



## ROMANTICISM AND THE WORKS OF BARRY X BALL

By **MONROE DENTON**



(**MATTHEW BARNEY**)

**2000 - 2003**

MEXICAN ONYX, STAINLESS STEEL, GOLD, RHODIUM,  
POLYURETHANE, WOOD

HEAD / SHAFT ASSEMBLY: 69" x 6-1/8" x 7-7/8"

ONYX HEAD: 36-1/2" x 6-1/8" x 7-7/8"

CEILING ARRAY: 88-3/4" x 88-3/4"

COLLECTION OF **ACHILLE AND IDA MARAMOTTI**, REGGIO  
EMILIA, ITALY

Barry X Ball is the artist I always name when asked, "Who is the most underrated artist in the US today?" He has been working steadily and exhibiting in New York and internationally for more than twenty years, but the extreme finish of his works, his use of rare materials and the labor-intensive handwork on each piece have restricted his output and made public exhibitions infrequent. In December, Ball showed his latest work, a bust of Matthew Barney, at Mario Diacono's space at Ars Libri, in Boston; the piece is currently on view at P.S.1 in Long Island City, New York throughout the spring.

The Barney bust was the product of more than three years of concentrated work by Ball and a small number of studio assistants. Its production involved techniques ranging from fine-point hand carving of marble (an extraordinary pitted onyx from Baja, California) to a computer-driven lathe; from life casting to computer generated models; from hand-applied gold leaf to cast plaster ceiling ornaments from the Victorian interior.

Arriving in New York City in the late 1970s, Ball became part of a circle of monochrome painters. This group distinguished itself by a devotion to handwork in the minimalist era, to the production of paintings in a period that favored the dematerialization of the art object. Caught up in the discussions of this circle, Ball turned to archaic techniques. His earliest distinctive works, four large square works on wood panels, *Largen (Before/After Giotto)*, turned to the extreme pre-Raphaelites for inspiration. The wood panels (44" on a side) were cradled and the surface prepared by gesso followed by bole (a natural red clay used as a ground for gilding since the Middle Ages) in alternating horizontal and vertical layers to create a grid which would then be covered with the 400 small squares of metal leaf. *Largen 1* was a solid field of 24K gold leaf; *Largen 4* used fewer squares, breaking the surface into a 9 x 9 grid covered with platinum and palladium leaf. Palladium, which is more resistant to atmospheric conditions, changing slower over time, produced a lighter Roman cross on the surface over time.

For the past seven years, Ball has directed his attention to a series of portraits. These began with laminated Corian, the countertop material, which was sandwiched in alternating black and white stripes before being carved. The stripes, which became a characteristic Ball motif, descend from the striped marbles and painted designs of Tuscan Gothic and were seen to stunning effect in *A Profusion of Loss*, an elaborate wall arrangement in which rectangles of the Corian stripes were encased in silver plated frames and arranged in a shallow relief to conform to the outlines of Leonardo's vanished *Battle of Anghiari*. The cross-hatchings which this arrangement created recalled Jasper Johns' hatchings, but their industrial facture on the one hand and the historicist reference on the other produced an effect of lush intellect that matched the physical materials to heady effect.

Ball's work was out of step with his times. The religious references were discomfiting, although

these were always cultural rather than theological. Ball embraced the theatricality of a Roman Catholicism that was at odds with the Christian fundamentalism in which he had been raised; in fact, he chose Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* – a location of pagan, scientific wonder and a destination for art, not religious pilgrims – as the site of his wedding to Kimberly Van Zee, a noted oncologist. The extreme emotionalism of wonder, totally bypassed in the art of the time, was Barry Ball's element.

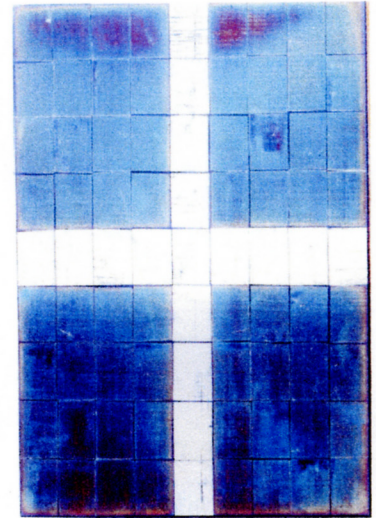
The landscape is the site of Romanticism. The library is the site of classicism, but nature and the wildness of "Nature's God" rather than a theologically tamed Messiah, are the presiding spirits of romanticism. Thomas Cole, one of the true fathers of American art, observed in his 1835 lecture "An Essay on American Scenery" that for this continent, the task was not to overthrow the reins of antiquity but to comprehend the new. Cole's romantic anxiety for the fragility of human existence in the world of industry and civilization found expression in the clearing of land, the sawing of forests to create the tree stumps that figure so often in his greatest works. The intertwined creation and destruction that are at the heart of Romanticism were the paths of the American soul.

The onyx of (*Matthew Barney*) conflates individual physiognomy with the distinctiveness of Chinese landscape stones, those natural images so beloved of scholars and connoisseurs and shifts the spiritual qualities associated with landscape into contemplation of the individual.

The creative process remains legible in the intensity of detail, a superhuman focus such as attracted nineteenth century Romantic painters and sculptors. First, the sitter is recorded photographically, in full and in detail; then the head is cast in an alginate/plaster mold of extremely high detail. The photographs and the positive cast (extensively hand-finished) from this mold provide references for the final work. It is in the cast where the decision of whether or not to carve the sitter's eyes as open or closed is made.

Additions and distortions to the cast at this stage include the flayed skin and viscera and the burst at the top of the head; these modifications are in plaster and/or clay and then are re-cast into another "positive." This model is then digitized via three-dimensional laser scanning and manipulated. Here, the overall head was stretched to 150%. Then, the same computerized process embedded a Victorian Baroque pattern as a veil over the head; at this time, the entire composition was then reduced 85%.

The primary cutting is done with a computer-controlled milling machine. The original boulder was 3000 pounds; obviously, the pittings that emerged in the carving process were impossible to determine from the original block. This computer-driven lathe has allowed Ball to work in stones and at scales that would be impossible before. Because the machine removes infinitesimally small particles rather than striking out large blocks, severely faulted stones such as this can be



**TOP: LARGEN 1 (BEFORE/AFTER GIOTTO)**

1982 – 1985

WOOD, WAX, LINEN, GESSO, BOLE, 23K GOLD

44 CENTIMETERS SQUARE

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

**CENTER: A PROFUSION OF LOSS**

1993 – 1995

SILVER, CORIAN, VELVET, WOOD, PHENOLIC, STAINLESS STEEL

83-1/4" x 94-1/8" x 9-1/8"

COLLECTION OF THOMAS H. LEE AND ANN TENENBAUM, NEW YORK

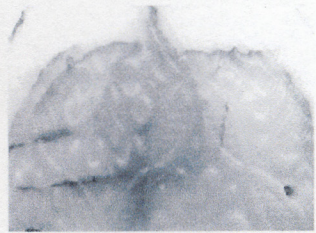
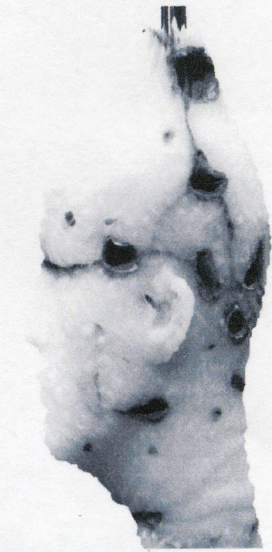
**BOTTOM: LARGEN 4 (BEFORE/AFTER GIOTTO)**

1982 – 1985

WOOD, WAX, LINEN, GESSO, BOLE, SILVER, PALLADIUM

44 CENTIMETERS SQUARE

COLLECTION OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



FULL LENGTH AND DETAIL VIEWS FROM (MATTHEW BARNEY)



LEFT: *PHILOSOPHER'S STONE*, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, MA; RIGHT: *BRONZE BUST*, FRANZ XAVIER MESSERSCHMIDT, 18TH CENTURY

appreciated.

The head was finally mounted on a 24K gold electroplated double-headed shaft which is suspended by thread-thin stainless steel wires from an elaborate ceiling arrangement which makes reference to a panoply of historical periods and styles. The central element features four Raphael-esque putti (of a type beloved of Runge, the German romantic painter) from whose foreheads – the centers of thought – wires run to the golden spear.

Romanticism always enters through nature—whether in the Anglo-Chinese garden, studied informality or the lone figure contemplating a sea of fog in Casper-David Friedrich's painting. Emerson's famous quote from his 1836 essay,

Nature characterizes the complex sublimity of contemplating nature:

"To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. . . . I am glad to the brink of fear. . . . Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. . . . In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature."

Contemplating Barry X Ball's (Matthew Barney) produces the effect of the Emersonian sublime. Boundaries collapse, not only in the

way the erose edges lace the air surrounding them, but empathically, in a puzzling, painful exchange of sensations between viewer and object.

Romanticism's revolt against reason found expression in Percy Bysshe Shelley's nomination of poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." In the secular religion of art, based on a concept of autonomy of esthetic feeling – art for art's sake – Matthew Barney would be a leader. Ball exaggerates Barney's own engagement with myths in the image of the flayed hero. This trope is associated on the one hand with Marsyas, the shepherd foolhardy but almost talented enough to defeat Apollo in music, flayed when the god won; on the other, there is St. Bartholomew, at the feet of Michelangelo's Christ in the *Last Judgment*. Either association should produce overpowering experience of the sublime which was essential to the experience of Romanticism.

E. T. A. Hoffmann, a writer well associated with the movement, defined the characteristics of the movement and the sublime, in notes on Beethoven's Fifth, saying that it "inspires fear and trembling, awe, sorrow, and awakens the endless nostalgia that is the very essence of romanticism." Romanticism, it must be observed, is based on sentiment not sentimentality. The difference is great: sentiment is by definition multiple – it is the complex of feelings, emotions that provokes character as expressed through actions.

The romantic figure is a figure of action. Socrates might be the apostle of Classicism, but Prometheus is the god of Romanticism. Prometheus, Faust, Hamlet form the melancholy triumvirate. Barney is an interesting contemporary embodiment (the theatricalized masochism—the stretched scrotum of *Cremaster 1*, the bloody mouth of *Cremaster 3* would, one thinks,

supply him with sufficient scars to attest to his suffering.

Time and its attendant loss are important factors in this melancholy. In the rare marbles of Ball's sculpture, time is literalized as a seething, inchoate slag – the pitted, cross surface is either coming into form or falling apart.

The eclecticism that characterizes most contemporary art may have been adopted out of the anxiety of taking a firm position. The demands on art are no longer clear-cut. How can the ideal function in an era without ideals? Eclecticism, however, is a basic strategy of Romanticism. At technical levels, there are ideas of radical impurity, expressed through assemblage. An insistence on materials as material allies the past to the present in its common fate – death – with no promise of redemption. The struggle for form is a struggle of the present tense – the teeming emotionalism of the romantic imagination.

Goya's *Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (from the *Caprichos*) is a generative image of the romantic imagination. What sleep did not induce, drugs and hallucinations (Thomas de Quincey, Coleridge, Baudelaire) might. The psychic world was not that far removed from today. With the recognition of history, we are caught in an unending deluge, struggling against being drowned in the accelerating flood. On the popular level, sentimentality turns to revivals of styles from a comforting past, but this is only one aspect of the machinery of culture. Industry parades under the banner of the Enlightenment, seeking standardization; romanticism protested in favor of individualism – fear of the machine and rationalism – the elevation of difference, exceptionalism. Our own relish of fear and danger, evident in the development of extreme sports, for example, finds visual form in the bravura images of Barry X Ball.