

[Chloe Piene's new skullptures \(a review by Tim Maul\)](#)

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I watch mostly public television, and one of my favorite programs is 'Secrets of the Dead'. This hour long show combines elements of history, archeology, and forensic research in unraveling the 'mysteries' of numerous grim historical events. Several weeks ago, one segment investigated the 'secret graveyards' of organized crime,

specifically, a location in the borough of Queens, New York. In the final scenes, the skeletal remains of gang members murdered in the early 80's were unearthed. Through these somber images, I reconnected to my encounter with Chloe Piene's sculpture, whose exhibition at Gasser & Grunert in Chelsea had closed a few weeks earlier. The human skull, that timeless logo of death, is having an especially good year both in and out of the arts. Here in Manhattan, poor Yorrick advertises a production of Hamlet, while on 'The Simpsons' one of Bart's trio of tormentors at Springfield elementary sports death's head on a black t shirt. And there's that Damien Hirst. Hirst, like other art provocateurs periodically gets it exactly right, as did Warhol's 'Disaster' series, which offered up a 'little death' during Pop's euphoric zenith. Hirst is Hirst, but his diamond encrusted platinum skull, may be, as Carl Andre once noted (about Warhol) the art we deserve right now. Hirst's stated admiration of Mexican Christian and pre-colonial religious iconography, assures his ordination into a select, male priesthood of artists who transforms that which is without value into the eternal, piss into gold. Piene cites the influence of Joseph Beuys in her work, and his presence is felt here primarily in the automatism of her drawings. Along with Warhol, Beuys was one of the 'catholic' of 20th century artists. No matter how contrived, his 'death' and resurrection on the Russian front is potent myth central in the construct of (maybe) the greatest messiah complex in contemporary art. Apart from his performances, what Beuys left behind appears to be disintegrating in the vitrine/relicquary, awaiting reanimation. The dead, as a million zombie movies confirm, shall walk again. Beuys's gaunt features (I witnessed his 'Coyote' performance at Rene Block Gallery in '74) suggested Mary Shelly's shambling, romantic monster- wearing a hat and a fisherman's vest. Curiously, it is Warhol's (no picture of health himself) uneven production that resonates in his absence, and we have instituted his saintly musings as the Word of Andy. Both Beuys and Warhol share incidents in their biographies where they returned from the dead, but only one's art still 'lives'. One hopes that Chloe Piene will never, or has not, suffered the trauma of either Joseph or Andy; her art reaches further back to the macabre tendencies of the Northern renaissance, and earlier. The charcoal drawings could read like Bronze Age eroticism, also channeling the bitter Grosz and the twisted DeKooning, among others. But my real engagement was with her sculpture, every one of which could stand as a study for some unspeakably dark monument. These untitled assemblages of plastilina, wax, wood and plastic, maintained a clammy, fresh from the studio appearance. They, of course, are of skulls, modeled by hand and built up from casts of teeth, or maybe jawbone. Some pieces are formed into clumps, while others appear halted in the process of excavation, recalling that dank mafia resting place. Piene's skulls hold us at a cautious distance, and a visit to this smart gallery unexpectedly becomes a hushed tour through a catacombs. As suggested by her 'Golem' drawing, inert materials can be, through occult practices, transformed into living tissue. But nothing is living or breathing here. There is also a unmistakable resemblance to fecal matter in several of the works. What creature could have produced such deposits? – The actor gobbling Tyrannosaurus Rex in 'Jurassic Park?' Simultaneously waste material, carnage, grotesque décor, or self portraiture, Chloe Piene advances the long history of the skull in art, moving it beyond juvenilia. Someone said recently that 'the sword is not an antique', and we need not worry about the skull becoming one either; they are a growth industry.

Tim Maul, NYC, 7/08

[Check Chloe Piene's book at onestar press here](#)







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