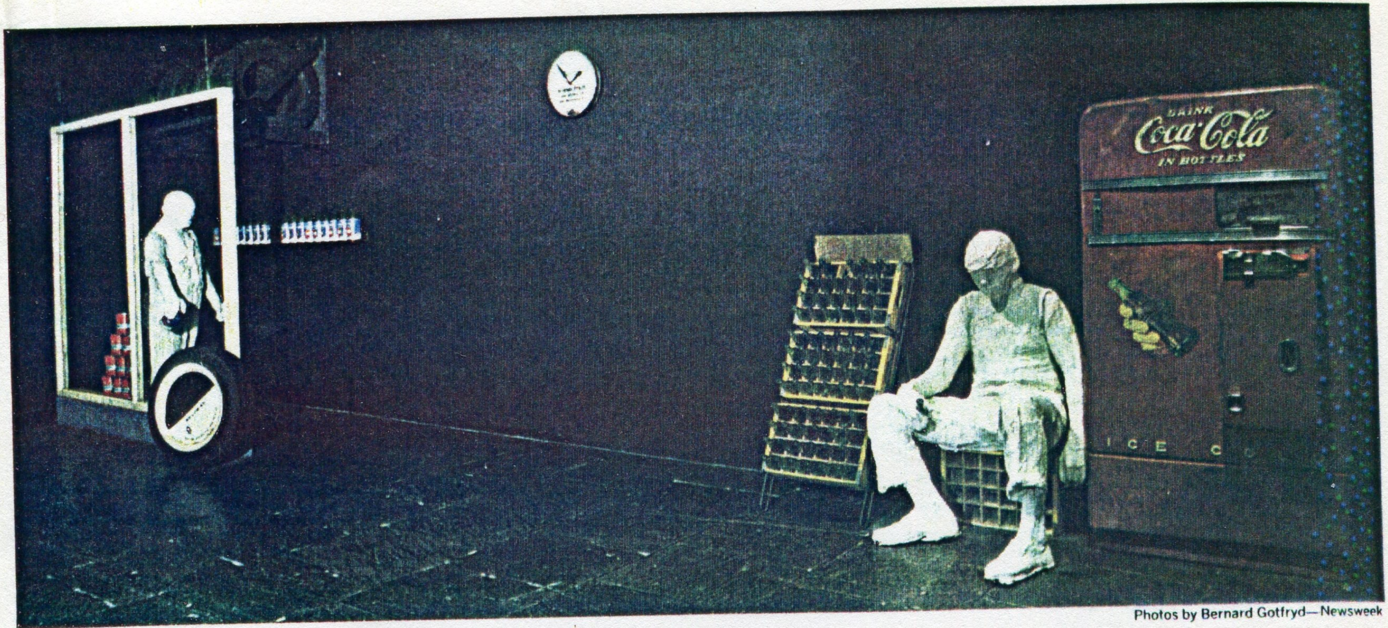


Photos by Bernard Gotfryd—Newsweek

Segal's 'The Gas Station': Turn the fingers up and he could be Saint John the Baptist in coveralls

THE GREAT BODY SNATCHER

ART

NEWSWEEK

"Fraud!" critics cried in 1877 when Rodin exhibited a statue of a male nude called "The Age of Bronze." The figure seemed so lifelike that everyone believed he'd cast it from a living model. To prove that his sculpture was no mechanical copy, Rodin had photographs and casts taken of the Belgian soldier who had posed for him. Nearly 100 years later, George Segal made his name by casting directly from living people and setting their white, plaster doppelgängers amid commonplace environments that had been salvaged from the junk heap. "How ingenious!" we cried in 1962, hailing Segal as a master of pop art, the inventor of a stunning new gimmick.

Segal has stuck with his idea for seventeen years, modifying it with color during the '70s. Now, in a retrospective of his work at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, his sculpture seems positively homespun in its simplicity, almost sentimentally traditional. Yes, it's easier to wrap wet, plaster-impregnated fabric over a model's greased or clothed body than to start from scratch, but in a way it is also more honest: Laboriously imitating suit lapels in bronze is an affront to our American bias for do-it-yourself solutions. But even those detractors who initially felt Segal's work was too gimmicky have come to respect its formal quality, its homely humanism.

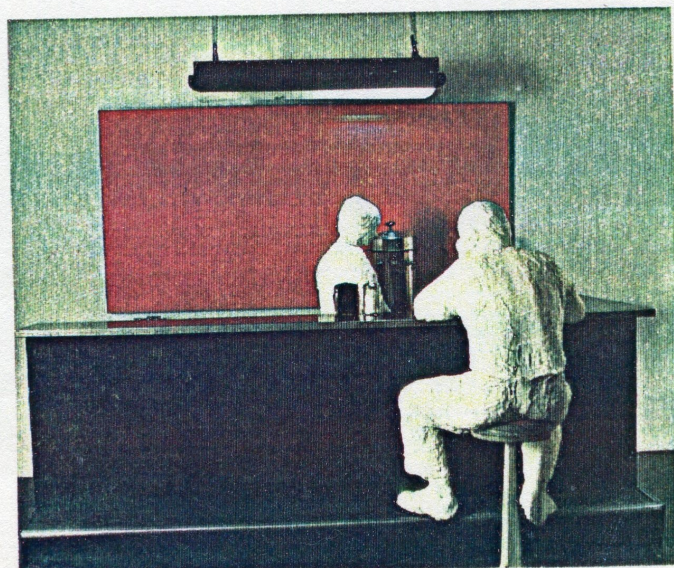
Segal, now 54, has said that he was inspired by Cézanne, and his basic sculptural mix is surprisingly close to Cézanne's "Still Life with Plaster Cast." Segal's white, calcified figures in their colorful real-life settings echo Cézanne's image of a plaster Cupid standing in the center of a lively group of oversize onions and luscious fruit. His art is as unsettling as Cézanne's: it disturbs because we identify with the frozen, white figures—we feel ourselves shrouded within their confines, turned momentarily to stone.

MORE COMFORTABLE: A struggling painter for many years, Segal was inspired to turn primarily to sculpture in 1960. He was knocking together props and sets for a Robert Frank film, out of junk and architectural fragments that were lying around his New Jersey chicken farm, when it suddenly dawned on him that the hand-modeled plaster figures he'd been placing in uneasy proximity to his expressionist paintings would be much more comfortable in situations salvaged from the real world. Within a year, he'd taught himself to make shell casts of posed people by encasing them in plaster-soaked bandages, thereby eliminating the last vestige of sculptural awkwardness from his work.

Segal chose the objects in his assembled tableaux not only for convenience and formal reasons, but also because they evoked nostalgia for the recent past. His use of "found" materials links him with such pop artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Jim Dine and Tom Wesselmann, but his straightforward seriousness and emotionalism are at odds with pop art's interest in satire and put-on. We can hardly imagine Segal's "The Execution" or his controversial "In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State—Abraham and Isaac" (NEWSWEEK, Sept. 11, 1978) in a pop-art exhibition.

Moreover, Segal's art is antipop in its psychological density. His finest pieces—"The Gas Station," "The Butcher Shop," "The Diner," "To All Gates," "Walk, Don't Walk" and a number of his recent reliefs—are physically shallow, their space pictorially compressed. The encasement of

'The Diner': A three-dimensional Edward Hopper



the figures seems to symbolize their mental states: introverted, thoughtful, slightly melancholy. It is as if the repetitious act of wrapping them in strip after strip of wet cloth, followed by the sensual warmth of the setting plaster and the soothing handling of the sitters' bodies by the artist, as he smooths the plaster and shapes their parts, has mesmerized them into near zombielike submission.

OFF GUARD: The plaster—it's actually hydrostone, a tougher material—takes too long to harden to permit unnatural posing, and so the artist can capture his models' spirits—with their bodies, so to speak, off guard. Martin Friedman, in the accompanying catalog *($7.95, paperback)*, likens the process to being transformed into a "ka," the ancient Egyptian effigy for the soul of the deceased.

Segal at work: Timeless statements and private ironies

Once caught, the model's spirit becomes the protagonist in a silent play of Segal's devising that has no plot and no action. The effectiveness of his tableaux at the Whitney is greatly enhanced by dim, carefully controlled lighting, often originating within the piece itself. Coming upon his figures in the exaggeratedly subdued light of the show can be as unsettling as encountering another person in a dark room when you thought you were alone. The installations are highly theatrical. Theater is an illusion with real people in real clothing and fake settings pretending to be making up their lines as they go along, and the typical Segal actual-size "still life" has as much in common with that enterprise as it has with traditional sculpture.

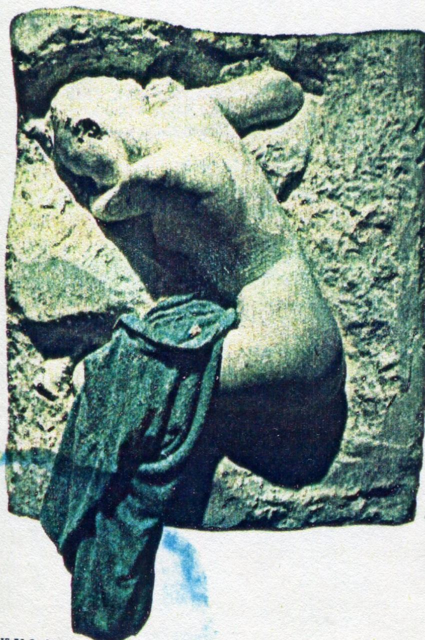
Over the years, Segal's art seems to have been shifting away from particular scenes toward wider, more general "statements." This process has been accelerated during the '70s by two technical changes: he has switched from exhibiting the shells of the models to showing casts made of the insides of those shells, and he has increased his application of color. The new process results in far greater naturalism—we see the actual wrinkles and hair follicles of the model—but his use of color and the occasional classical references in his poses underlines the fact that his work is art, not the condescending sort of wax-museum realism of a Duane Hanson. Segal, you might say, plays Edward Hopper to Hanson's Andrew Wyeth.

ALIENATION: Segal's most powerful work has often been described as looking like walk-in Hopper paintings (although his tableaux don't invite entry), and a comparison of the two artists is instructive—despite Segal's disclaimer of any direct influence. Hopper's woodenly painted figures, like Segal's calciform people, seem ill at ease in their surroundings—emblems of contemporary alienation. But, more profoundly, both artists share a deep formal understanding of the role architecture can play in the composition of figurative work.

STABILITY: Hopper spent his life painting "sunlight on the side of a house," and Segal's first successful work, "Man Sitting at a Table," was as much about the table, chair and window that framed the man as the figure itself. Hopper's porches and darkened theaters, like Segal's diner counters and fragmented doorways, surround the subject with the rectilinear stability we associate with classical architecture, persuading us—almost—of the eminent reasonableness of life.

Segal now admits that he has something in common with Hopper's "sometimes puritan, other times sensual" sensibility. But it's more than that. Their casts of uncommunicative characters inhabit the same world—our world. The model for Hopper's "Gas" in the Museum of Modern Art was a BP station on Route 6 in Truro, Mass., and the man with the oil can in Segal's "Gas Station" was a guy named Phil who ran the gas station a mile from Segal's New Jersey home. Each artist turned the subject into a timeless statement about the human condition. As Segal once said: "My private irony is that if I took away the oil can and turned his fingers up, Phil could be Saint John the Baptist in coveralls."

APRIL KINGSLEY



'Blue Robe,' 'Walk, Don't Walk,' 'Meyer Schapiro'