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BARRY X BALL *Matthew Barney / Barry X Ball Dual-Dual Portrait*

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Matthew Barney/Barry X Ball Dual-Dual Portrait (2000 – 2009), a composite work by American sculptor Barry X Ball, is installed at Galerie Nathalie Obadia overlooking the Pompidou Center. Here the audience has an opportunity to view, as a whole, his assembly of incongruous materials, which have been transformed with meticulous devotion into objects deformed by genetics and depraved acts. Comprised of two comma-shaped mounds of marble “flesh” ritualistically speared by sleek stainless steel shafts, the work is suspended from the ceiling by spidery rigging, its upright rigidity reinforced by the exacting parallel placement of the metal rods. These supports immobilize the symmetrically positioned stone pieces—two mechanically carved Siamese twin heads based on facial casts of art star Matthew Barney and the artist himself. The attention paid to the craftsmanship of each element assembled belies a fetishistic gratification. According to Ball, “hundreds of hours of hand stone-carving/polishing” are used to make the marble elements alone. The violence depicted is undeniable; the two Janus-like heads are decapitated and gored completely through from below.

“This work could have certain associations for Parisians,” speculates Corrine Prat, one of the gallery’s directors, as she looked at Ball’s bodiless heads, an implied reference to the French Revolution (Marie Antoinette, one of the most famous members of the royal family, was guillotined by Revolutionaries at Place de la Concorde, just blocks away from the gallery). After the queen’s decapitation, Madame Tussaud (like Ball, another early adopter of the special effects genre) immortalized the royal by employing the same casting techniques as Ball does in “Dual Portrait.” She found Marie Antoinette’s head in an unmarked grave and made a cast of her face, thus launching Tussaud’s wax museum franchise. Ultimately Marie Antoinette’s beheading was punishment not only for being a royal, but also for false accusations of deviant sexual behavior. The bloodthirsty populace, readily believing she was guilty, enthusiastically embraced killing her for her alleged involvement in orgies and incest. If, similarly, you associate the violent acts in Ball’s sculpture with reactions to sexual—read: creative—urges, you can take one direction here for decoding his work. To start, the various, obsessively polished and rubbed materials are erected as if in restraints and mimic the surreal construct of sexual fantasy. More directly, the creative ambitions and desires of the fused artists engender the punishing mutilation and penetration Ball delivers. In fact, in a statement about this piece, Ball refers to Barney and himself as “twin martyrs (‘Saints Barry and Matthew in Ecstasy’).” They have suffered, it would seem, for their sexual/creative urges. Taking this line of logic one step further, Ball locates female sexual energy as the genesis of all creativity, hiding the sculpture’s female genitalia in the center of the work beneath layers of stone flaps that dangle below the carved double decapitated heads. As Ball describes them, “the figures’ violently-penetrated labial/vulval appendages” are the gateway to the ultimate source that fuels artistic energy.

Along with Ball’s reference to martyrdom—another reminder of Marie Antoinette—the hierarchical placement of his work’s distinct parts suggests levels of religious ecstasy, thus fusing creativity, sex, art, and religion. The twin phallic impaled portraits are made of two different types of marble, one in black and one in bright yellow ochre. Hinting at divine metaphysical union, the only perceptible material communion between these elements is in the matching yellow veins naturally infiltrating the black stone. Ball harnesses his creative urges using obstinate materials, ritualistic technical applications, and sexual energy sublimated by depictions of violence. His approach evokes the harsh practices and attitudes of the patriarchal religions he refers to in his statements. It is regrettable, however, that so frequently, as in Ball’s work, the subjects of love, creativity, and sexual passion, especially those of women, are celebrated and depicted through violence and destruction.