

## Barry X Ball – Portrait Sculpture

The Matthew Barney installations are the largest, most-complex portrait sculptures I have realized. After making and exhibiting a very different kind of art (none of it figurative) for over 2 decades, I began work on my portrait sculpture project over 8 years ago. Since that time, I have worked exclusively on this endeavor. The project has gone through many formal and conceptual changes since its inception. The completed works vary greatly in form, scale, and materials, although for the last few years, all the heads have been carved from stone. A description of my working process follows.

I invite my portrait subjects to pose for me. (To-date, I have not accepted portrait commissions.) My subjects are primarily drawn from the art world. Visual artists predominate, although there are also collectors, curators, musicians, and family members. I choose my subjects because of who they are, what they do, and how they look. I am currently working on, or have already completed, portraits of the following individuals (in alphabetical order):

Barry X Ball (sculptor)

Matthew Barney (sculptor, filmmaker)

Marion Brenner (photographer, collector)

Max Cole (painter)

Jean-Pierre Criqui (curator, critic)

Dudley Del Balso (collector)

Monroe Denton (critic)

Steve DiBenedetto (painter)

Jen Fong (photographer)

Bill Jensen (painter)

Jon Kessler (sculptor)

Matthew McCaslin (sculptor)

Lucas Michael (photographer)

Giuseppe Panza di Biumo (collector)  
Laura Mattioli Rossi (collector, curator, art historian)  
Michael Scott (painter)  
Robert Shimshak (physician, collector)  
John Tremblay (painter)  
Stephen Ullrich (musician)  
Kimberly J. Van Zee (surgeon, researcher, wife)  
Michelangelo X Ball Van Zee (son)  
Soleil X Ball Van Zee (daughter)  
Dan Walsh (painter)  
Milford Wyman (collector)  
Rae Wyman (collector)

An alginate / plaster mold is made of my subjects' heads and necks at my studio. I also take a series of reference photographs at that time (full "head shots" as well as 'details' of cranial / facial features). The casting / photographing procedure takes about 2 hours. For the next 2-3 years (the average time to complete a portrait), I usually have little-to-no interaction with my subjects. Such is the case with Matthew Barney. He generously agreed to pose for me in early 2000 and was cast / photographed at my studio in June of that year. Since that time, I have had no contact with Matthew. Now that his portrait is complete (it was finished in early November), I will alert him to its impending exhibition at PS1.

Immediately after life-casting, a polymer-modified plaster 'positive' is derived from the initial head / neck mold. The positive cast is typically quite "rough" when it emerges from the mold and requires extensive hand-carving to be transformed into an accurate facsimile of the subject. Sometimes, as in the Matthew Barney piece, the plaster eyes are carved 'open'. (The subjects have their eyes closed when they are cast.)

Most of my portraits have an effusive, invented neck structure appended to the head. For Matthew Barney, this appendage was pushed to an extreme. First Matthew's

modeled plaster neck was shorn of most of its athletic musculature. Next, a distended, layered swag of flayed skin and viscera was modeled in clay and draped from the emaciated neck stub. The top of his head was also extensively clay-modified. Finally the entire plaster / clay assemblage was cast in plaster again and then detailed, polymer sealed, and sandblasted to create a unified model centered around a vertical impalement-bore axis.

To transform my completed models into stone, they are first digitized via cylindrical 3-dimensional laser scanning. The resultant "virtual" models may be digitally manipulated or left as-is. The Matthew Barney scan was vertically stretched to 150% of life-size. Next, a scanned Victorian Baroque relief pattern was digitally "shrink-wrapped" around portions of Matthew's distended virtual head so as to comprise a dense layer of decorative armor corresponding to the outermost surface of his multi-layer flayed skin. The entire virtual construction was then globally scaled to 85% of life-size before being converted into machine language.

The initial stone shaping is accomplished on computer-controlled (CNC) milling machines. In the case of my Matthew Barney portrait, the stone selected was from a 3000-pound boulder of rare, exuberantly-pitted / fissured / veined translucent onyx from Baja California (Mexico). After diamond wire-saw and bridge-saw sizing, the trimmed block was diamond core-drilled to again establish the axis (corresponding to that of the model) that would eventually become the sculpture's impalement wound. Next followed many days of glacially-slow computer-controlled carving, with multiple passes by progressively finer tooling, on a 3-axis CNC lathe. The final milling passes were specified so that the figure is encircled with a dense, diagonal web of parallel micro-flutes. Months of hand carving / polishing followed the CNC milling. The stone was finally masked, sandblasted, and oil-impregnated.

The golden shaft was CAD-designed and CNC-machined from stainless steel, then it was centerless-ground, hand-polished, and 24K gold-plated. The turnbuckle anchors were similarly custom-fabricated from stainless steel. The cables are thread-thin, 7x7

strand stainless steel. The aircraft turnbuckles that tension the cables are made of polished stainless steel and rhodium-plated brass.

The ceiling array presents a panoply of historical decorative styles culminating in a large, perforated, cherubic-fringed central medallion. The cast polyurethane decorative elements are supported by an elaborate, 8-spoked, modular wooden construction of graduated posts and tiered disks which, in-turn, anchor the tapering funnel of cables that suspends the impaled sculpture. The installation is symmetrically ceiling-lit from its periphery with 8+ high-intensity halogen lamps. The resultant radiating floral pattern of shadows cast by the stone/shaft assembly echoes, on the floor, the composition of the decorative ceiling "octopus".

At the time I began my portrait sculpture project, I considered this new work a complete break from my art of the preceding 20 years. Now I am not so sure. I do know that after my mid-90's shows of suspended black and white geometric Corian sculptures at Angles, Mario Diacono, and Luhring Augustine Galleries, my work had reached an insular, self-referential impasse. I felt that my aesthetic decisions were still circumscribed by my fealty to the precepts of minimal and conceptual art - and monochrome / fundamental painting, in particular - even though, formally, my art, with its occasional inexplicable decorative flourishes, had often moved to the Rococo-esque fringes of reductive orthodoxy. By 1997, like a habitual Roman Catholic, I was still attending Mass even though I was possessed of little belief. The extreme labor requirements of producing my work, towards an end that held little of the revelatory unknown, had begun to weigh on me.

Why did I chose portrait sculpture as my path to spiritual renewal? For several perverse reasons:

- Because almost no one else (except academic hacks and hired Pietrasanta / Carrara guns) was doing it.
- Because I had almost no training in figurative drawing / painting and absolutely none in traditional sculptural techniques.

- Because (specifically in the case of my stone heads) I saw very little stone sculpture in contemporary museums and galleries – a remarkable fact considering that stone has been the primary medium of sculpture for several millennia.
- Because it would force me to interact with my fellow humans

In 8 years, my portraits have moved from the hyper-classical, funeral sobriety of the Panza Pseudogroup ensemble to the attenuated, expressionistic, recklessly-inclusive, layered, Baroque compendium that is (Matthew Barney) and the inexplicable distortions of the Matthew McCaslin homunculi. I am drunk with the retrograde impropriety of my enterprise. It takes a very long time to produce one of my portraits - in spite of employing several assistants, I finished only one piece in calendar year 2003. Solution? Make an all-encompassing thesis of each.

And then there is the stone. I have sought out rare, uncommon species. Because of the means I employ to shape my sculptures (precision water-cooled/lubricated high-speed diamond milling), I am able to utilize stone that has heretofore been overlooked or rejected by sculptors employing traditional means. In particular, I have increasingly used exotic, exuberantly pitted / fissured / figured onyx. The extreme translucency of the onyx serves to de-materialize its stony solidity and magnify the light from external sources. I have assiduously worked to "place" the various cavities, inclusions, colored veins, and flaws...to little avail, I am happy to report!

Stone "imperfections" counterpoised with fetishistic craftsmanship. The layering of ordered tool-path fluting, glistening polished viscera passages, Victorian Baroque patterned relief. Stretched distortions of head and neck, florid flayed skin. Pinching, wrapping, smashing. Impaled, clinically presented, suspended. Stainless steel, gold. The ceiling, the floor. The artist, the subject. Victims. Light.