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## Tom Duncan at Andrew Edlin Gallery



*Tom Duncan (b. 1939), Portrait of Tom with a Migraine Headache, 2013, Mixed media, 128.5 x 61.5 inches*

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, August 2023

Tom Duncan, originally born in Scotland, is now in his eighties—old enough to have been a very young child during the harrowing years of the Second World War. He moved to the United States in 1948, and now lives in Westbeth, the artists' apartment/studio compound, in New York City's West Village. There, he constructs vitrines containing dramatic scenes, more than a few of which allude to local events regarding the war. His art, beautifully crafted, cannot be said to align with the conceptual drive of much of today's art. Instead, his work occupies a highly interesting, perhaps more interesting place, which cannot be described as self-taught, but which communicates an emotional directness, based on a naïve understanding of form and narrative, that links the imagery and stories to a highly personal outlook.



Tom Duncan (b. 1939), *Portrait of Tom with a Migraine Headache (No. 3)*, 2020, Found objects, acrylic, graphite, collage and tin cutouts, 42.5 x 25.75 x 2 inches

*Portrait of Tom with a Migraine* (2020), is a double relief, consisting of found objects, collage, and tin cutouts. The work consists of two reliefs— green on the verso and red on the recto. The two busts are placed within a frame with curving embellishments. Considerable open space occurs. Both figures' bodies incorporate found objects that make their torsos more intricate, even if we don't really know what these objects symbolize. Their heads, too, are filled with unknowable things—an obvious reference to the migraine Duncan is referring to. The manufacture of the sculpture is fairly rough, yet the overall effect is cultivated in some idiosyncratic, nearly 19th-century manner. Duncan communicates the migraine in subtle ways despite the work's aura of directness.

The moving sculpture called *Mummy, Why are the German Prisoners of War at Mass with Us?* (2004) is an open, mixed media tableau vivant four inches deep. The center of the image consists of three men, in pyramidal arrangement and ecclesiastical dress, standing in front of the altar, Duncan, portrayed as a small boy, holds the hand of his mother, who wears a coat and a scarf. Both stand with their backs toward the viewer. On both sides of the central aisle are men, many bearded and some in naval uniform; they are German prisoners watched over by a single man with a gun. Despite the fact that the visitors are celebrating mass, the man with a gun and the small facsimiles of rifles and motorcycles placed on the frame encircling the church congregation make it clear that even in Scotland, far away from the European countries where the hostilities were taking place, war had made its mark.

Another work, with the same title as the first relief mentioned in the review, *Portrait of Tom with a Migraine*, was made in 2013. It shows a robot-like form in white, consisting of several box-shaped objects stacked on top of each other. There is a head at the top of the column, but it looks more like an animal than a person. The head, which has discernible features, gives some human gravity to the object, but it also suggests a wild background—we don't know if the work is a self-portrait, or a ghastly creature in pain. A number of pipe lengths extend from the sculpture's midriff to the pedestal. The latter, shaped in irregular but straight-edged forms, supports the work, nearly 130 inches high. While the title makes it clear the work refers to the artist himself, there is also the sense that these works are emblematic of the human condition in general. The seeming lack of academic polish in many of Duncan's sculptures may fool the casual art viewer into assuming he wants direct communication between him and his audience. But that is not truly the case. Instead, it might be surmised that his raw approach to the work is a way of connecting with a larger viewership than those typically engaging in the fine arts sphere.



*Tom Duncan (b. 1939), Portrait of Tom with a Migraine Headache, 2013,  
Mixed media, 128.5 x 61.5 inches*

Duncan is an artist who may well have subjugated his skills in favor of a directness that speaks to his viewers socially as well as esthetically. He makes art capable of crossing broad ground. This way of thinking is central to our cultural efforts at present, which seek a democratic element above all else. **WM**



### JONATHAN GOODMAN

Jonathan Goodman is a writer in New York who has written for Artcritical, Artery and the Brooklyn Rail among other publications.