



Art

7 Artists Smashing Our Expectations of What Marble Can Be

● Ariela Gittlen Jul 25, 2018 12:55 pm   

It is hard to imagine a material that signifies high art more than marble—the medium of Michelangelo, Bernini, and Brancusi, used to compose the wings of *Winged Victory* and the slithering sea serpents of *Laocoön*.

Yet marble has also come to signify bougie kitchen countertops and the tacky opulence of Las Vegas hotel lobbies. Plus, owing to its beauty and durability, marble remains as popular a material for modern headstones as it was for ancient temples and tombs. Marble communicates status, history, and wealth—even if these are merely aspirations.

Contemporary sculptors working with marble speak effusively of their medium, as if it's a high-maintenance spouse, but one who continues to surprise and delight after all these years. They praise its hardness, its delicacy, its art historical bonafides, its workhorse practicality, its spectrum of colors, and its ability to resemble both flesh and rock, often within the same work.

Whether with traditional craft techniques or CNC carving machines, artists continue to explore marble's possibilities, despite the weight of its history. Below, we share the works and insights of seven artists who have expanded the uses of marble and are pushing the medium into new territory.

b. 1990, based in Mexico City, Mexico



Milena Naef, *Fleeting Parts*, 2016. Photo by Lisa-Marie Viestra and Alice Trimouille. Courtesy of the artist.



5 Images

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For Milena Naef, sculpture is something like a family business. She's the latest of four generations to sculpt in stone, but her performance-based practice takes the material in an unorthodox direction. "I started inserting myself into the stone, creating a negative shape to fit my own body," she explained.

In her "Fleeting Parts" series, Naef carves holes into marble slabs that fit her as precisely as a couture gown, so that a shoulder, leg, or hip emerges from the stone. The effect is startling: a merger of flesh and rock that suggests mythic stories of



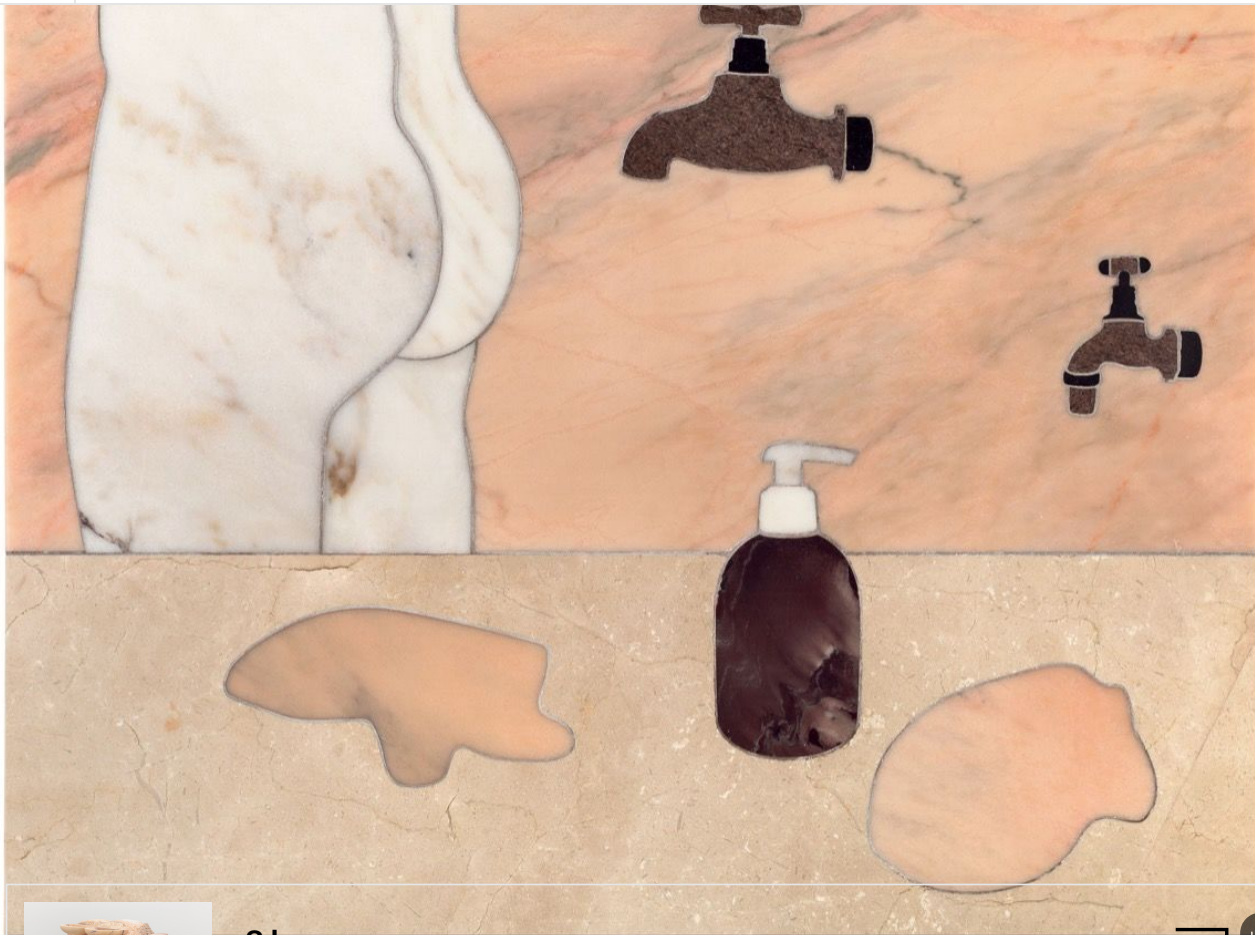
“It demands time and patience, which stands in contrast to my fast-paced life. It’s a hard material that, at the same time, is very fragile.”

Instead of mimicking flesh with marble, as artists have done for centuries, these works act as a frame or a support for a living body, blurring the line between material and model, subject and object. Yet the works of “Fleeting Parts,” as much as any classical marble nudes, still act as *memento mori*—a reminder that stone will always outlive flesh. Naef sees these sculptures as both elements in a performance and as independent works in their own right, and her reasons are surprisingly practical. “Eventually, the plates have to function as autonomous objects.” she explained, “since they will outlive my body.”

Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel Follow

b. 1976, based in Brussels, Belgium

b. 1975, based in Paris, France



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Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel, *Stone Marquetry with Body, Soap Dispenser and Taps II*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and C L E A R T I N G New York / Brussels.

Over the course of more than 20 years, Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel have together explored traditional craft techniques, always constructing the works themselves rather than relying on fabricators, and often making a single material the focus of a body of work.

In a recent exhibition at the Brooklyn gallery Clearing, the pair turned their attention to marble. Titled “Rosa Aurora Rosa,” the show featured enormous blocks of marble (each weighing over 7 tons), which the artists carved with hand tools. “We like to use large blocks and carve them by hand in a traditional fashion, emphasizing the possibilities that each technique offers,” the duo explained via email, “from bush-hammering an area of *non finito* (leaving areas of the work unfinished) to polishing the surface of a figure or an object.”

toilets, and shower heads, as well as human arms and legs. Previously, the pair has merged bodies and objects: a stoneware vessel with a human foot, or a wooden relief of the digestive tract adorning a heavy wooden cupboard. Their combinations are especially effective in pink marble, owing to its tendency to resemble human skin. “We chose this specific pink Portuguese marble for its color and pictorial quality,” the duo said, “and its ability to incarnate the idea of flesh, body fragments and bathroom fittings.”

Barry X Ball [⊕ Follow](#)

b. 1955, based in New York, New York



Barry X Ball, *Fantastico* (Portrait of Jon Kessler), 2001-05. Courtesy of the artist.



Barry X Ball, *Sleeping Hermaphrodite, after Hermaphrodite Endormi (Ermafrodito Borghese)*, 2008-10. Courtesy of the artist.



2 Images

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Much of Barry X Ball's work in marble and other calciferous stones begins not with charcoal sketches or clay models, but with digital data. For his "Portrait Sculptures," "Masterpieces," and "Scholars' Rocks" series, the artist used a 3D scanner to record the forms of living portrait subjects and historical works, such as Michelangelo's *Pietà Rondanini* (1552–64). Although Ball has been working in this way for many years, he is still impressed by the scanner's accuracy. "Unlike traditional forms of copying, where artists interpret their models, 3D scanning allows me to start with truly objective data," Ball explained. "This incredible technology also enables me to see the scanned sculptures better than even their creators could."

Armed with this data, Ball begins with a perfect copy of his subject, then either improves or alters their faces and bodies in surreal and eerie ways. In his "Portrait Sculptures" series, his subjects' faces often appear to be stretched and pulled like taffy, overlaid with strange textures, or doubled so that two heads emerge from a single neck.

Ball's 20,000-square-foot Greenpoint studio is a technological wonderland of modern fabrication tools, including a massive CNC wire saw and anthropomorphic robots. But he seems equally—if not more—attentive to the eccentricities of the ancient stones, often adjusting his approach based on what he discovers within it. "Just last week, I performed a horizontal test cut on a large boulder freshly arrived from Mexico and discovered an amazing dense field of crusty cavities distributed throughout the onyx," Ball said. "Immediately, I thought of Grünewald's still-shocking *Isenheim Altarpiece*—that boulder is shouting at me to incorporate its wounds."

Nevine Mahmoud [Follow](#)

b. 1988, based in Los Angeles, California



Nevine Mahmoud, *Blue donut*, 2017. Photo by Marten Elder. Courtesy of the artist and M+B, Los Angeles.



Nevine Mahmoud, *Mother milk*, 2017. Photo by Marten Elder. Courtesy of the artist and M+B, Los Angeles.



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Juicy, squishy, soft, damp: not qualities typically present—or, let's face it, usually desirable—in marble sculpture, but Nevine Mahmoud's work makes them seem innate. The artist's sculptures of fruits, tongues, and breasts appear at first glance to be pliable and soft. *Blue Doughnut* (2017), a marble circle balanced on a plexiglass plinth, looks as puffy as its namesake suggests, and both sweet and a little lascivious.

into friendly, Pop art shapes—are some of several things that fuel Mahmoud’s practice. Her interest in marble arises, in part, from the oppositions inherent in the medium—its strength and its delicacy. “On the one hand, there is a relative force required to move the stone, break it, hollow it, shape it into the sculpture,” Mahmoud said. “At the same time, one needs a minute-by-minute sensitivity in order to understand the limits of the rock in front of you—its unique fractures, curves, and hidden layers.”

Matthew Simmonds

b. 1963, based in Kvistgård, Elsinore, Denmark



Matthew Simmonds, *Mars Ultor*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.



Matthew Simmonds, *The Passage*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.



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Matthew Simmonds's exquisite carvings (most stand less than 2 feet tall), each carved from a single block of marble, appear at first glance to be replicas or models of existing structures: perhaps the nave of a particular Romanesque cathedral, or the newly excavated ruins of a Greek temple. And while they may be inspired by existing architecture, many designs are entirely born of Simmonds's own invention. He approaches each piece with an architect's eye for planning and precision, while allowing for adjustments along the way.

"I tend to work things out in measured plan and elevation drawings first, considering how these will interact with the natural shape of the stone," he explained. "Usually, I don't know exactly what a sculpture should look like when I begin, and during the working process, there are often several points where I can decide on a change in the design before a piece is finished."

is one of his favorites), particularly those with sacred or religious import. Beyond the design of these historical structures, he's also attentive to how the architects used light and space to communicate a spiritual message—one he tries to replicate in his own work. Ultimately, Simmons's goal is to "create the sensibility these buildings convey [but] in a small internal world inside the stone," he said.

Hanna Eshel [⊕ Follow](#)

b. 1926, based in New York, New York



Hanna Eshel *Sphère Tailée*, ca. 1970
Patrick Parrish Gallery



6 Images

By turns rough and smooth, and biomorphic and geometric, Hanna Eshel's abstract marble forms recall Isamu Noguchi's simplicity and Brancusi's rigor and balance. Often—as is the case of *Sphère Tailée* (ca. 1970), a white marble sphere with a protruding slice—they have the appearance of being split apart, and then reassembled, as if to suggest the artist's own overlapping identities and adventurous life.

Eshel has the sort of biography upon which big-budget historical films are based. Born in Jerusalem in the 1920s, she served as a cartographer in the Israeli Air Force, and in the 1950s, moved to Paris, where she studied painting. She later lived in Carrara, Italy, where she spent six years mastering marble sculpting as the only woman in her group at the prestigious Atelier Nicoli.

Although Eshel did not begin working with marble until she was 46 years old, it was the medium in which she found her voice as an artist, and to which she dedicated her long career. An autobiographical poem on Eshel's website suggests that marble formed the bedrock for her life and work: “I still own no house or country home, no diamonds, furs or cars– / I am weightless – does this make me a CITIZEN OF SPACE? / But my marble keeps me anchored!”

In Carrara, she won the Fiori Carrara prize for her work in marble, and rubbed elbows with Noguchi and Henry Moore. She later penned a memoir about that time, entitled *Michelangelo and Me: Six Years in My Carrara Haven*. When she arrived in New York in 1978, it was with over 20,000 pounds of her work in tow (much of it had to be lifted through the window of her Manhattan apartment by a crane). Now in her nineties, Eshel is no longer up to the physical challenge of working in stone, but her love of the material has not faded. When asked what interested her most about marble, she responded simply: “It's alive. It talks to you.”

