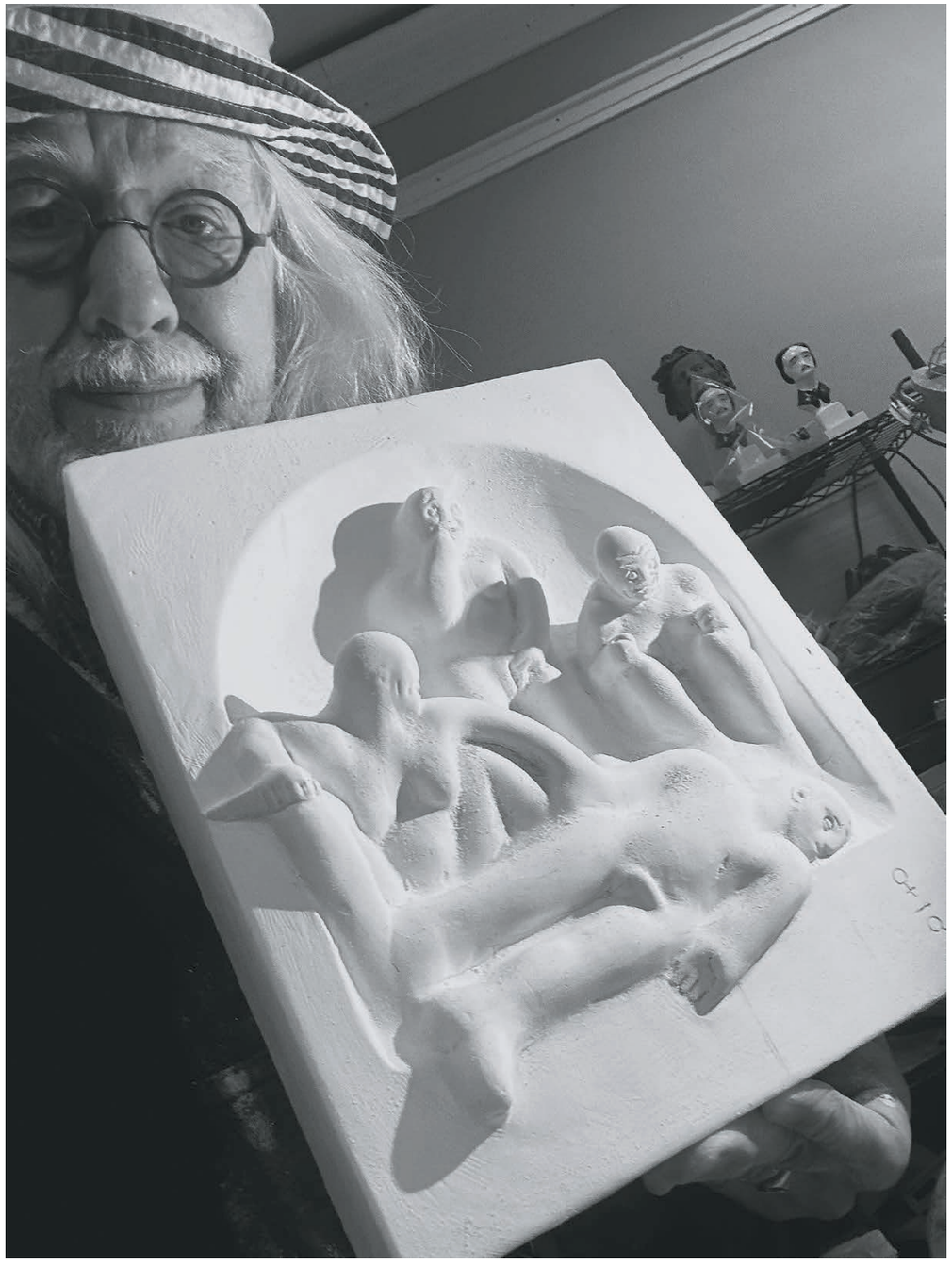
# **TOM OTTERNESS** BATTLE OF THE SEXES

# TOM OTTERNESS

## BATTLE OF THE SEXES

**CRAIG STARR** GALLERY



Tom Otterness with his 1982 relief *Female Victory*, December 2024.

## ***The Frieze*: Then and Now**

by Michael Brenson

Tom Otterness was fresh out of high school in Wichita in 1970 when a scholarship to the Art Students League brought him to New York. The League was a school of makers. It taught anatomy and drawing from the model. Its storied history included battles between modernism and anti-modernism, figuration and abstraction.

In 1973 Otterness entered the progressive, conceptually-oriented Whitney Independent Study Program. In 1977 he became a member of Collaborative Projects, Inc., aka CoLab, a collective of around fifty artists with a shared belief in political and cultural activism, and diverse aesthetics. CoLab produced magazines, films, and cable shows; and exhibited in apartments, storefronts, and bars; in a derelict building and, most famously, in the summer of 1980, in an abandoned massage parlor on West Forty-first Street. The Times Square show had an uncontrollable, anything-is-possible energy. Go for it! Do it! Say it! Dealers who would help define the art of the eighties in New York were drawn to the show's vitality. Brooke and Carolyn Alexander, who would support and exhibit *The Frieze*, were introduced to Otterness's work there.

When Otterness arrived in New York, he was a painter. By 1980 he was a sculptor. Soon after joining CoLab, he began making small figures that he cast in Hydrocal plaster and mounted on marble bases. He sold them for $4.99, first on a stand at Artists Space, then on a blanket on the street. The figures—including a seated father and daughter, copulating angels, wrestlers on a pillar, and a ramrod-straight hand-less and foot-less man lying face down on a-ramrod-straight hand-less and foot-less woman—were anonymous yet strangely intimate. These "souvenirs of monuments," as Otterness has described them, hinted at interpersonal relationships, but so much was missing in them—faces, limbs, context, individuation. The figures seemed severed from, but somehow still also rooted in old stories, the allure of which was overwhelming. In Herbert Read's 1956 study *The Art of Sculpture*, Read argues that the "specific art of sculpture, an art with its distinct aesthetic, comes into existence somewhere between the 'two extremes' of the monument and the amulet."[1] Otterness's "souvenirs of monuments" seem to be holding onto both.

Then, in 1982, came *The Frieze*. Otterness worked on this intricate, multipart, narrative relief sculpture patiently, obsessively, for eight to nine months. It still seems wild, both a scroll to be deciphered and a series of eruptions. Pretty much everything that Otterness had been seeing, reading, thinking, and living found a place

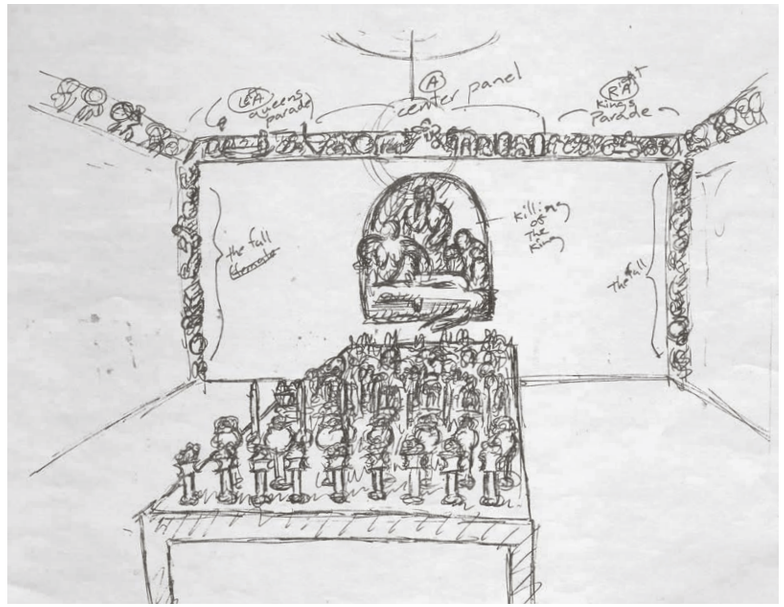
in it: Alley-Oop comics, Aesop's Fables, Egyptian, Greek, Indian, and Romanesque architectural reliefs; CoLab's street politics and radical feminism. Not to mention Giotto's poignant humanism and Renaissance salvation-damnation cycles. There was Punk and the Lower East Side, the Met, MoMA, and the Museum of Natural History, where Otterness worked as a night watchman for five years, keeping company with the museum's fabulous survivors of extinction, immersing himself in cultures other than those of postwar America. And, more art history, including the WPA and Malevich, Cézanne, Guston, Michelangelo. Goya. Rodin. And contemporary artists like Matt Mullican, David Hammons, and Gordon Matta-Clark. Plus films, sculptures, and paintings by Otterness's CoLab colleagues and friends.

"I was grabbing everything," Otterness remembers, "everything that caught my eye".[2] "I appropriated from everything at the time," he told curator Douglas Dreishspoon,[3] but "appropriation" does not seem the right word for Otterness's relation to his sources. He did not pluck them out and plunk them down in his work. Every source passed through his hands. "I was on everything," he said, describing his intense involvement in the sculptural process. Some of these sources are obviously more important than others, but the difficulty of imagining *The Frieze* without any of them is an indication of Otterness's search for a universal language, and his determination to welcome into his work as much as he could of the great sprawl of visual culture.

Image and process, rupture and continuity, fantasy and topicality, a proliferation of simplified reproducible sculptural figures, many of them tiny, their gestures mimicking those of humans, who share the stage with animals and fossils, as inseparable as they were in prehistory. Farce and tragedy, cheekiness and shock, charm and alarm, sympathy and cruelty, hope and skepticism, sex and death, simplicity and intricacy, the smile and the gasp. Here, for the first time, is Otterness's sculptural world.

II

*The Frieze* consists of seventeen sections, thirteen horizontal and four vertical, and one free-standing sculpture, a baby girl (fig. 7), larger than any of the relief figures. She is lying on her back, on a cylindrical pedestal, the palm of her left hand supporting a sphere. Most sections are around four feet long and ten inches tall.




Proposal drawing for the exhibition *Tom Otterness: Sculpture*, Brooke Alexander Gallery, 1983.

The material is plaster, cast from clay. Otterness did the modeling and casting in his apartment. All-female crews provided crucial help, including building molds, casting, and sanding plaster. The figures are generic. Many are in action: marching, carrying, climbing, falling . . . but few have feet. There's no sense of place. With all their drive and purpose, where are the figures going? Are any of them, including the processions of workers, really going anywhere? The women are naked, their breasts and genitals conspicuously exhibited. The white surfaces are smoothly sanded; skin is unmarked by age. The whiteness is hyper-white: forms can seem to blast into the light. No figure has hair. On some of the faces, Otterness incised lines that make the figures seem demented or demonic. Sacrifice, punishment, ceremony, obsession, and fate—essential parts of the history of sculpture—are as integral here as they are in Greek and Indian friezes. Geometry's elemental forms, as foundational in ancient civilizations as they were in utopian abstraction, are as important as the figures. Cézanne's building blocks of nature—spheres, cylinders, and cones—are ubiquitous here.

The Michelangelo-inspired *Battle Cartoon* (fig. 1), made by Otterness in his hometown of Wichita in 1981, can be understood as *The Frieze's* origin panel. More than a dozen figures seem to be in the process of emerging within the inchoate white ground. There's little differentiation between male and female. Many actions are not yet fully defined, but even in this unfinished state the battle of the sexes is unstoppable.


Proposal drawing for the exhibition *Tom Otterness: Sculpture*, Brooke Alexander Gallery, 1983.

Before they are even awake, the figures are engaged in combat and sex, and in the combat of sex. Geometry is in and around them. The pyramid and cube at the top right, the disk at the lower left, and the cylinder at the lower right accompany the figures without their knowledge. The ovals of several heads generate a rhythm that hints at its own kind of replication and beauty, a life of forms that is linked at its inception to human beings and is both dependent on and beyond them. However ancient, geometry seems forever new. The figures are born scripted; geometry isn't.

This explains why some of the figures in *The Frieze* are not just carrying spheres and cylinders but holding onto them for dear life. And why, when a geometrical form falls, its loss can be experienced as dire. In *Battle of the Sexes* (fig. 13), males and females are smashing one another with spheres and cylinders. What humans were given by their creator in order to build and dream—and think—is instead used by them to batter. But geometry will always be there. Geometry is one of the sources of hope in *The Frieze*, if only the figures could see this and dream with it.

During the one previous gallery exhibition of *The Frieze*, at the Brooke Alexander Gallery in New York in 1983, and in every other previous installation, the horizontal sections were installed sequentially, well off the ground, at cornice height, or higher. *The Frieze* told a story, one filled with delight and savagery, and bizarre twists and turns, but with a beginning and end. The female panels unfolded on the left side of the installation, the male panels on the right side. Each side included methodical movement and disruptive behavior, prankishness and leisure. On both sides, the king—symbol of the patriarchy that is the worst evil in *The Frieze* world—was done in. In *Female Revolution* (fig. 4), the statue of a phallus is cut into and in the process of being pulled down; on the other side of the panel, the king's body is dismembered and displayed as a flattened king-sized baby.

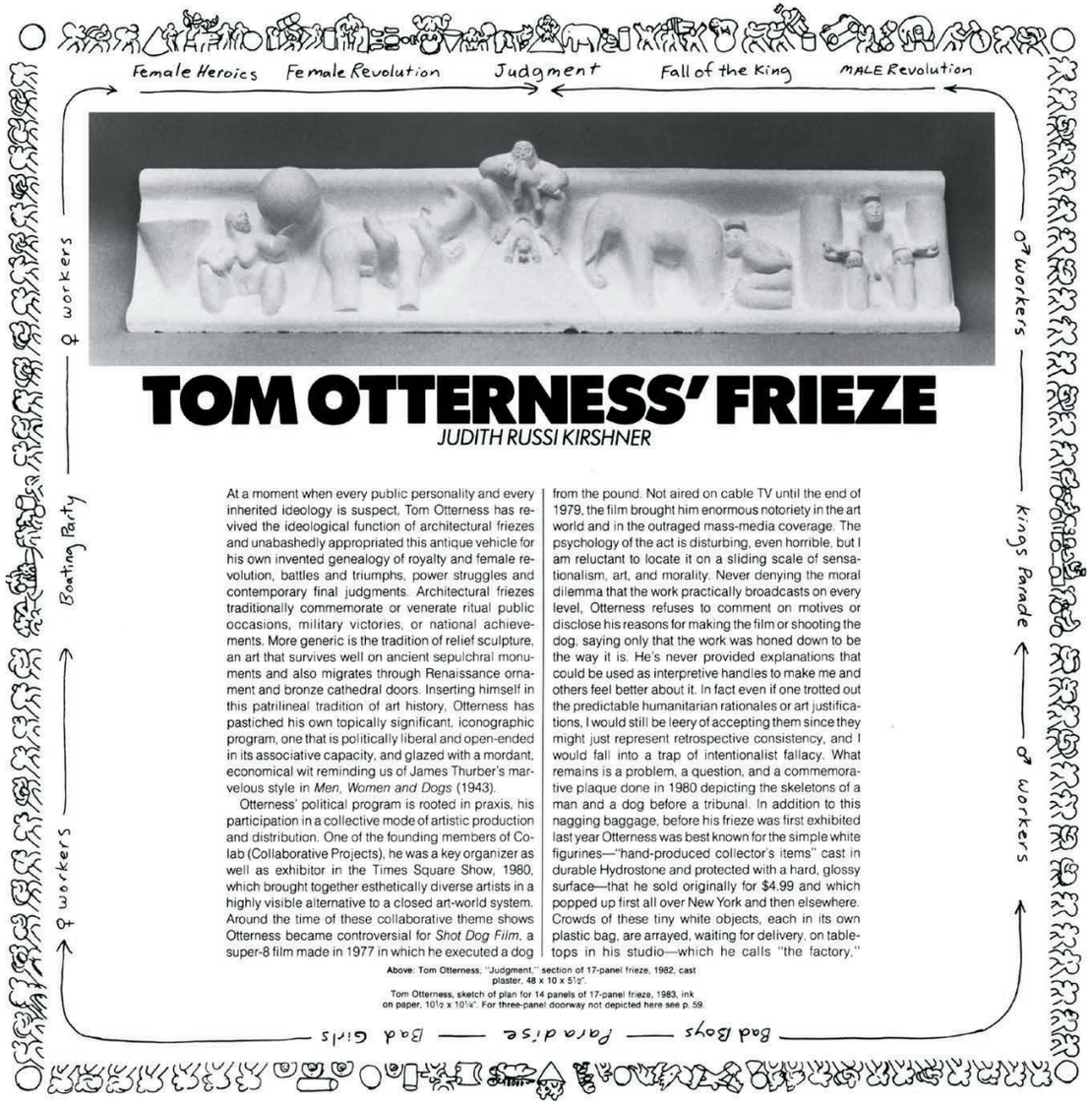
In previous installations *The Frieze* began with *Children's Paradise* (fig. 16), at the heart of which is a smiling girl and boy, arm in arm, standing on the flat end of a magical top or cone that is balanced on its point. In this age of innocence, the animals and fossils on both sides of the children are happy, too. At the left side of the panel there is a child, and behind him a ghoulishly goofy dinosaur fossil standing on its hind feet. They seem to be deciding what to do with a big, beautiful sphere. All is friendly and playful, no sign of strife or danger here.

The cycle ended with *Judgment* (fig. 3). Innocence has become depravity. The obscene central figure, its body straddling the point of another cone—this one with the poisoned feel of a slag heap—is devouring its offspring while giving birth to a royal baby, emerging from the womb wearing a crown. "The androgynous agent of this section, like Saturn," said Otterness to Dreishspoon, "simultaneously devours and gives birth to royal offspring. Cannibalization is implied." The image is an unmistakable reference to Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*, in which a crazed giant is eating the left hand of a gender-ambiguous figure after biting off his/her head and right arm. To the immediate left of *Judgment's* center figure is a female copulating with an eyeless rhinoceros. On the right side a king, wearing his crown, is on his knees, his hands bound behind his back, kissing an eyeless elephant's ass. To his right, another sculpture of the king is chained to two pillars.

At the far left of *Judgment*, the tone shifts. Sitting beside an upturned cone, like the cone in *Children's Paradise*, is a female figure—*The Frieze's* queen, holding a sphere in her left hand, looking at it, as if to wonder, "What is the earth? What is this planet? How did we get here, and can we imagine something different?" The figure recalls another art history landmark, Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I*, an iconographically elaborate meditation on creativity, in which a brooding female figure with wings is unable to decide what to do with the geometry, including a sphere, in her presence. The queen also refers back to the baby on the pedestal holding her own sphere. Otterness described the baby as "the center of a centrifugal force that spins the cycle round and round." A longitudinal and latitudinal grid has been incised into the beachball globe, but it has not been mapped. The world has not yet been divided into territories. However vicious the behavior of the females may be in response to patriarchy, Otterness puts hope for a transformed future in women's hands.

Geometry, workers, and women are sources of hope in *The Frieze.* But how believable are they? *The Frieze* suggests cycles and repetitions that are inescapable. It is also directional, and momentum is almost entirely away from *Children's Paradise*, toward *Judgment*. After the *Male Fall* (fig. 14) and the *Female Fall* (fig. 15), even with the *Male Ladder* (fig. 8) and the *Female Ladder* (fig. 11), there is no going back to a state that is not susceptible to repetition and cycles. The one figure in whom male and female coalesce is a monster. The promise of geometry is eternal but, like the

Installation view of *Tom Otterness: Sculpture*, Brooke Alexander Gallery, January–February, 1983.




# TOM OTTERNESS' FRIEZE

JUDITH RUSSI KIRSHNER

At a moment when every public personality and every inherited ideology is suspect, Tom Otterness has revived the ideological function of architectural friezes and unabashedly appropriated this antique vehicle for his own invented genealogy of royalty and female revolution, battles and triumphs, power struggles and contemporary final judgments. Architectural friezes traditionally commemorate or venerate ritual public occasions, military victories, or national achievements. More generic is the tradition of relief sculpture, an art that survives well on ancient sepulchral monuments and also migrates through Renaissance ornament and bronze cathedral doors. Inserting himself in this patrilineal tradition of art history, Otterness has pastiched his own topically significant, iconographic program, one that is politically liberal and open-ended in its associative capacity, and glazed with a mordant, economical wit reminding us of James Thurber's marvelous style in *Men, Women and Dogs* (1943).

Otterness' political program is rooted in praxis, his participation in a collective mode of artistic production and distribution. One of the founding members of Colab (Collaborative Projects), he was a key organizer as well as exhibitor in the Times Square Show, 1980, which brought together esthetically diverse artists in a highly visible alternative to a closed art-world system. Around the time of these collaborative theme shows Otterness became controversial for *Shot Dog Film*, a super-8 film made in 1977 in which he executed a dog from the pound. Not aired on cable TV until the end of 1979, the film brought him enormous notoriety in the art world and in the outraged mass-media coverage. The psychology of the act is disturbing, even horrible, but I am reluctant to locate it on a sliding scale of sensationalism, art, and morality. Never denying the moral dilemma that the work practically broadcasts on every level, Otterness refuses to comment on motives or disclose his reasons for making the film or shooting the dog, saying only that the work was honed down to be the way it is. He's never provided explanations that could be used as interpretive handles to make me and others feel better about it. In fact even if one trotted out the predictable humanitarian rationales or art justifications, I would still be leery of accepting them since they might just represent retrospective consistency, and I would fall into a trap of intentionalist fallacy. What remains is a problem, a question, and a commemorative plaque done in 1980 depicting the skeletons of a man and a dog before a tribunal. In addition to this nagging baggage, before his frieze was first exhibited last year Otterness was best known for the simple white figurines—"hand-produced collector's items" cast in durable Hydrostone and protected with a hard, glossy surface—that he sold originally for $4.99 and which popped up first all over New York and then elsewhere. Crowds of these tiny white objects, each in its own plastic bag, are arrayed, waiting for delivery, on tabletops in his studio—which he calls "the factory."

Above: Tom Otterness, "Judgment," section of 17-panel frieze, 1982, cast plaster, 48 x 10 x 5½".

Tom Otterness, sketch of plan for 14 panels of 17-panel frieze, 1983, ink on paper, 10½ x 10¼". For three-panel doorway not depicted here see p. 59.

A sketch plan for 14 panels of *The Frieze* by Tom Otterness.
Published in *Artforum*, Volume 22, Number 2, October, 1983. © *Artforum*.

moments of community and play in *The Frieze*, it exists in the shadow of a will to destruction and domination. The excess of passion is so baked into the story that it is hard to imagine interactions among the figures undetermined by it, even if patriarchy disappears. However we interpret the story, and like all good stories, this one is open to many interpretations, it has an overriding feeling of fate. If the old scripts, the old time-honored patterns, are inescapable, what does progress mean? Releasing the potential for discovery and freedom within *The Frieze* is what the Craig Starr Gallery has done.

III

Its installation breaks any sense of narrative inevitability. After *Battle Cartoon*, the panel that greets visitors to the gallery, the installation has no sustained sequential development and no points of culmination from which it seems difficult or impossible to veer off. *Judgment* appears not opposite *Children's Paradise*, at the other end of the cycle, but immediately flanked by *Fall of the King* (fig. 2) and *Female Revolution* in the first gallery. The images of leisure, *Boating Party* (fig. 10) and *King's Parade* (fig. 9), face *Judgment*. *Children's Paradise* appears in the second room, opposite *Battle of the Sexes*. *Female Ladders* and *Male Ladders* are installed in the first gallery, and *Male* and *Female Fall* in the second. Breaking their expected sequential development has the effect of turning ideas of ascent and fall into everyday activities rather than biblical events.

Just as decisive, the gallery presents *The Frieze* at eye level. Seeing the sections up close eliminates the straining that comes with having to look up. Face to face, the scenes are vivid, the figures tactile, the concentration and intelligence of Otterness's hand and eye marvelous. Each section still connects to other sections, but now each becomes its own focus of attention. Each emerges as a scene encouraging its own imagining. It is not that the story does not matter, but rather that it can now be opened up in unexpected directions. The stories are no longer up there, but with us, down here. The narrative is no longer a program. Nothing is locked in.

Seen as its own image, the oddness of the baby affixed to the pedestal jumps out, separating her sufficiently from the narrative in which she is the fulcrum to raise questions. Where did she come from? Who gave birth to her? Is she, the savior, immaculate, a female baby Jesus? Is she a new kind of being, or perhaps a sci-fi creature from

another planet? Does the hope *The Frieze* invested in her depend upon the viewer's ability to connect with her oddness and imagine her and her sphere outside scripts?

The gallery's third inspired decision was asking Otterness to enlarge *Killing of the King* (fig. 12). Of the three images of the destruction of the king, this one is the primal scene. The king is a dead stiff. Three female figures, the three furies, oversee his flat dead body. As in *Female Revolution*, the crown he was born with has been separated from his head and his body flattened so that it faces the viewer—it seems about to fall out of the relief. The king's penis is pointed almost straight down like a divining rod; penis and scrotum look like a toy gun. The fury on the left holds him inside the relief with her left hand and with her right hand wields the knife, with which she has stabbed him. The figure standing above him has two fingers in her sex and two fingers in her mouth, her expression lascivious and alien to speech. The third fury, on the right, sits, hovering over the king, her fists on her knees, her expression perhaps ecstatic. The high relief of the furies's heads makes them tactile—as if encouraging viewers to touch or, strangely, maybe even comfort them. The king is toppled, done, over with, dead. He will no longer bother anyone. Compared with the furies's wrath, however, he seems almost human—he, too, a victim.

This installation argues for Otterness not just as a gifted storyteller but as a great image maker. For me the most catalytical level of hope, the first inspiration, proposed by *The Frieze* lies here, in the potential of sculptural images, made by the hand and bursting with personality, complexity, and culture, to hold their own in the now.

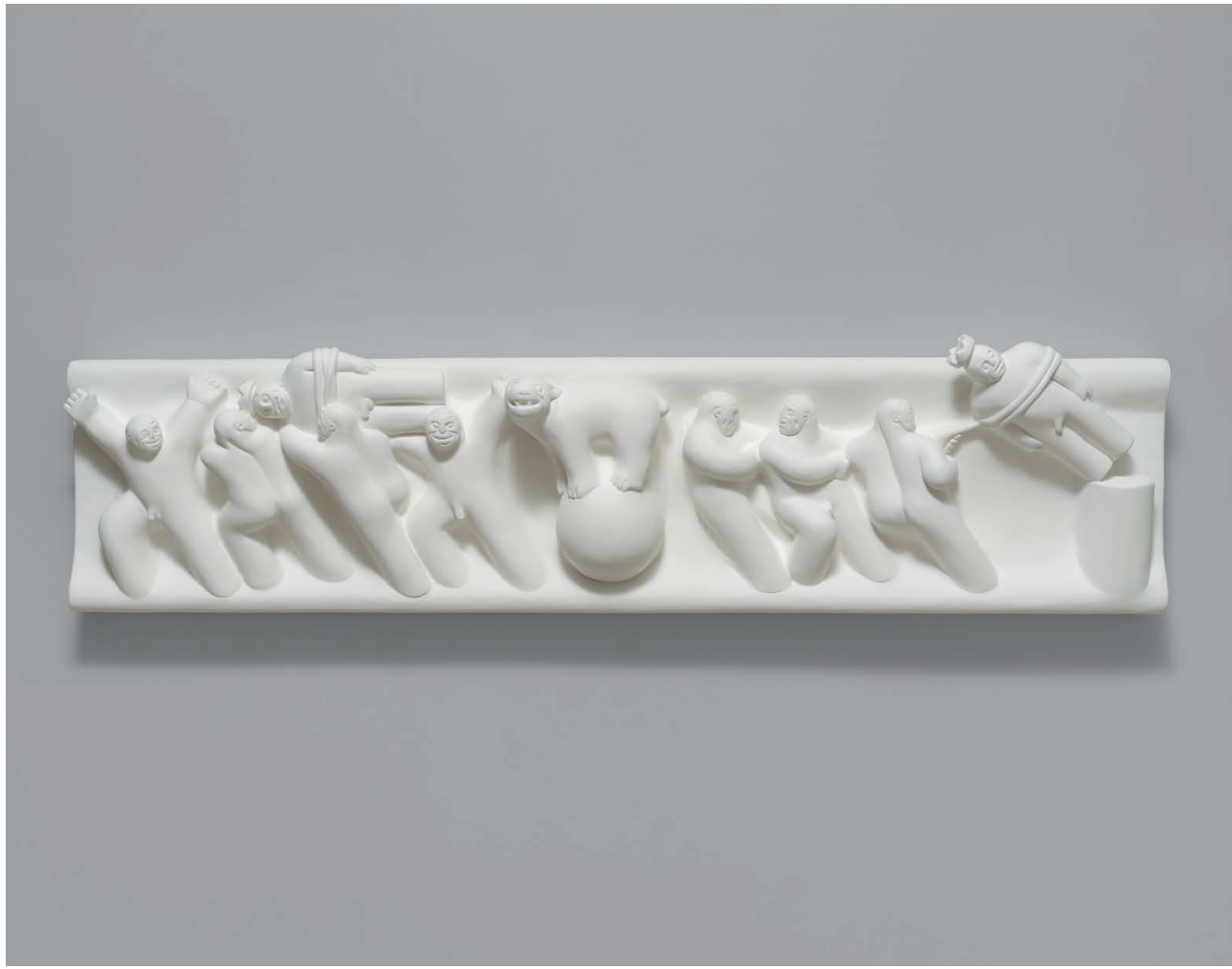
* * * * *

Michael Brenson is an art historian and critic. He received a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University and was a critic for *The New York Times* (1982–91). He is a Getty Scholar, a Guggenheim Fellow, a Clark Fellow, and the recipient of a Whiting Creative Nonfiction Grant. He currently serves as the Artistic Director of the Jonathan and Barbara Silver Foundation.

1. Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 5.
2. Tom Otterness, interview by Michael Brenson: 9 January 2025, Long Island City, NY. Unless otherwise noted, all of Otterness's statements are from this interview.
3. Tom Otterness, interview by Douglas Dreishspoon, 17 May 1996, Brooklyn, NY. See also *Tom Otterness: The Frieze* (Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, NC, 1996) n.p.

## PLATES

1. *Battle Cartoon*, 1981



2. *Fall of the King*, 1982–83

3. *Judgment*, 1982–83

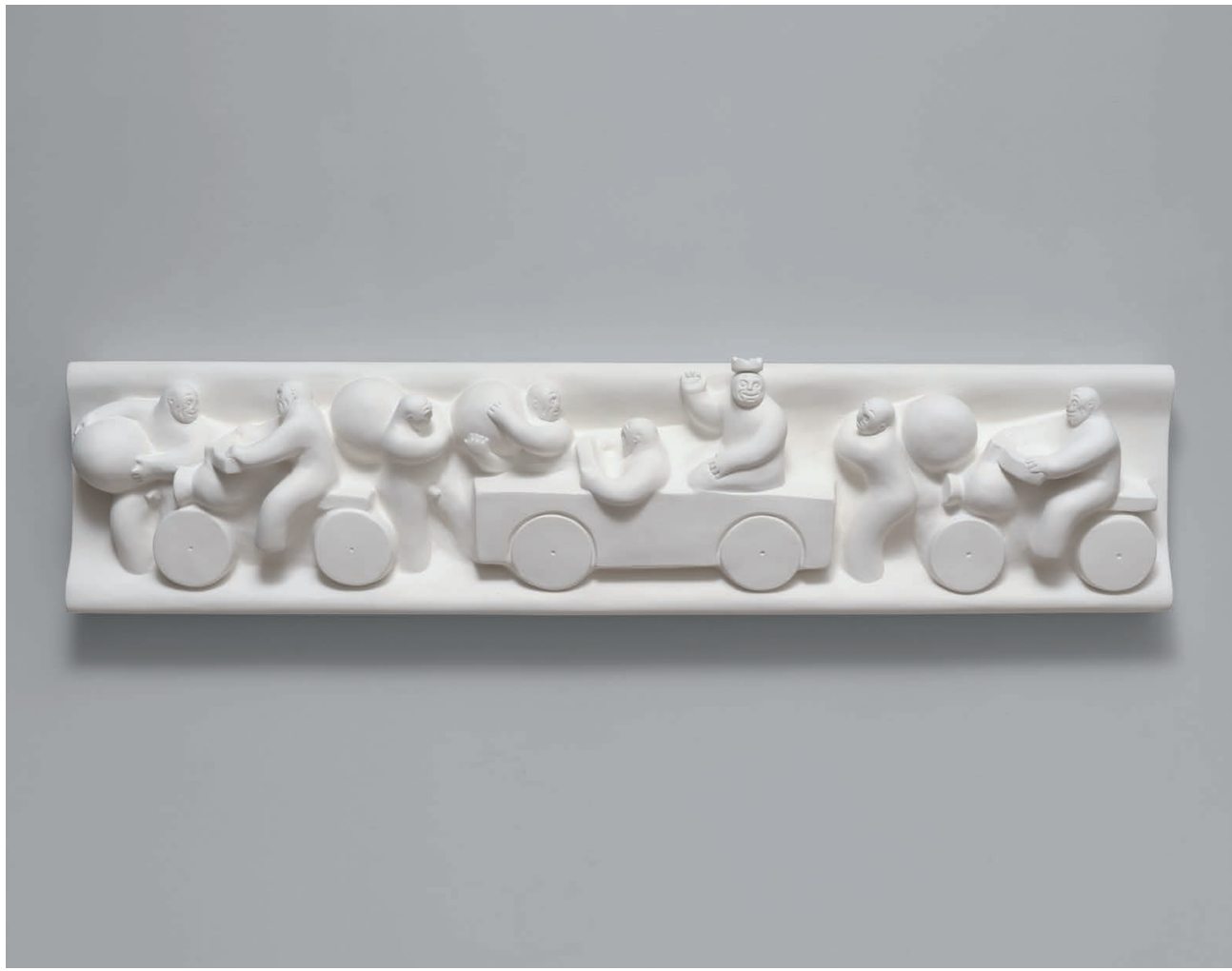
4. *Female Revolution*, 1982–83

5. *Bad Girl with Two Acrobats*, 1982–83

6. *Three Bad Girls*, 1982–83

*7. Baby and Globe on Cylinder*, 1982

8. *Male Ladder*, 1982–83



9. *King's Parade*, 1982–83

10. *Boating Party*, 1982–83

11. *Female Ladder*, 1982–83

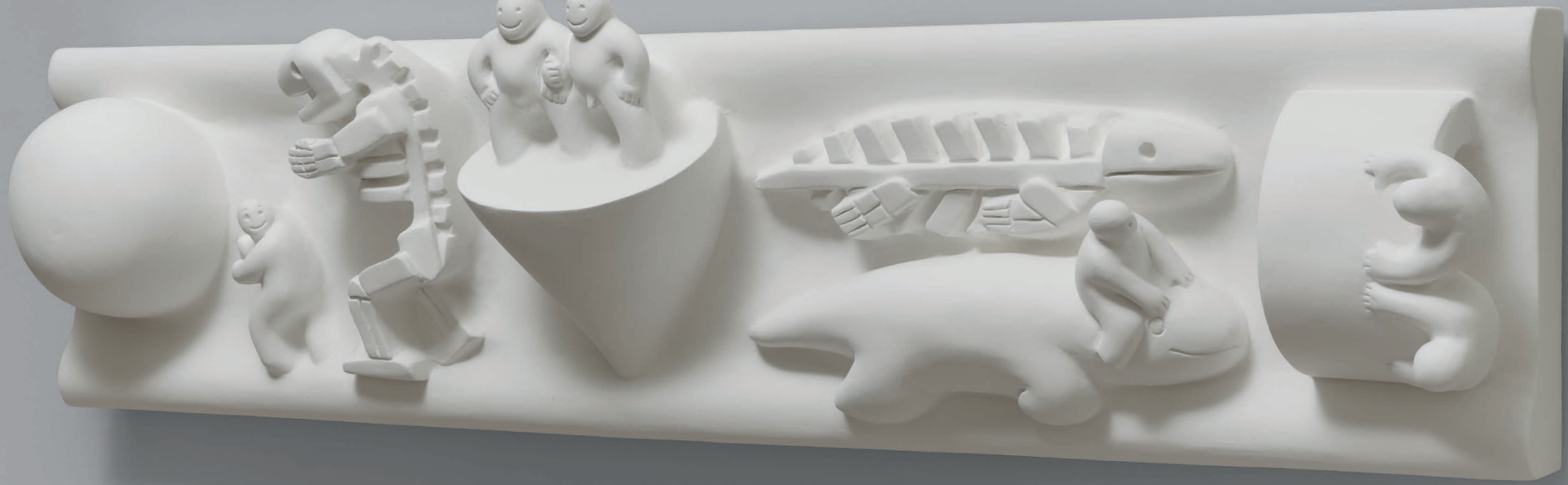
12. *Killing of the King*, 1982–83

13. *Battle of the Sexes*, 1982–83

14. *Male Fall*, 1982–83

15. *Female Fall*, 1982–83

16. *Children's Paradise*, 1982–83



## INSTALLATION VIEWS

## ADDITIONAL WORKS

17. *Bad Boys*, 1982–83

18. Female Workers, 1982–83

19. *Male Workers*, 1982–83

20. *Male Revolution*, 1982–83

21. Female Heroics, 1982–83

## CHECKLIST

The sculptures in the exhibition, except for *Killing of the King*, are unique casts made in 2025 from the original 1982 molds.

In 2025, I enlarged the small *Female Victory (Killing of the King)* in clay to its current size and cast the piece in the show. I had first proposed this enlarged sculpture for the 1983 Brooke Alexander Gallery exhibition, but it remained unrealized. The smaller *Female Victory (Killing of the King)* showed the three same figures, but the king didn't have his crown and cylindrical legs. As in my 1982 proposal drawing, I put them back in the new sculpture.

The original Brooke Alexander Gallery friezes were designed to meet the ceiling as cornice moldings and had open backs and slanted side walls. They were used to make editions in 1983. Some of these editions were hand colored, some in white plaster or Hydrocal, and some were cast in other materials.

The sculptures presented at Craig Starr Gallery have perpendicular side walls and fit flush to the walls. Each unique plaster has also been cast in bronze as an edition of 3 with 1 AP.

*—Tom Otterness*

1. *Battle Cartoon*, 1981
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
24¼ × 22¼ × 5 inches

2. *Fall of the King*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
11¾ × 45½ × 5⅝ inches

3. *Judgment*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
11¼ × 51⅝ × 6¼ inches

4. *Female Revolution*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
11⅝ × 46½ × 5¾ inches

5. *Bad Girl with Two Acrobats*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
10½ × 20¼ × 4⅜ inches

6. *Three Bad Girls*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
10½ × 20 × 4 inches

7. *Baby and Globe on Cylinder*, 1982
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
26½ × 20¾ × 19⅜ inches

8. *Male Ladder*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
102¼ × 8 × 7¾ inches

9. *King's Parade*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
10¾ × 46⅛ × 6 inches

10. *Boating Party*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
11¼ × 43 × 6½ inches

11. *Female Ladder*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
103 × 7¾ × 6⅛ inches

12. *Killing of the King*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
40¼ × 33¼ × 10½ inches

13. *Battle of the Sexes*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
10⅝ × 79¼ × 6¼ inches

14. *Male Fall*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
109⅛ × 10⅜ × 5¾ inches

15. *Female Fall*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
109½ × 10⅜ × 6⅞ inches

16. *Children's Paradise*, 1982–83
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
11⅜ × 44⅝ × 6¾ inches

17. *Bad Boys*, 1982–83*
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
10½ × 44⅝ × 6¼ inches

18. Female Workers, 1982–83*
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
10⅝ × 48¼ × 5½ inches

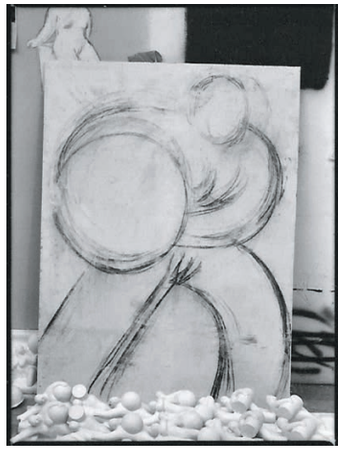
19. *Male Workers*, 1982–83*
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
10½ × 44⅛ × 5½ inches

20. *Male Revolution*, 1982–83*
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
11 × 42⅛ × 6½ inches

21. Female Heroics, 1982–83*
Plaster coated in polymer emulsion
11¼ × 41⅝ × 6¼ inches

*Not exhibited

Overleaf: A skylight installation of *The Frieze* at a private residence in Washington, D.C.



This publication accompanies the exhibition

Tom Otterness: *Battle of the Sexes*

10 April – 11 July 2025



Archival photography courtesy of the Tom Otterness studio
Plate photography: Thomas Barratt Photography
Design: Tony Morgan/Step Graphics
Printing: Meridian Printing
Edition: 1,200 copies

Craig Starr Gallery and Tom Otterness wish to dedicate this publication to Brooke and Carolyn Alexander, the first supporters of *The Frieze*.

Craig Starr Gallery wishes to thank Tom Otterness, Coleen Fitzgibbon, and the Tom Otterness studio, without whom this exhibition would not have been possible.

ISBN: 978-1-7347239-6-0

**CRAIG STARR** GALLERY

5 EAST 73RD STREET NEW YORK NY 10021 TEL 212.570.1739 CRAIGSTARR.COM

**CRAIG STARR** GALLERY