

I was engaged by the communal spirit of huddled figures, supporting each other in the effort to lift an otherwise back-breaking block. This had been the first time I encountered Max Leiva's work, which quickly followed with discovering more of his work edifying kinship. Each member of the group stands around the block, shoulders launched slightly forwards, as it casually sits on their shoulders. Nobody is hunched, nobody winces like a solitary labourer lifting an anvil. The block sits on their shoulders, casually. A strong community shows in Leiva's work, where tasks are jointly shared, so much so that in a second piece, other characters—the same characters, because it really doesn't matter—lift the same block with some figures now upside down, themselves balanced on the backs of their peers and lifting the block with their feet. They toil without struggle. This is facile work because all of these people embody the same ethos, without pathos.

In other scenarios, one man stands whilst another is supported on his back, flying; even more aerial figures are stacked like a tower, faces curious and sincere as if watching a singularly important event above a crowd—yet possibly not so, merely watching the tumultuous end of a local football match. In one piece, two people are fused as one at their abdomen, one upright and the other upside down with fingers intertwined in a physically impossible effort to keep both upright. There are both men and women—it can be hard to distinguish.

They could be native peoples or assimilated immigrants, with their faces shaded and sculpted with just enough facial features to capture a struggle borne by all participants and felt just enough by each one in turn, but clearly not as much as bearing the struggle individually. His sculpted pieces display this subtle reality. Sometimes nondescript and nonchalant, Leiva's characters help one another, for in Leiva's world, the individual matters less than the collective, with the feeling of joint responsibility recorded as simply as possible, as if everybody has recognised their place since birth. I do not think that individual names for the sculptures in the exposition matter so much, since each artwork continues the theme of the next, culminating in a painful evocation of the *mise-en-scène* of Central American refugees and economic migrants facing hardship in an attempt to cross the Mexican border. The bizarre response of the people hindering their progress flies against the sense of community that they leave behind.

We need to recognise that, poignantly, this is not a stage play, but real life. I feel this in Leiva's work when we see a series of figures backed against a black wall, their faces blackened portentous in anticipation of the result of their journey north, but this is not the most troubling part of the tableau. A man, regimented arms kept to his side, head turned, examining a group to his right; the troubling part of this piece is that these people are separated from one another and disengaged. A contemporary to his right has their hands clasped in between their legs, like an embarrassed child. Strikingly, the other characters look towards a central, lone, figure—his or her face erased and dark. Standing as a monolith, this person holds two books in each hand by their bindings, spine side up.

I feel a scholastic element here, with its focus on the individual.

All characters here are presented balanced on a rod, or road, which leads from the collective, to the insular. Leiva has constructed *Pernexus*, although this is a show balancing both nexus and nadir.

—Ryan S. McMullen
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