



"THE NINTH CIRCLE"

2005

Doug Thielscher

CARRARA MARBLE

18" x 19" x 12"

PHOTO: COURTESY THE MCLOUGHLIN GALLERY

SAN FRANCISCO

"No Fooling We Mean It!"

at The McLoughlin Gallery

It may be T.S. Eliot's cruelest month, but April always starts in good, silly humor, capering like a late-March lamb. "No Fooling We Mean It!," which opened April first, lives up to its ironic title: the idiosyncratic, witty sculptures of David Middlebrook, Jeff Schomberg and Doug Thielscher explore big philosophical and moral issues without falling into either giddy jokiness or its inverse, badly clothed good intentions.

Middlebrook creates elegantly simple but soundly engineered visual paradoxes in wood, stone, clay and metal: his stacks of seemingly weighty elements playfully defy gravity (while occasionally hinting at weightier concerns). *King of Things* is a Surrealist *personnage* composed of found objects—but every element is handmade, from the huge head, a resin frying-pan handle, to its rope-coil abdomen and shredded-tire feet, both fashioned from bronze. The improvised portrait bust of *Carbon* pulls off a similar levitation, its gigantic head an egg carved from basalt balanced atop a cardboard-box torso fashioned from bronze. More sobering is the enigmatic *Heirloom*, an

insectile bundle of blanket tied in string (all bronze) standing on three nylon-strap legs (actually aluminum); it's a memorial to a soldier killed in Afghanistan based on the package of personal effects mailed to his parents. Schomberg scavenges metal for his sculptures: three small steel figurines given industrial-fitting heads (spark-plug socket, spigot); a pair of metal collages set within steel frames, *Hinged* and *Unhinged*; *Spiral Axis*, a sheet of steel coiled like a paper yoyo; and *Trumbull*, an old metal fuse box outfitted with a tiny video display of dancing flames. Thielscher carves marble and travertine into fragments of classical-style human figures enacting dark dramas: *Cain #1* shows a fist merged with a stone block; *To Be Different* has a bare foot trampling a bundle from which protrudes a single finger; the multiple heads of *Trudy* sit atop a miniaturized upended coffin; and *The Ninth Circle* depicts Dante's Count Ugolino gnawing at his enemy's, or son's, head—a hellish image in the shivery Romantic tradition.

—DEWITT CHENG