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ART/ARCHITECTURE; A Sculptor and His Famous Muse Make Art Together

By M. G. LORD
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LOS ANGELES — WHEN Keith Edmier was 9, he saw a poster of Farrah Fawcett in a red bathing suit and fell in love. He was not alone. It was 1976, the year Ms. Fawcett made her debut in "Charlie's Angels," and the poster, based on a photograph by Bruce McBroom, sold 12 million copies.

Now 35, Mr. Edmier is an artist whose work focuses on the celebrity obsessions of his childhood, including Janis Joplin and Evel Knievel. His sculptures were in the Whitney Biennial this year.

Ms. Fawcett's image first surfaced in two of his 1997 works: "Jill Peters," a white polyvinyl sculpture of his real-life grade-school crush wearing Ms. Fawcett's signature hairdo, and "Jill, Keith, Farrah," a triptych of juvenile portraits that links the artist with the actress when she, too, was a child.

In 1999, after learning that Ms. Fawcett herself had studied sculpture at the University of Texas in the late 1960's, Mr. Edmier approached her with an unusual proposal -- that they collaborate on her portrait.

"He didn't want me just to be the model," Ms. Fawcett recalled. "He said, 'I want to work with you.' "

She countered with a modification: that she might also make a sculpture of him. In two years of working together, during which their collaboration became personal as well as artistic, they have produced numerous pieces, ranging from solarized photographs to a punchbowl-size, wax sea shell containing Ms. Fawcett's footprints in sand from her birthplace. (The piece brazenly equates Ms. Fawcett with Botticelli's "Venus.") Their chef-d'oeuvre, however, is a linked pair of life-size, classical sculptures executed without irony: Ms. Fawcett in carved Carrara marble, and Mr. Edmier in cast bronze. In a show titled "Contemporary Projects 7: Keith Edmier and Farrah Fawcett 2000," these pieces, along with other objects, will be on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art starting on Thursday.

In a midriff-baring sweater, platform boots and, of course, the familiar curls -- styles that were fashionable in the 1970's and are fashionable again today -- Ms. Fawcett, 55, seems to have changed little since she portrayed Jill Munroe in "Charlie's Angels." She lives in a high-rise apartment with rigorous security on Wilshire Boulevard. Its living room bears witness to her celebrity. An Andy Warhol silk-screen of her hangs over the fireplace, and an Annie Liebovitz photograph of her son, Redmond, and former husband, the actor Ryan O'Neal, graces a bookshelf. Yet the room is also a monument to the art career she abandoned, filled with promising student work: small female nudes, an unfinished oil portrait, a terra-cotta head of Jesus that she herself restored after its beard chipped during the Northridge earthquake in 1994.

In school, while finishing that very head, Ms. Fawcett learned to make terra cotta resemble bronze by applying a patina -- a technique she rediscovered at the Tallix Fine Art Foundry in Beacon, N.Y., where the bronze sculpture of Mr. Edmier was poured. Artisans there, accustomed to following directions from artists, were startled at her hands-on involvement. "They'd never had an artist do the patina before," she quietly boasted. (Or perhaps they were familiar only with the art technique in her 1997 Playboy video in which she made images by pressing her bare, paint-coated body against chiffon.)

When she spoke, Mr. Edmier was respectfully silent. He slouched on her couch beneath a wall-mounted study for the bronze -- a terra-cotta cast of his nude torso. Like Ms. Fawcett, Mr. Edmier quit school for Hollywood, leaving the California Institute of the Arts to work as a makeup and special-effects artist. His handiwork can be seen in "Nightmare on Elm Street 3" and "Barton Fink." But over time he discovered he "was more interested in making artifacts" -- masks and other special-effects constructions -- than films. In 1991 he moved to Manhattan and, influenced by other artists of his generation, notably Matthew Barney, with whom he shared a studio, began finding his identity as a sculptor.

Although Mr. Edmier was a toddler in the late 1960's, the era has a strong grip on his creative life. "Piano," part of a 1993 solo installation at the Petzel/Borgman Gallery in Manhattan, included glass castings of his actual baby teeth, which his mother had saved. He is best known for "Betty Edmier, 1967," a life-size portrait in transparent pink plastic of his mother in a wool-and-silk suit copied from the one that Jacqueline Kennedy wore when her husband was assassinated. The figure is pregnant; its see-through abdomen holds a fetal self-portrait of Mr. Edmier made from rose-tinted dental acrylic, a medium he mastered in high school while working for a dentist.

The inventiveness of this piece, along with Mr. Edmier's comfort with self-exposure, appealed to Ms. Fawcett. While posing for her own portrait, she recalls, she fidgeted self-consciously; Mr. Edmier, by contrast, was a natural model: "He went into some Zen-like place," Ms. Fawcett said. This is evident in the photographs that Ms. Fawcett and Mr. Edmier selected for "Recasting Pygmalion," a book from Rizzoli that commemorates their partnership. Ms. Fawcett poses in a demure slip; Mr. Edmier parades around as if he's just out of the shower.

This table-turning aspect, in which the artist is more exposed than his celebrity-muse, intrigued Lynn Zelevansky, the curator of contemporary and modern art at the County Museum, who put together the show. "With Keith, you have a new generation's view of what celebrity means -- the fact that he is not interested in celebrity per se, but in its impact on the individual," she said. The work fits in the context of past relationships where the male artist's muse was a female artist with whom he was romantically linked. The show at the County Museum includes a Rodin "Danaid" for which Camille Claudel was the model, a Man Ray photograph of Lee Miller and an Alfred Steiglitz portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe.

Unlike, for instance, the lurid three-dimensional caricatures that Jeff Koons produced of himself with his wife, the Italian porn star Ciccolina,

between 1989 and 91, these bronze and marble pieces are "unabashedly romantic, purposely engaging sentiment to the point of cliché," Ms. Zelevansky said. They also allude shamelessly to landmarks in Western art, "ideals of beauty" expressed in works by Michelangelo, Canova and Rodin, which, Ms. Zelevansky said, makes them appropriate for show in an encyclopedic museum. The exhibit, however, is not without a sexual component. Using dental plastic, Mr. Edmier has cast two orchids that allude explicitly to male and female genitalia.

The collaboration originated as a project for Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, a local art space whose director, Irene Tsatsos, delivered Mr. Edmier's request to Ms. Fawcett's publicist. When Ms. Fawcett signed on, the Art Production Fund, a New York-based nonprofit group founded by Yvonne Force and Doreen Remen in 2000, became involved -- even though Mr. Edmier and Ms. Fawcett could not say what exactly they planned to do. "Because we understood how Keith had already worked with Farrah, ambiguity was an expected preliminary aspect," Ms. Force said.

Nor did she flinch when his needs grew, from rent for one month in a Venice, Calif., studio to rent for eight months. Then there were materials, including 11,000 periwinkle-colored Crayola crayons (Mr. Edmier forged them into the footprint-filled seashell) and a marble slab from Michelangelo's quarry in Italy. "For better or worse, we funded a fantasy," Ms. Force said.

Working collaboratively with a nonprofit group's money was very different from Ms. Fawcett's experience with Richard Avedon, George Hurrell and Andy Warhol. In 1983, when Ms. Fawcett was starring in "Extremities" Off Broadway, Warhol befriended her. "Andy was shy; I was shy," she said, recalling the time he sketched her on a napkin at a dinner party at the designer Halston's home. But when Warhol executed her portrait as part of a documentary for "20/20," she said, he shut her out of the creative process. Nor did he pony up the promised artwork. "I had to pry it away from him," Ms. Fawcett said, describing how she and Mr. O'Neal had personally removed two portraits from the Factory, Mr. Warhol's downtown studio, and carried them to their uptown residence.

The works in the County Museum show are owned by the Art Production Fund, though Mr. Edmier and Ms. Fawcett are each allowed to cast an edition for themselves. The artists also control the rights -- crucial to Ms. Fawcett, who left "Charlie's Angels" after one year in a dispute over merchandising rights. Having negotiated 10 percent royalties of the best-selling McBroom poster, she was unwilling to settle for what the show's producers offered -- a paltry 2.5 percent.

"My whole life has been merchandised -- with or without my consent," she said. Or almost her whole life. Except for the Rizzoli book, she and Mr. Edmier have deliberately ignored the merchandising opportunities of their collaboration.

"Keith is pure," Ms. Fawcett said with mock frustration. Then she glanced at the Warhol over her fireplace: "If Andy were here, he might back me up on this."

Contemporary Projects 7: Keith Edmier and Farrah Fawcett 2000

Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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