

# ALL IN PIECES

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

## ME US THEM: OLIVER HERRING

TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, THROUGH JUNE 14

**T**HAT MAN OVER THERE? HE MIGHT have existed once. His subtly shaded flesh looks so real, it invites touch. All his details hum with life: eyebrows, stubble, lips. Like a porcelain figure who's been tapped with a hammer, he's been fractured, but he hasn't fallen totally apart; just enough so hundreds of hairline cracks show. In his nudity, he is solemn. He might be a relative of Frankenstein's monster of imperfect creation. Though you may be tempted to ask him questions, he is not alive, and you can't touch. Go ahead and look, though—he won't bite.

His name is Wade, and he's a life-sized sculpture made by Oliver Herring out of meticulously cut and reassembled photographs (even the amazingly life-like hair is made out of shredded prints). There are two versions of him here, and even if you arrive knowing what to expect, *Wade 1* and

*Wade 2* (both 2006) are likely to make you do a double-take (and the dramatic overhead lighting does a fantastic job of heightening the spooky, wax-museum effect). The *Wades* join a similar sculpture of a woman, *Gloria* (2004), leaning on the wall of a clear enclosure, as well as an eagle sculpture that had me totally fooled; from a distance, I thought it was a mounted, taxidermied bird. But it, too, is made out of cut prints mounted on foam core.

Welcome to the simulacrum, Herring-style: He specializes in the double-take, the unscripted encounter, the cut-and-pieced-together. This survey of 15 years of work is an intriguing look at an artist who continues to push the boundaries of representation in seemingly unrelated media: stop-motion video, improvised performances, altered photographs, and knitted Mylar sculptures. Models he uses in videos are asked to enact instructions (*Task*, which he performed in Saratoga in March, asks volunteers to choose from an envelope of tasks). He is deeply concerned with gender, having been inspired by Ethyl Eichelberger, the drag performer. The portrait of *Fran* (2001) here exemplifies this—looking like a transgendered body builder, her red-

colored skin has been sliced into segments—so it appears three-dimensional when approached from the side. When you look at her straight on, the segments disappear.

While the work here is in some ways all over the map (and the video work and Mylar knits on the whole seemed weaker), images such as *Fran* and *Wade with Cheryl's Features* (2007) are hauntingly memorable. And it's instructive to view this work all together: Although *Inside a Heap of Flowers* (2002) is, for example, markedly different stylistically from *Ladders 2* (2002), both photographs pose the human figure in alien settings.

So, too, with *Shane after Hours of Spitting Food Dye Indoors* and *Chris after Hours of Spitting Food Dye Outdoors* (both 2004)—color portraits of men after, yup, you guessed it, hours of spitting food dye. In these startling photos, the dye acts as both a sculptural and painterly element, emphasizing saturated creases, wrinkles and facial hair. The pigment is a provocation, one of Herring's artifices meant to get at the truth. You might not think the same artist also did the video *Joyce and David #2*, of a singularly mismatched couple doing an awkwardly synchronized dance (and one of the more intriguing video pieces). This might be because Herring seems more invested in the staging of an artwork—the process—than he is in the outcome. And in general, this approach

keeps things interesting. Like a circus ringmaster, Herring just keeps throwing things at people until the breaking point (in an interview with PBS he talks about “a point of saturation”)—as the amusing title of one photograph, *The Day I Persuaded Two Brothers to Turn Their Backyard Into a Mud Pool* (2004), attests.

In contrast to the absurdity of some scenarios, more recent images are striking, disturbing altered photographs: *Cheryl (small) with gauze face and iridescent blades* (2007) pastes photographic fragments of a face together with sinister images of metal blades. *Stanzi/Silver and Iridescent* (2008) similarly shows a person (man or woman, we can't tell) wearing a conservative dress and pearls, their face covered by crinkled metallic paper with dark holes for eyes. Like the outstanding *Wades* and *Gloria*, these works have the psychological depth of nightmare.

Herring is a visual polymath, and through all he is concerned with the fragmentary, constructed nature of identity. What happens in the seconds when the camera is off? Who are we when we are alone, unguarded? Like the surrealists, who used randomness and associational processes to get through to the unconscious, Herring cuts photographs and uses spontaneous performance with strangers to try to answer these always intriguing questions.

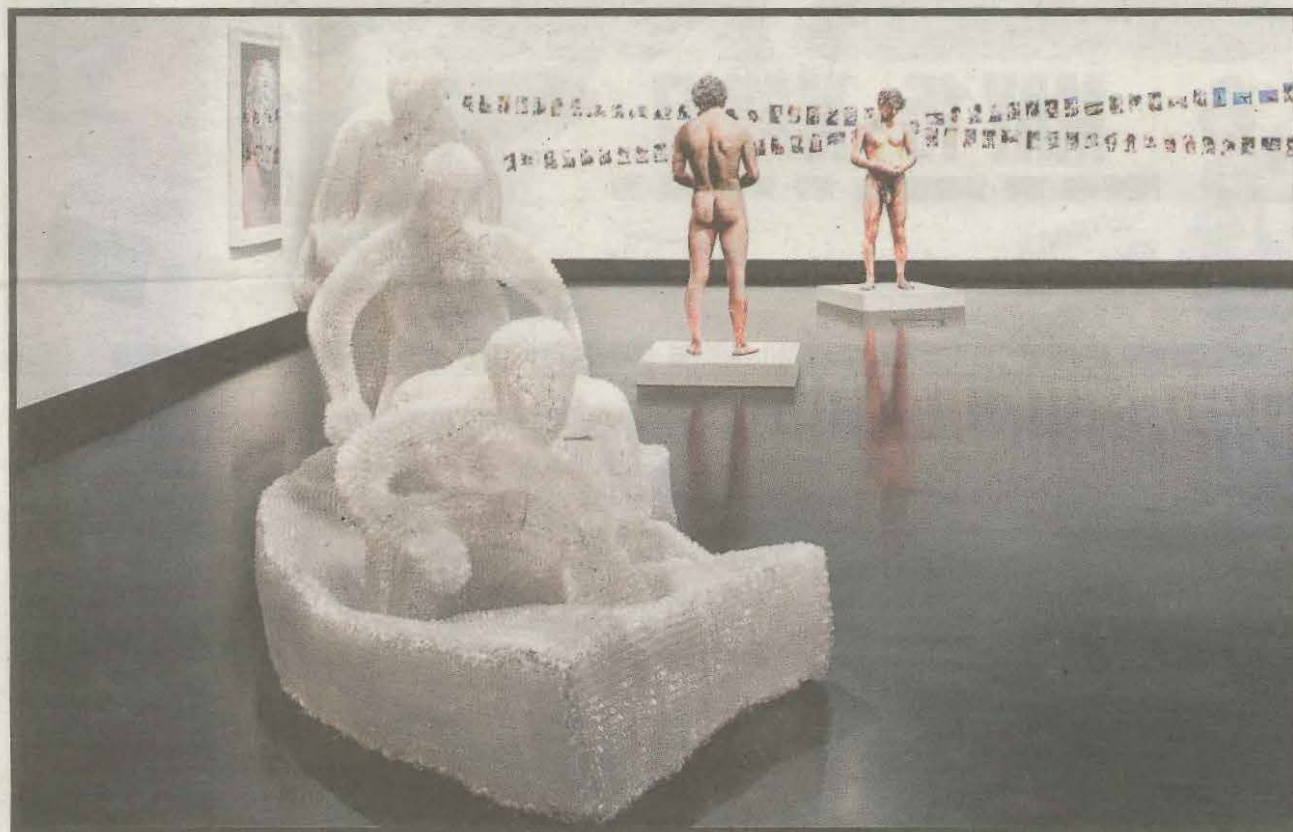
## WOULD YOU LIKE FRIES WITH THAT?

AMERICAN COLOR:  
RICHARD GARRISON

SPENCERTOWN ACADEMY ART CENTER, THROUGH MAY 24

ONE OF MY FAVORITE SCENES IN the movie *Dude, Where's My Car?* is when the main characters try to order Chinese “foood” at a drive-thru. The transaction, which begins rather prosaically, devolves into a yelling match between a disembodied voice repeating “and then?” after each item is ordered and a very frustrated customer. Even after Ashton Kutcher's character rips the drive-thru monitor apart, it continues to taunt him with the same refrain as his car speeds away.

For me, this scene reveals the crassness of American culture. Not only do we love our cars so much that we like to eat in them, but the food we crave is bland and generic. Apparently we are comforted by sameness. We like to be surrounded by the familiar colors of our favorite chain and to



Art and process: Herring's *Me Us Them* at the Tang.