

## CHRIS DONNELLY / AMERICAN, b. 1962 /

STRANGELY FAMILIAR AND EMOTIONALLY EXPRESSIVE, the wooden busts carved by Chris Donnelly are both captivating and charming. “It is the funny or unusual everyday things that people do that inspire me to make these carvings,” says the artist.<sup>1</sup> Donnelly delights in merging unexpected elements, combining everyday characters with vivid and sometimes surprising facial expressions. *Birthday Suit, Everybody's got one #119*, 1997, one of three works by the artist in the Shein collection, particularly exemplifies Donnelly's playful humor; a cheerful birthday hat decorates the head of a man whose apprehensive and brooding expression seems far from celebratory.

By day a licensed cosmetologist in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Donnelly devotes evenings and free time to his artwork. Although he has never received any formal training, Donnelly's interest in carving began in the late 1980s when he started whittling fishing lures. After experimenting with small lures for five or six years, Donnelly began to carve more sophisticated forms of fish, animals, and eventually human busts, for which he is best known today. His pieces generally range from one to three feet tall and are carved mainly from linden wood, a type of soft American basswood, which he paints with oil-based pigments once the carving process is complete.<sup>2</sup> The colors are naturalistically applied and are used princi-

pally for definition of clothes and facial details. Donnelly confirms that the colors and clothing are secondary elements. “The facial expression and the mood it conveys is the main focus.... I am really aiming for a reaction. I want my work to be sincere and honest enough to evoke some genuine emotions when people look at it.”

Donnelly typically numbers rather than titles his sculptures, preferring to allow viewers to explore the ambiguities of his pieces without descriptive labels, which, he feels, could potentially limit personal interpretations. Although some of the inspiration for his work comes from specific individuals and encounters, Donnelly asserts that most of his figures are fictive creations, based primarily on his own imagination and only loosely connected to life experiences. “My imagination is, of course, a large part of the process, and many of the ideas are a combination of memories, Halloween, old photographs, relatives, friends, [and] self....” Despite the familiarity of his figures—many of which appear like stock characters in a stage production—the works never become clichéd stereotypes. The varied facial expressions and emotive body language of the figures poignantly demonstrate the richness and depth, not to mention the irreverence, of the human condition.

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<sup>1</sup>Unpublished artist's statement.

<sup>2</sup>Phone conversation with the artist, July 9, 2004. Donnelly notes that he has recently begun to carve mahogany wood and produce more complex multiple-figure pieces. Donnelly first began exhibiting his carvings at informal shows such as the Ann Arbor Art Fair, but is currently represented in galleries in New York, California, and Michigan. All subsequent quotes are taken either from the artist's statement or this phone interview.