

A Haunting Installation Transforms the Phillips Collection

- by [Becca Rothfeld](#) on March 6, 2015



Bernardi Roig, “Herr Mauroner” (2008) (all images courtesy of the artist)

The main building of the Phillips Collection, the oldest modern art museum in America, is a sprawling, neo-Georgian affair, buckling beneath the weight of its dark, mahogany décor. The building dates back to 1897, and it has all the trappings of a quintessentially traditional gallery space: opulent architecture, the promise of contemplative, quiet, and modernist artworks that eschew realism enough to hint at radicalism but not enough to seriously alarm anyone.

But a curious sculpture peers over the Phillips’s balcony: a bleach-white figure hoisting a bundle of neon lights over its shoulder, as if preparing to cast them into the street below. This interloper is one of six sculptures that comprise the exhibition *NO/Escape*, the brainchild of contemporary Mallorcan artist Bernardi Roig. All but one are human figures, realistically rendered but strikingly, chillingly white. They are scattered throughout the gallery, some in the unabashed open, others in hidden alcoves.

One sculpture, “The Man of the Light,” greets visitors immediately upon their arrival: a flabby, middle-aged man in mid-step on the spiraling staircase in the entryway, hauling a collection of lights strung on wires behind him. Roig modeled the denizens of *NO/Escape* after actual acquaintances — one cast is taken from the artist’s gardener, another from a friend — and they could not be more unlike the idealized molds of antiquity. Colorless and harshly lit, Roig’s offspring are chubby and slovenly, naked from the waste up, and clad in wrinkled, unbuttoned pants. He describes the figure in one of his installations, “Insults to the Public,” as the “average bourgeois man, bald, overweight, and apathetic.” This ruffled personality, replicated in sculpture after sculpture, seems out of place at the Phillips, a stronghold of muted tastefulness, the province of Degas’s delicate ballerinas and Renoir’s quaint luncheons.

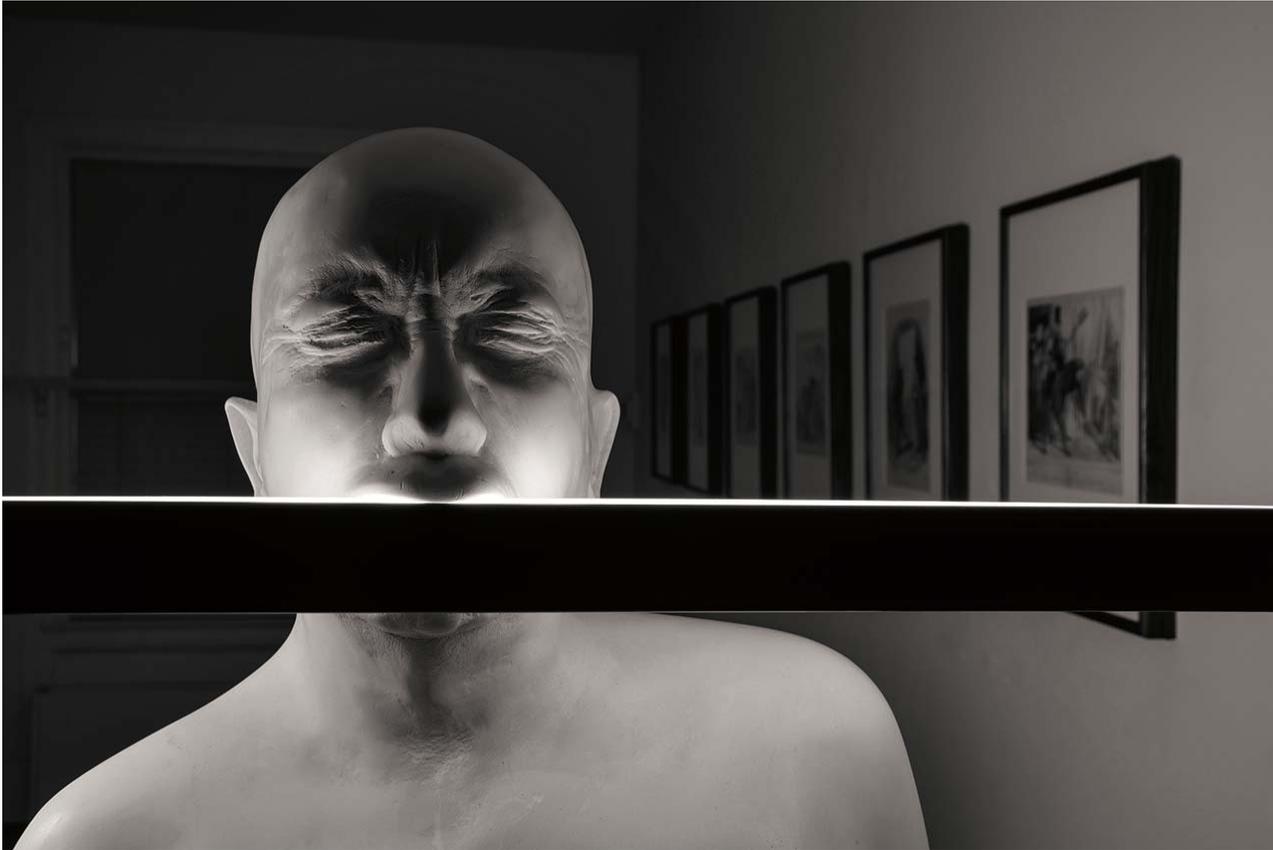


Bernardi Roig “The Man of the Light,” 2005

The exhibition is part of “*Intersections*,” a multi-year project featuring contemporary artworks that respond to the Phillips Collection’s permanent holdings and especially to its architecture. *NO/Escape* is not exactly integrated into the space, but it is expertly, even elegantly, tailored to it: “The Man of the Light” fits fluidly into the stairwell’s contours, the attendant tumble of lights cascades down the steps like a neon waterfall, while another piece links two parts of the museum, the imposing Phillips House and the minimalist Goh Annex, an addition erected in the 1960s and renovated in the late 80s. This sculpture, “Actéon,” consists of a glass slab stretching from one building to the other, pinning a figure midway up the brick wall. He is shirtless, and his face is pressed uncomfortably against a bar of light. His bare feet dangle impotently, yards above the ground.

There is no denying the crisp austerity of Roig’s installations — but there is something jarring about sculptures so at home in a gallery with which they are also so at odds. Spatially, Roig’s work is seamless, but its presence amidst modest still-lives and landscapes is discomfiting. The works’ sleek and purposeful placement is distinctly out of place.

Roig has inserted his installations into the unlikeliest parts of the gallery, demanding our perplexed attention. At one point, one of his creations goes so far as to block off access to an entire room of lithographs: “An Illuminated Head for Blinky P. (The Gun),” named for German minimalist painter Blinky



Bernardi Roig, “An Illuminated Head for Blinky P. (The Gun)” (2010)

Palermo, stands guard before the entrance. Like the rest of his cohort, he is pudgy and bald, with pants unbuttoned to reveal the top of his boxers. A bar of neon light obstructs the doorway, cutting across his face. The sculpture’s expression is half-kiss, half-grimace, his lips pursed forcefully against the bar in front of him. He holds his right arm behind his back. According to the exhibition catalogue, his fingers are curved in the shape of a gun. The gesture is a secret between him and Roig, a pose we can never witness.

Outside the building, “White Cage,” an empty, glowing cage with neon bars, beckons incongruously from the otherwise pedestrian corner of 21st and Q Streets. Like “An Illuminated Head for Blinky P.,” “White Cage” toes the line between entrance and exit: the sculpture’s bent bars form a conspicuous opening that hints at escape but invites entry. The cage encloses nothing: it is an emblem of imprisonment that appears peculiarly fragile, ethereal, as if it were made of light. The construction of “White Cage” undoes its iconography, prying a symbol of imprisonment apart from its usual function. Where “The Man of the Light” stoops beneath a tangible intangible — the weight of light — the neon construction of “White Cage” presents us with the inverse, an insubstantial solid.

A final installation, “Insults to the Public,” is a further bafflement. The work is half static, half fluid: while footage of Fernando Castro, an art critic and professor of aesthetics at the University of Madrid, plays on the wall on loop, a sculpture of a small, fat figure slumps towards the video in a posture of despair, brandishing an outraged fist. “Insults to the Public” is named after Peter Handke’s 1966 experimental “anti-play,” published in English as *Offending the Audience*. Handke’s work features four “characters” in casual dress,

charged with the task of vehemently insisting that there is no play, no imagined scenario, no collective suspension of belief. Over the course of the evening, the “characters” in *Offending the Audience* reverse the event’s focus, turning their gaze on the audience and encouraging the house to turn their gaze on themselves. The play dissects the ritual of theater-going, offending not only the audience members in attendance but also the notion of an audience that can be defined in opposition to performance. The audience, Handke intimates, is playing a role: the role of a cultured elite, out for a night at the theater.



Bernardi Roig “White Cage” (2014)



Bernardi Roig “Insults to the Public” (2013)

In “Insults to the Public,” as in Handke’s play, performance bleeds into spectatorship. Roig puts the viewer (us) and the artwork (the frumpy, slouching figure) into direct dialogue with criticism, reminding us that the act of gallery-going is not an exercise in passive observation but rather an exercise in complicity: as we wander through the Phillips, we opt into the gallery-game, appreciating art we think that we should appreciate. “Insults to the Public” reanimates the inert art object, bringing the exchange between viewer, artwork, and cultural conversation to the fore. The figure, fixed in his dejected stance, entertains debate with the critic speaking heatedly in the video. Like “White Cage,” a liberating prison, and “The Man of the Light,” a display of heavy light, “Insults to the Public” inverts its medium. It is sculptural, by definition rigid, but it succumbs to the fluidity of interpersonal exchange, conceding that commentary and context are at least as constitutive of an artwork as any of its formal qualities.



Bernardi Roig “An Illuminated Head for Blinky P. (The Gun)” (2010)

“Insults to the Public,” like the rest of *NO/Escape*, is an affront to the myth that the gallery is an insular, hermetic space, sealed against outside intrusions. Intrusions are the core of Roig’s work, and they alter the landscape of our expectations. Once we glimpse the first, unexplained sculpture, we inadvertently seek out the next. The gallery becomes haunted with the specter of potential figures — and the sculptures we do find are frozen mid-motion, inviting us to imagine their next moves.

Ultimately, *NO/Escape* reminds us that the terms of our imprisonment are the terms of our escape. The Phillips, like the figures in Roig’s provocative show, is static, but our interactions with it are not. To navigate a space differently is to navigate a different space — to escape without really escaping, without needing to really escape.

[NO/Escape](#) continues at the Phillips Collection through April 5.