STYLE

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Italo Scanga: An artist whose time has come

His students' admiration led to current interest in his work

By Hunter Drohojowska

Italo Scanga is an artist who prides himself on what he describes as his studied perversity. "I always want to contradict myself, so I'm consistently moving from theme to theme." His latest theme, "Heads," currently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is attracting the kind of steady attention that has eluded him throughout his career.

And the notoriety has come in a rush. Besides the LACMA exhibition, Scanga's work can also be seen in group shows at the Jan Baum and Newspace galleries and in another solo show at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. At 51, he expresses a childlike surprise at this sudden surge of interest in his work.

As a teacher of 20 years, the last seven of them at UC San Diego (he lives 50 yards from Wind 'n' Sea Beach in La Jolla), Scanga was best known as the man who taught such famous artists as Bruce Nauman, Ree Morton and Stephen Keister. But his students didn't forget their mentor once they launched their own careers. They recommended Scanga's work to anyone who would listen. That, coupled with a resurgence of interest in figurative art and expressionist styles, was enough to make Scanga a gallery name.

"I was ripe like a fruit," says the curly-haired, blue-eyed Scanga during a recent interview at LACMA. "Maybe I wasn't ready before; maybe they didn't take me seriously because I was considered more of a teacher than an artist. It's a difficult role to get out of."

Equally important to the recent good word-of-mouth was Scanga's acceptance, in the early '70s, of his Italian heritage as a subject in his art. His theme then had been welded steel sculptures, which were popular but "not especially original." The return to his roots compelled him to abandon this formal approach and to adapt a more personal and idiosyncratic art for which he is now best known. Beginning with tableaux of kitschy religious paintings combined with tools and other relics from his hometown, it evolved into sculptures created from altered religious icons.

It was a distinctly autobiographical series of works, admittedly cathartic. Scanga had grown up in Lago, a town he describes as almost medieval. "In 17 years, I hardly knew anyone from outside the town. When we saw a car, it was a big deal. Everybody was Catholic, so the church played an important role in your life."

Another formative influence in his youth was that of a cabinetmaker who taught him how to carve wood. "I made furniture, not sculpture. This was during World War II, when the schools were

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He resurrects past artistry using a subjective approach

By Christopher Knight
Herald art critic

The Modernist preoccupation with newness has not been without its disabling features. In keeping with the larger sense of constant, endless re-invention through the miracles of technology, an accelerated rate of change created a pressure for absolute newness in art that has had its darker side. While convulsive change did give to the enterprise of art the heady dream of perpetual social renewal by cultural challenge, it carried with it a built-in, ever more rapidly approaching obsolescence, too. For if the pressure was to be maintained, what was "new" just moments ago had inevitably to be cast aside, embalmed and buried in the museum of cultural acceptance in favor of the next startling challenge to appear on the horizon.

Italo Scanga is an artist who has spent the past several years rummaging around the Modernist burial ground. He's been making sculptures and drawings whose origins are clearly tied to a whole host of familiar sources — Constructivism, Assemblage, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism and more — and to traditions of folk art, artifacts of popular culture and earlier periods of Western art, besides. So self-evident are many of the sources from which he draws that some may be tempted to dismiss his efforts as mere grave-robbing. But to do so, I think, would be to miss the point.

At the moment, there are abundant opportunities to examine the range of Scanga's concerns. His work was included in a group exhibition of current art that exploits religious imagery, seen last month at the university art gallery

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closed. The only thing we thought of was basic necessities, not art."

In 1980, these carving techniques and his interest in metaphysics culminated in a series titled "Fears," a group of gangly, stick figures each holding above its head a symbol representing a specific fear, from natural (lightning or fire) to cultural ("Fear of Drinking" or "Fear of Buying a House").

Succumbing to his own fear of stagnation, Scanga's series of chunky carved heads at LACMA represents his latest "perversity." In explaining the faces painted with slashes of color and the obvious cubist references — guitars, wineglasses — on the backs of the heads, Scanga says, "I wanted to be more rational, and the heads seemed the logical thing to do. I used cubism because it has to do with modernism. I didn't want to go to an obscure source, as most people do, because they don't want to admit being influenced. I want to say — of course I'm influenced.

"It was the other side of me, too. I wanted to be less emotional, less nervous, less autobiographical, less narrative. I chose to do this at a time when everybody else is interested in expressionism. I think expressionism has become too common and ordinary. So I went backward."

Walking through the galleries of 17th- to 19th-century art at LACMA, Scanga emits "oohs" and "aahs" of appreciation. Pointing to a ceramic relief by Della Robbia, he blurts, "I like that Italian artist!" His enthusiasm wanes, however, when he sees the installation of his huge heads. All lined up like the deity sculptures on the Easter Islands, they are arranged much too formally for his taste. "We'll move this one with the hair up there and move the shinier one back, and . . . " Under his direction, the rearranged installation begins to look a bit more lively.

Scanga moved to the United States when he was 17, settling with his family in Rockwell, Pa., where his father worked as a trackman for the Baltimore and Ohio railroad. A year later, with only a rudimentary grasp of English, he moved to Detroit, working as a GM assembly-line worker at night and attending school by day. After two years in the army, he attended art school at Michigan State University on the G.I. bill.

"It was in the middle of nowhere," recalls Scanga, "but I had great teachers. They told me, 'You can't paint, why don't you deal with materials?' So I started doing figures in clay." According to Scanga, it took him until 1970 to shed the admonitions of those teachers. "I'm a late bloomer. I was never a star. I would have loved to be a minimalist, but it never happened."

Those desires were dashed by his good friend, minimalist sculptor Dan Flavin, who'd stopped by his studio one day in the mid-'60s to see his art. "He told me he hated anthropomorphic art. I felt terrible. I responded that there's nothing I can do about it. I'm anthropomorphic." That, Scanga explains, forced him to look within for the sources of his art. "But you can't make art for long by just looking at yourself."

Scanga has returned to building figurative sculpture in a series called "Archimedes' Troubles," which is currently at the La Jolla Museum. "I looked Archimedes up in an encyclopedia and got interested in his life. He lived in Sicily, close to where I lived. It was a Greek colony then, mostly Spartans. I read that part in a cookbook," says Scanga by way of explaining the inspiration.

These sculptural figures, like those in the "Fears" series, hold up symbols, but, in this case, the circles and triangles of Archimedes the geometrician. Above some of them, the circles disintegrate, allowing the geometry to take over, which is hinted at in the perplexed looks of the figures.

Explains Scanga: "This guy (Archimedes) is caught, he becomes helpless. He becomes a prisoner of his own beliefs, his own inventions. He's entangled by his own modesty, his own brilliance, his own psychosis. You can read all of these things into the works or none of them.

"The point is," he continues, "I never specify one event or position. Something happens and everything else drops into place. I start with an idea, but I don't want to prove every point before I go on to the next stop. My work is not about structuralism."

Scanga is reminded of Vico, an 18th-century philosopher who believed that history repeats itself. "*Corsi et recorsi.* Appearing and reappearing. This means repetition of history. I like this theory, that if you don't solve the problem, you move on. Vico freed me from thinking that you have to be consistent, that I was allowed to do what I want instead of being restricted by limitations and dogmas."