

Barry X Ball

Sleeping Hermaphrodite

Sculpture: Belgian Black marble
 Base: Carrara marble, stainless steel,
 Delrin
 Overall 174 x 91 x 80 cm

● Bob Nickas

The *Hermaphrodite Endormi*, in the collection of the Musée du Louvre since the sculpture's acquisition by Napoleon Bonaparte, is unquestionably one of the world's great masterpieces. It is also a copy Based on a Greek original *circa* the second century BC, the statue is Roman, dating to the second century AD. Little more than ten years after its discovery in 1608, its repose was further interrupted when Cardinal Borghese commissioned a twenty-year-old Bernini to carve the mattress on which the figure would ultimately come to rest. Although the figure and its bed appear to have always been coupled, the work in its final state is in fact a composite after a lost original. Such is the passage from antiquity to our time. Lately, having slept for more than four hundred years, the Hermaphrodite has once again been roused, and aroused.

Barry X Ball, who had previously produced his own meticulously crafted transformations of a pair of Italian masterpieces representing purity and envy Antonio Corradini's *La Purità* (Veiled Woman, 1720-25) and Giusto Le Court's *La Invidia* (Envy, c. 1670), both in Venice's Ca' Rezzonico palace subsequently turned his attention to the beguiling ambisexuality of the Hermaphrodite. Just as Bernini bedded the figure in 1619, so too would the American artist have his way with it, animating our sense of how figurative sculpture, and all appropriation, is a matter of asexual reproduction. Sculptures are neither male nor female but neuter, made of wood or clay or stone rather than flesh and blood and chromosomes, the last of which may be off balance. Human hermaphrodites are characterized by ambiguous genitalia, the result of either a female foetus being exposed to testosterone *in utero* or a male foetus not receiving enough of the hormone. Unlike earthworms, snails and most plants, it should be noted, human hermaphrodites cannot fertilize their own eggs.

In his transformation of the Hermaphrodite, Ball has rendered the pure white figure in Black Belgian marble and given it a far greater endowment. In this work, the penis is a long, serpentine affair, somewhat

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tumescent, sly and tempting, as if post-coital or as if the dream of the Hermaphrodite has been made visible. The viewer/voyeur, who is not caught in the act of looking by the sleeping figure, is in any case implicated as the absent lover Ball's dark counterpart is no less than the libidinal awakening of the figure's dormant potential. An anatomical detail common to both works is the hands, both of which are severed, whether intentionally or by accident, and which Ball could have replaced but did not. In their absence the hands point to the labour through which the work was embodied, to the hand-carving that released each figure from rough blocks of massive stone. Caressed by anonymous sculptors, by a young but already brilliant Bernini, re-cast as smaller bronzes in the seventeenth century (the Hermaphrodite as fetish, as 'promiscuous' with one in the collection of the Metropolitan

Museum and another, famously, owned by Yves Saint-Laurent), the Hermaphrodite has in its various forms come to represent desire, power and possession for many people, from emperors and cardinals, to one of the great couturiers of our time. Now that it has been re-imagined and brought back to life by Ball – after he and his studio assistants worked exhaustively for more than two years, using state-of-the-art technology for the scanning and the initial carving and traditional, painstaking methods for rendering every detail – one can't help but wonder if there is a thread that connects these distant points in time. Beyond our sense of the Hermaphrodite as the ultimate symbol of impossible creation, there is one truth to the pursuit of art, passing from one century to the next and inherent in artists – and also collectors – on an almost molecular level: in a word, obsession.

