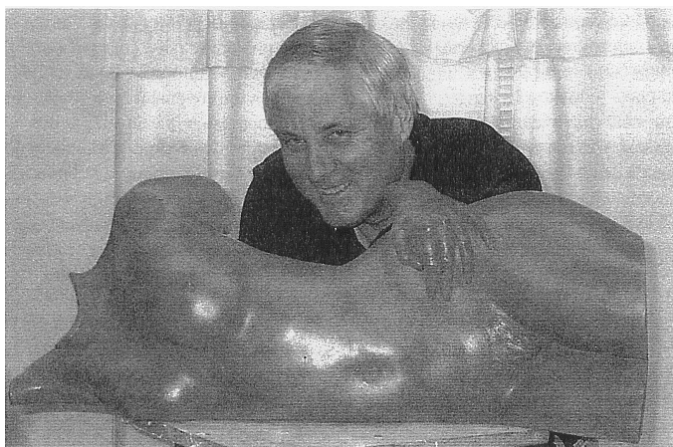
"It's just a life cast..." How many times have I heard that? In fact, how many times have I said it myself? I suspect that there is no other sculptural technique that creates so much ambivalence. Anyone who sculpts the old fashioned way may feel that life casting is somehow, well cheating. After all, anybody can make a reasonable likeness by just pulling a mold off of something or someone. Most artists may have even tried it somewhere along the line. The results were about as dead as a corpse. But remember, when the first practical form of photography, daguerreotype was invented in the 1830's painters looked upon it with equal

disdain. The main complaint was that photography was not selective. A photographer was only able to capture what was actually there and was unable to add, delete, or change the image; it was felt that there was no creativity, no skill involved. Yet photography, which is every bit as much cheating as life casting, has gained acceptance as an art form. So what is so different, so disagreeable about something that could be call three-dimensional photography? Before I answer that, let's digress just a little, just a few thousand years.

Life casting has been around for a very long time. The Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, relates in his Natural History how one Lysistratus of Sicily made a plaster mold of a face and cast the positive in wax. In Malvina Hoffman's 1939 book, "Sculpture Inside and Out" she claims that "Molds were made from living subjects even as far back as 1300 B.C." She then gives detailed directions for casting

masks from both living and dead subjects. It is hard to imagine that a contemporary book would describe the making of death masks as a normal procedure, something that a sculptor should know to make a living.

But until the invention of photography, a mask was the only way of capturing someone's exact likeness and it survived as an accepted art form at least as late as 1939. Since the most common mold material was plaster which had obvious detrimental side effects, the subject usually had to be dead to endure the process. Who has not read of the death mask of Napoleon or Lincoln? But anyone who thinks that any living caster, including myself, is responsible for inventing the techniques need only see an 1887 painting by Edouard Damon entitled Moulding. It shows an artist and assistant removing a mold from a model's leg. It reminds me of my own studio. And if anyone thinks that he/she is discovering new territory, get a copy of Carl Dames's Moulding and Casting subtitled Its Technique and Application for Moulage Workers, Sculptors, Artists, Physicians, Dentists, Criminologists, Craftsmen, Pattern Makers, Architectural Molders, etc. This book will make it very clear that almost anything you can imagine has been done before. But while the steps of the procedure have changed little, the materials have improved. Modern materials are an improvement in two ways. First of all, there is no reason ever to put plaster directly on skin. While there are some fast setting rubbers available which have the advantage of making reusable molds, they have some disadvantages in both safety and cost. The most suitable material for general use is alginate which is essentially powdered kelp. It is absolutely harmless to the skin, the detail is excellent, and it is relatively inexpensive. There are numerous brands available with different characteristics. I have tried every brand that I have come across and my favorite is Prosthetic Cream alginate. The second improvement is in the materials for the final positive. Any plaster will work, of course, but the only thing worse in terms of durability would be cast paper. An improvement would be any of the cast "stones" or Portland cement or hydrocal or fiberglass resin, etc. One can even pour wax directly into an alginate mold for casting into



Dave Parvin with life cast

bronze. By far the most suitable material that I have used is Forton MG.

The manufacturer describes it as "...combining alpha hemihydrate gypsum cement with sophisticated polymer chemistry resulting in a permanent casting with remarkable variations in appearance." The basic matrix is three powders and a liquid to which you add chopped fiberglass for strength and various fillers for particular effects. For example, adding powdered limestone will give you a pure white marble appearance. Once the system is water soluble, it will accept water soluble dyes and pigments. The most interesting effect results from adding metal powders. The final product can be polished and/or patinated as if it were hot cast metal and looks remarkably like the real thing. It is easy to work with, odor free, very durable and not hazardous.

My own involvement with life casting began when sculptor Thomas Schomberg mentioned to me that a life mask can be very helpful for anatomical reference. I have been sculpting since childhood and casting for almost ten years and am well aware of casting's advantages and shortcomings; even I view it with some ambivalence. On one hand I feel that it is a technique with unique possibilities, a technique that every artist would do well to have at least a fundamental grasp of. Who could possibly see the work of either John de Andrea or Duane Hanson and even think that it could be accomplished without a great deal of training and practice? The most famous piece of art in Denver is certainly de Andrea's Linda at the Denver Art Museum. After all, great art is not just great realism nor great abstraction nor great workmanship, it is great emotion.

So where, on the other hand, is the cheating? I would guess that most sculptors suspect that anyone whose primary work is casting probably can't sculpt and isn't willing to make the effort to learn how. I agree. I am always quick to point out that my primary work is my sculpture and not my castings. I admit that I don't want anyone to think that casting is all I can do because almost anyone can do it. I explain it this way. After one of my two or three day workshops and some practice, it isn't long before anyone should be able to make acceptable castings. In the same couple of days I could explain everything needed for one to be able to sculpt. But sculpting takes years of practice. It is analogous to photography versus drawing or painting.

But the question still remains about casting from life, why would anyone who is any sort of real sculptor ever want to try it? For reference. Don't most of us photograph our models in a particular pose so as to have something to refer to when the model isn't present? Well, why not do the same thing in three dimension? Some of the preparatory steps that I take when I begin a new sculpture is to cast at least the model's face and hands in the desired position. It is their very realness, their exactness that makes them so useful. In some ways, they are superior to the actual model. I can refer to them at any time and for as long as I need to. They can be turned in my hands and studied from all angles. I can even store them indefinitely and refer back to them if I enlarge the piece at a future date. The second issue is to make the casting an end in itself. Most people would treasure a bust of a loved one. But sculpting an accurate portrait takes time-enough time that the final product can require a significant financial investment. But I can cast a face including the neck and ears (in other words all of what

is needed for recognition) and remain within most people's budget.

The actual impression takes only about fifteen minutes and the preparation and explanation require that the person be in my studio for only about an hour to an hour and a half. The process is reasonably pleasant but just involved enough that the subjects usually depart with a feeling of accomplishment for having "suffered for art" and been a partner in the creation of something. Unfortunately, the mask is not finished in the hour and half. It takes me about eight man-hours of work over a week's time before it's completed. One of the things that I do is to make a secondary mold in silicone rubber, partly because it improves the final product and partly because it allows for additional copies. It is not just the affordability that makes a mask so desirable; it is the realness. I have had people tell me that they had commissioned a bust of their child only to admit that they were disappointed with the results because it really didn't look like their child. Obviously, they chose the wrong sculptor. Portrait sculpting is not easy; you cannot be very far off and have it actually look like the subject. I like to say that around my studio, "parts is parts." And of course, I have cast the entire human body either as a whole or in pieces. The face is most important since we are recognized by our faces. The other parts that I most commonly cast are hands and feet of infants, clasping hands of couples, and torsos.

In order of difficulty, hands are the least difficult, followed by torsos, with faces being the most difficult part of the body to cast. Not only are faces very involved structures, but covering the face can induce claustrophobia, not to mention suffocation. I have not explained here step by step how to do a casting because it would be beyond the scope of this article. It is complicated enough and with just sufficient risk to the subject that it probably shouldn't be attempted at home without some instructions. I have developed some dummy heads so that one can practice prior to spreading goo on a living person.

I have been casting long enough that I do not ask whether life casting is fine art or cheating. To me it is just another art form, a different art form with its own limitations and advantages. But if great art causes great emotion, nothing is more satisfying to an artist than to arouse this emotion in even one person. I am often amazed at the reaction of parents to their children's castings. I have seen a mother cry over a hand, a face, or a body saying that she will always have her child at that age. The two things that are the essence of castings are realism and permanence. A photograph is real but will last only perhaps a hundred years. A video is real but may last only one generation. But a casting can capture a moment in time forever. A casting may survive until the sun goes supernova.