

Timely Reminder in Dallas: Great Art Is Thrilling to Look At

By BRIAN T. ALLEN
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Sleeping Hermaphrodite, 2008–2017, by Barry X Ball. Translucent pink Iranian onyx.
(© Barry X Ball. Photo courtesy Barry X Ball Studio)

The Nasher Sculpture Center, with a solo show on Barry X Ball, leads the way in reopening and focusing on art rather than virtue-signaling.

Museums are opening, finally, almost everywhere, and what a relief. The COVID-19 hysteria shuttered every performing-arts space and museum in the country in an assault on culture devastating enough to make a Hun blanch. Theaters, alas, can't overcome the six-foot rule, that social

distance diktat pulled from a hat by some boob public-health lifer whose idea of culture is online solitaire. No matter to him that theater, music, dance, and opera are going broke.

Museums, though, are returning to the job of serving the public, with Texas leading the way. There, museums showed civic responsibility. They opened expeditiously, give or take a few whose directors kept pushing the snooze button. While museums across the country talk about “accessibility,” Texans understand it starts with unlocking the doors. “Equity” doesn’t mean keeping everyone out, equally.

I visited the Art Institute of Chicago the day it reopened. People were delighted to see their favorite paintings again. New York State moved glacially in allowing places like the Met and MoMA to invite visitors back, but they’re opening now. Governor Cuomo sent the Grim Reaper speeding through New York’s nursing homes by packing them with COVID patients, killing thousands. He paused, though, when it came to culture and postponed museum openings for weeks. City museums are now dealing with deficits, layoffs, and a trashed tourist economy, but at least they’re back in the business of making art available.

California still insists it’s too dangerous to open museums. This is ridiculous, but the will to control is strong there, and its leaders love the power and the drama. I know many of my curator friends there want to get back to the galleries. Working from home, without a library, collection, files, and an in-the-flesh public, is an inefficient, dispiriting drag. There are only so many webinars worth making or watching.



Exterior of the Getty Center museum in Los Angeles in 2016. (*Lucy Nicholson/Reuters*)

Speaking of California museums, last week I wrote about the [Getty trustees’ craven capitulation](#) to complaints by junior staff that the museum aids and abets racism. I’m now persona non grata there, it seems, so I’ll need a wig and sunglasses as well as the mandated mask when I visit, if and when the museum ever reopens.

The trustees faked contrition — the Getty's not a hotbed of white supremacy, and they know it — rather than defend the place's positive, productive engagement with African-American and Latino neighborhoods in Los Angeles and its generous support of artists from all backgrounds, as long as they're good. Its record in hiring minorities isn't bad, either.

The trustees want the huffers and puffers to go away, but what a price they paid. They embraced the big lie that the country's racist. And in addition to petting a few flunkies and cranks who seem to want to be social workers, they agreed to race-based hiring of curators, librarians, and scholars.

I'm bewildered by the museum's jump into quagmires like the George Floyd shooting.

It's not that the trustees of the Getty should stay in the clouds atop Mount Brentwood, invisible and in sphinxlike silence. They might be blinkered, even delusional — they say they're impressed, for instance, by those peaceful protests in places like Portland — but they're powerful. They sit on a \$7 billion endowment. If they're going to say something, though, pick a topic on which they are, at least, informed, a topic like, say, art. And while they're at it, why not do something useful for, say, the public?

I'm astonished that not a single museum board and precious few directors clamored loudly and insistently this spring and summer to reopen the culture sector. The trustees at the Getty, overseeing California's richest, biggest cultural organization, ought to use their clout to push Mayor Garcetti and Governor Newsom to liberate the state's museums, theaters, gardens, zoos, opera companies, symphonies, and dance companies from purposeless, punitive lockdowns that kill culture, arts employment, and not-for-profit balance sheets.

Instead of fighting for the public's right to enjoy its cultural heritage, they preen over the latest PC pieties. If the Getty trustees care about their visitors — maybe they don't — they'll use their credibility and voice to fight what's becoming a lockdown lifestyle rather than send love letters to Black Lives Matter.

It took a while, but the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas finally reopened. It was still shut when I was in Texas in June — even its splendid outdoor sculpture garden was verboten — but I visited anyway to see *Barry X Ball: Remaking Sculpture*, its new exhibition. The Nasher specializes in modern sculpture. Its core collection, assembled by the Dallas entrepreneur Ray Nasher, is three-dimensional perfection. Its building, designed by Renzo Piano when he still had some imagination, is a gem.

I wrote about Ball in March 2019 when I first saw his work at the [art fair in Maastricht](#). I didn't know him — my academic specialty is Federal period American painting, and I love the countless times when I learn new things — and the exhibition in Dallas frankly admits he's better known in Europe than here. *Remaking Sculpture* is his first solo U.S. museum show.

What a great show, and what intriguing art, both beautiful and packed with meaning. Ball reinvents sculpture, a medium that dates to cavemen. He's a traditionalist in that his formats and forms evoke Michelangelo, Bernini, and Canova. He uses the most gorgeous stone. He puts hundreds of hours of handwork into each sculpture. What's new is his enlistment of 3-D scanning, modeling software, and computer-controlled milling machines to make work that awes and delights and is very much of our time.

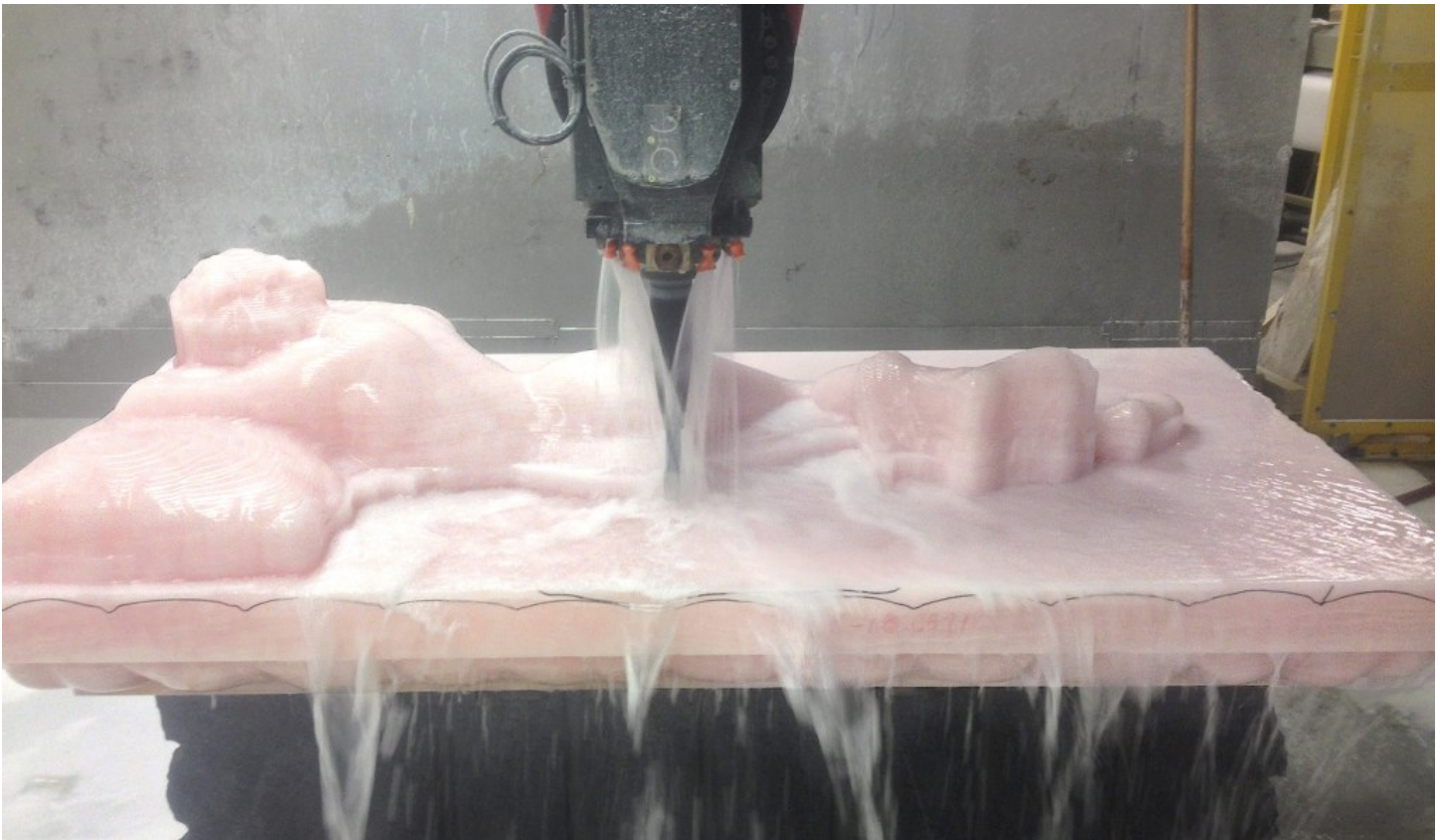


Digital scanning of *Hermaphrodite Endormi* (*Sleeping Hermaphrodite*) in the Salle des Caryatids, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

(Photo Courtesy of Barry X Ball Studio, New York.)

I'll start with *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, from 2008. It's one of the two or three stars of the show. It's familiar, for starters. It's based on a Roman marble sculpture from around a.d. 150, which itself is based on a lost Greek bronze from around 200 b.c. The Roman sculpture is in the Louvre. Archaeologists discovered it near the Baths of Diocletian in Rome in 1608. It was restored in 1619. In 1620, Bernini carved the bed addition. Ball's work is confounding, too. It's a copy, yes? What's the fuss?

It's not a copy. It's a reinterpretation. Ball made a 3-D digital scan of the Roman sculpture. The scan captures infinitesimal details. Ball tweaks it by indicating what's polished and what's matte. He gets his stone in Carrara in Italy, which once supplied Italian sculptors with some of the world's finest marble but now, in addition to its marble quarries, is the place to buy exotic stone coming from anywhere.



CNC milling of the pink Iranian onyx stone for Barry X Ball's *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, 2008–2017.

(Photo Courtesy of Barry X Ball Studio, New York.)

For *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, Ball selected translucent pink Iranian onyx, as decadent and luxurious a stone as there is, though I have to say the French Rouge de Roi marble he used for *Saint Bartholomew Flayed* is wild. I can't call it lovely since it's meant to evoke blood and gore — Saint Bartholomew was skinned alive. It's sexy sinister. I love exotic, colored stone. It's my version of LSD.

Ball selects blocks of stone, so he's prepared for surprise. Stone is like wood in that you really don't know what's lurking in the block. Stone, like wood burl, can have cavities and fissures allowing design adventures. Even the highest-end seller of stone will probably slice it in slabs for use in fancy counters or luxe building façades. Buyers are open to some variation to make surfaces engaging, but, overall, a more or less uniform look sells.

In his *Envy/Purity* series, from 2008 to 2012, based on a pair of late Baroque-era Venetian sculptures, Ball found that Italian Portoro marble and Pakistani onyx created an anxious, even frenetic palette for *Envy*. Envy, after all, is a toxic, edgy, grasping emotion. *Purity* soothes and elevates, and that's why Ball picked translucent Iranian onyx. The show smartly juxtaposes the two looks, though Ball considers them two separate works of art. He makes his sculptures in editions, each in a different stone with an entirely different effect. He made one version of *Purity* in a white Mexican onyx mottled in rust-color and pitted. There, *Purity* is still fetching, but she seems to rot before our eyes.

This translucent Iranian onyx block, incidentally, was once reserved for Ayatollah Khomeini's tomb, but Ball grabbed it. I'm all for that skunk spending eternity beneath second-best.



Left: *Envy*, 2008–2018, by Barry X Ball. Italian Portoro marble, stainless steel.

Right: *Purity*, 2008–2018, by Barry X Ball. Translucent white Iranian onyx, stainless steel.

(Private Collection. © Barry X Ball. Courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center)

Back to our *Hermaphrodite*. I'd say "pretty in pink" describes the stone. The emphasis is on the feminine. Let's face it, though the figure has a penis, there's more of a Boy George than Indiana Jones vibe. Once he's got his stone and his scan, Ball enlists a water-cooled seven-axis robot milling machine armed with a diamond drill and sets it to work. A new *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* emerges over time. Machine and drill work 24 hours a day. Ball prescribes a polishing program for his studio assistants. He's after a juxtaposition of the look of plump flesh against the weightless translucence of a raised foot. Bernini's bed is cold, hard marble. Ball makes it plush, with a matte finish that looks like velvet.

Ball has an industrial-grade studio with a fancy behemoth-size robotic diamond wire saw and every factory gadget under the sun. In reimagining sculptures done by the Old Masters or by Greek and Roman artists, he asks a pointed question: What would they have made of the technology we have today, once they recovered from fainting?

This raises an unexpected but perfectly good, even cunning question. Artists have copied and quoted the masterpieces of the past since antiquity. Jed Morse, the curator, in his very good essay, points to Rodin. Rodin didn't copy Greek sculpture, as obsessed as he was with the Elgin Marbles. He looked at them from the point of view of a late-19th-century Frenchman. "I rediscover," he said, trying to access the mind of ancient artists and then processing what he found through his French heart.

Lots has happened since Rodin's day, from cubism to Dada, abstract expressionism, and conceptual art to our time, when there's something of an Old Master revival augmented by huge changes in the technology of art. We see the revolution in materials in Ball's use of computers. Photography was once a new technology, as was video art. I wrote, I think last week, that all contemporary art reflects the concerns of its day, and it's hard to argue that technology isn't at the heart of the way we live now.

Sleeping Hermaphrodite is topical — the figure is male and female — but gender bending isn't a new phenomenon. The Louvre sculpture is broadly familiar and sexy, and it's got the lineage Ball likes, with Greek, Roman, and Baroque fingerprints. Our age right now puts ambiguity on the front burner, which probably appealed to Ball, but another highlight in the show is a portrait bust of Pope John Paul II as ornate as the Baldachino in St. Peter's basilica, another Bernini opus.

Remaking Sculpture is a survey of Ball's work. He's 65 and clearly has some gas left in his tank so I'm curious about future work. There are beautiful portrait busts in the show from the early 2000s. In 1993, he made a remarkable wall sculpture launched by a Rubens drawing of Leonardo da Vinci's *Battle of Anghiari*, a mural he did in 1505. It was painted over or destroyed at some point, but Rubens reconstructed it using Leonardo's drawings and a 16th-century print. So he started with multiple layers of reinvention. Using small silverplated picture frames, empty but for velvet interiors, he mapped the bones of Leonardo's work.

It's a design diagram, with each frame marking a pivot point in Leonardo's image as imagined by Rubens. It's smartly placed on a freestanding wall in the middle of the show, so it visually serves as a good reference point for understanding Ball's development. I kept returning to it. It supports the narrative and anchors it. That's good curating and good exhibition design.

In 2011, Ball riffed on Michelangelo's last sculpture, the unfinished *Pietà Rondanini*, and that's in the show. There's metalwork, too. He made a portrait bust of Matthew Barney using pierced 24 karat gold-plated silver, blackened silver, and stainless steel. Much of the head is opaque but the back isn't, exposing a swirling network of metal skeins evoking the circuits of the brain in full fire.

The exhibition isn't big, but neither is the Nasher. Ball's work is new, but it was a treat for me on the third or fourth go-round in the museum to look at the great things by Arp, Brancusi, Duchamp, de Kooning, Giacometti, Rodin, Matisse, Miro, Henry Moore, Richard Serra, and Picasso in the Nasher's permanent collection. Ray and his wife, Patsy, bought the most exquisite things. They displayed them in their Dallas home, so the scale is domestic, but they acquired with a future museum in mind.

The book's attractive. Jed Morse, the curator at the Nasher, wrote a solid essay. Glenn Adamson, the best contemporary craft and design scholar of his generation, wrote an essay. He's always great. David Hunt's essay reads like an Ezra Pound poem. It's impressionistic and also reminded me of an Isadora Duncan interpretative dance, in words. I didn't have the patience for it.

The Getty trustees and staff seem happy to wrangle over insider kerfluffles of interest to no one except their naval-gazing selves, all the while indifferent to the calamitous waste their locked-up treasure trove represents. What a shame they waste their energy on chasing utopia and signaling virtue rather than pressing, to paraphrase Ronald Reagan, to "tear down those bolted doors." Maybe they need to visit the Nasher for a reminder of what a thrill it is to look at great art. They seemed to have lost the feeling.