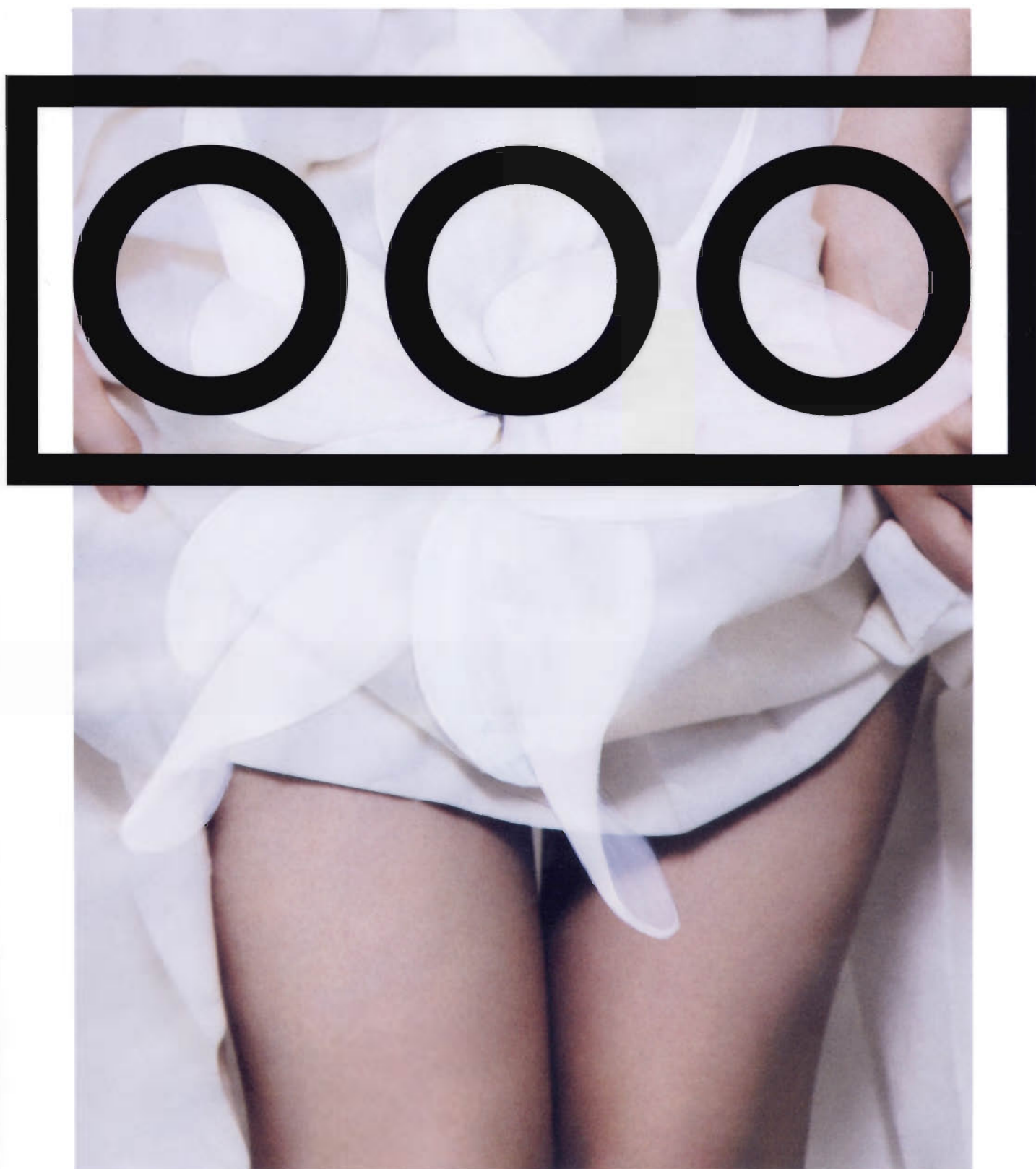


OUT OF ORDER



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Inside the Studio
Barry X Ball Reconceived Old Master
Honest Art in an Age of “Some Glue And Sticks”

By Amelia Cai, Yale

I recently visited the studio of sculptor Barry X Ball with the intention of interviewing him, but realized quite quickly that an interview would not suffice to properly appraise the storied output of this modern-day master. The familiar language and demeanor with which he welcomed me immediately signaled that this visit would be much more intimate, and so I tossed the list of stock questions that I had drawn up and intended to ask him. It was clear that an understanding of his art and practice would be more easily gleaned touring his studio in what would be a more natural engagement with his creative process.

When I first met with X Ball, we were dressed in a basic outfit of muted colors—a crew neck T-shirt and shorts with slim black athletic sneakers. His wire-framed glasses I recognized from interviews I had seen online. Understated yet distinct, I thought—a characterization that I came to understand befitted his art as much as his outfit.

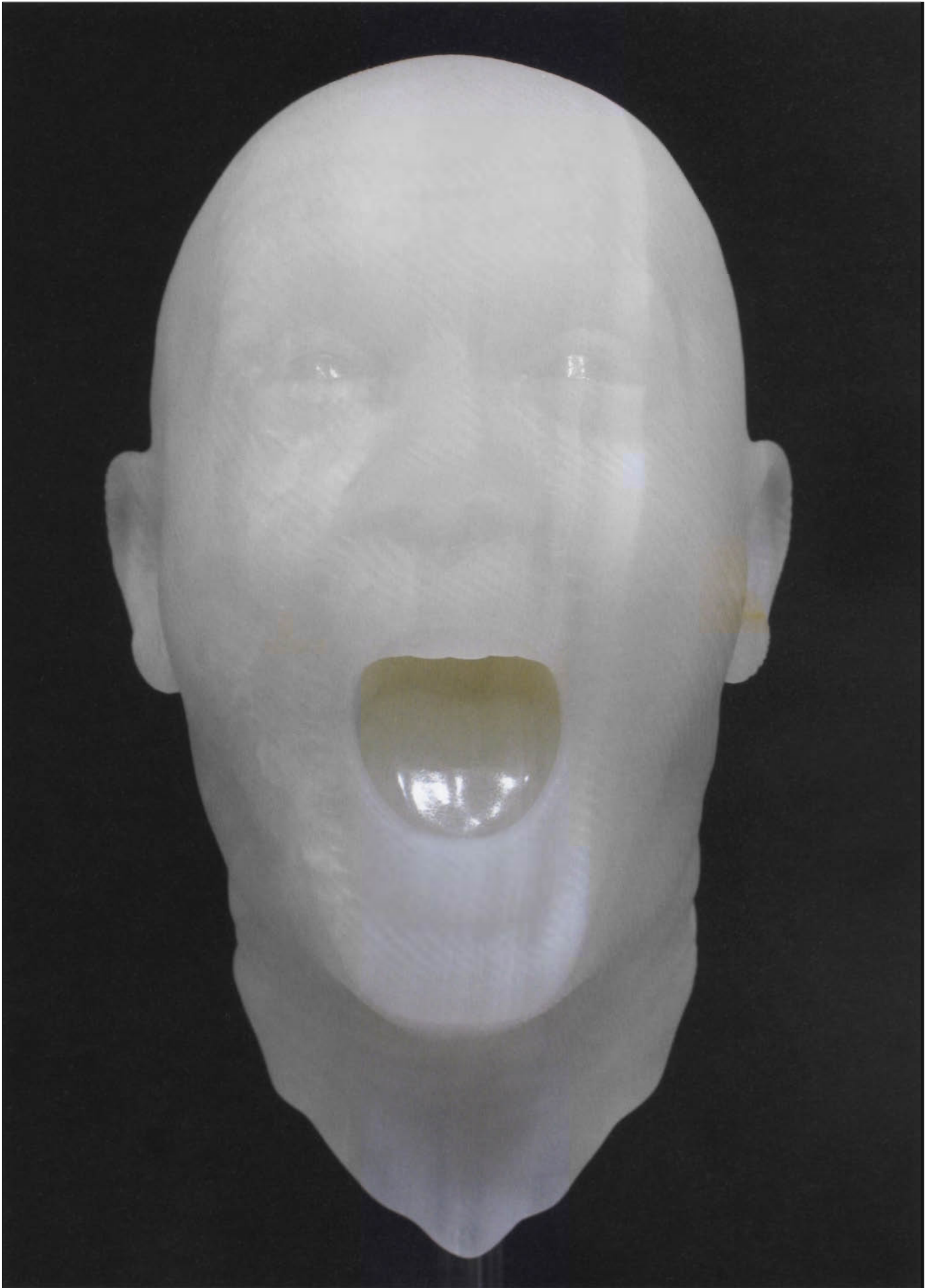
While glancing around his studio for the first time I was surprised by its serenity, more akin to an office space or a gallery than a locus for such considerable artistic production. Everything was in order, everything had a place: the precision of the studio's goings-on and appearance seemed to mirror the very precision with which he approaches his work. After greeting me and showing me around, he introduced me to his two assistants as they worked at an extra-large iMac computer. The screen's activity was dimly reflected in their glasses—I detected long, nearly unrecognizable angular vector shapes curling in and out of a three-dimensional grid, forming a distinct outline of a coffin-structure. As this vector-bound object continued to rotate in its empty, black digital domain, Barry began to explain his latest project, a virtual sculpting of Jacopa della Quercia's *Ilaria del Carretto*. “These computer renderings are derived from hundreds of three-dimensional scans I took of the actual sculpture,” he told me. “Once all the data from these scans has been fed into the computer, my assistants and I manipulate the final rendering line by line until it is perfect.”

Two things stood out to me straightaway as X Ball described his project. First, as he showed me pictures of the *Ilaria del Carretto*,

I was astonished by its sheer enormity—it quite simply dominates the room housing it. I still fail to comprehend the amount of painstaking work that must have been required by X Ball and his assistants to capture its every line, detail, and crack. Second, I was struck by X Ball's use of the word “perfect,” a totalizing and idealistic term so rarely applied to art nowadays. I asked him accordingly how he hoped to achieve this quixotic notion of perfection. “Obviously, my work is extensively grounded in history and art history,” he said. “I make no attempt at concealing my inspirations but rather make them central. Though I am remodeling Della Quercia's original work, I am not making an exact copy of it. My work envisions what Della Quercia would have made, the technical errors he would have avoided, had he the opportunity to work with the technology that I have today.”

X Ball spoke continuously of both his project and his process with urgency and conviction, especially as he asserted the uncompromising uniqueness of his own work, in spite of its admitted derivation from the work of his predecessor. His art is distinguished, he made clear, by its precision, owed in no small part to the advanced digital technologies that he employs to model stone with such refinement.

The more familiar I became with X Ball's universe as he explained his working methods to me, the more I realized that his work's ties to that of the Old Masters' extended further than their mere empirical correspondences. Not only do X Ball's work and that of the Old Masters' deal with similar subject matter and incorporate resembling forms, but his artistic process is analogous to that of his forebears as well. As I observed him in his studio—his relationship to his art, his rapport with his assistants—I imagined him as a modern-day Rubens, an overseer guiding the production of his work at every step, managing its conceptualization while leaving the particular exigencies of his meticulous process to his able helpers. And yet, his work retains a poignant personal touch despite its aforementioned reliance on digital technologies. I was stunned, for example, by one work that he showed me, a bust of the artist Lucas Michael, whose manifest exactness belies its tender modeling. Sculpted from Pakistani onyx, the red and white







Art allows you to imagine beauty in an unrestrained way, and there are no limitations

striped stone contorts into winding, twisting crevices, its face captured in an eternal scream. X Ball spoke proudly of the stone's many intricacies, pointing me to the material's innate cracks and blemishes that endow the work with such visceral affect. As he recounted fascinating tales of his extensive travels to numerous exotic locales where he finds the rare, valuable, and beautiful types of stone that he uses for his production, I began to see the exotic mystique conjured up in his stories likewise reflected in the beguiling forms of his ethereal sculptures.

At the end of my visit, X Ball and I discussed art more generally, in particular the role it played in giving his life meaning. While attending Pomona College, his favorite classes were in art history, preferred even to his courses in studio art. He told me, in fact, that his studio art classes were much too rigid, and that he eventually ended up pursuing his own projects instead of the planned coursework assigned by his professors. After moving from California to Williamsburg, with next to no money at the time, he taught himself all there was to know about sculpting. As many of his contemporaries sought to refute and subvert the legacies of great artists from the past with flippancy as their rule of thumb, X Ball chose instead to honor his antecedents, hoping to make what was, in his view, their already perfect work "more perfect." This choice, homage over irreverence, has no doubt served him well, evidenced by his rapidly expanding repute in the art world. Indeed, the enthusiastic reception of his work perhaps bespeaks a collective turn towards a similarly desired perfection—a renewed respect for mastery, craft, and classic aesthetic cohesion shared by both the artist and his proponents. Barry X Ball's work ultimately benefits from its association with the Old Masters, but maintains a distinctly contemporary spirit all the same. Timeless yet timely, his is an art that has perfected the search for perfection. ●

