

Barry X Ball: Part 1

by [Matin Momen](#)



“So,” began the New York sculptor [Barry X Ball](#) who was kind enough to allow us a visit to his Brooklyn studio some months back, “we bought a 200 foot by 100 foot piece of land.” And, while I couldn’t have imaged it at the time, this was a highly appropriate beginning to telling his story. It was a story that began at the end: the land in question was purchased in Greenpoint, Brooklyn to house Ball’s new studio and production facility.

Ball, a Californian native, who grew up working with hands by tinkering with all kinds of machinery, has been making art for a long time. But it was only in the last decade that he really has come into his own, producing work of unparalleled complexity. His sculptures are now being bought by fellow artists like Damien Hirst and Zeng Fanzhi, and by the fashion designer Rick Owens, which is how we learned about Barry X Ball in the first place.

It happened when our editor, Eugene Rabkin, was stuck at Owens’s house waiting for a taxi in a snowed in Paris a few years ago. Owens’s showroom used to occupy the first floor of the house but was unexpectedly moved. Instead of rows of tables and clothing racks he saw two impeccably chiseled heads suspended by metal wires from the ceiling, staring at each other, metal rods piercing the heads from top to bottom. They also had faces on the back of their heads, forever memorialized in a screaming position.

One bust, as Ball told me later, was of the artist himself and the other of Matthew Barney, Ball’s longtime friend. They were perfectly awe-inspiring in their grotesqueness. Below them was a table with several art books. The artist’s name read “Barry X Ball.”

As a sculptor, a natural and necessary part of Ball’s language is scale, dimension, sizing things up. And, for those familiar with Ball’s work, it is highly labored over. To get from initial concept to finished piece takes Ball at least a year (if not years) of thinking, planning, organizing, gathering and making, not much different from putting up a world-class computerized 3D milling facility from scratch. This is work for the long haul and Ball, I learned, is by nature and necessity much more patient and persistent than you or I.

A charming yet otherwise inconspicuous brownstone in Williamsburg hides behind its front door Ball’s current studio, the modern equivalent of of what I imagine must have existed in the Northern or Italian Renaissance. Not in the sense that studio assistants sit banging out work that Ball, as master, will put a few finishing touches on, thereby imbuing the work with his authorship, but, rather, that hidden behind that door there seems to be at any given time half a dozen professionals plying their trades on sculptures in stages ranging from embryonic, still on large computer screens, to others being smoothed by hand with files held like pencils.

At the top of a flight of stairs one enters a small area where Ball’s office manager attends to details

(and Ball is all about attention detail), surrounded by artist filing cabinets.

On the wall are framed prints of Ball's work installed in Italian palazzos, which on reflection is not as jarring as it sounds. Much of Ball's recent work takes as its material starting point sculptures of art-historical importance.

Ball's most recent gallery [show](#) was in Stockholm at McCabe Fine Art. There, three sculptures were exhibited (representing practically an entire year's worth of work) two of which, Purity and Envy, spring from Italian Baroque masterpieces by Antonio Corradini and Giusto Le Court, respectively, and the third, Perfect Forms, was a thorough re-imagining of the more familiar work by the futurist Umberto Boccioni, Unique Forms of Continuity in Space.

Off to one side is a small kitchen whose window gazes upon a New York City ubiquity, a construction site ("Some banker bought this," Ball said with a tone of haplessness that let you know everything you need to know about what Williamsburg is turning into).

The rest of the small floor is taken over by offices, one for Ball, and two others where several studio assistants work shoulder to shoulder surrounded by miniatures studies and 3D printed samples of Ball's work and its inspirations sitting on bookshelves. Two of these are head sculptures of Prince Albert of Monaco, rendered unrecognizably ornate. The assistants manipulate the three dimensional renderings of old sculptures that Ball scanned on sites in France and Italy, making them imperceptibly more perfect mouse-click by mouse-click. People talk about splitting hairs, but at Ball's studio the assistants actually do something like that.

Ball took me into his office where the architectural renderings for the new studio and production facility were spread out on a work desk. "The facility inside it will have – and this is the 2nd floor of the existing building – digital offices and, looking out over this," he gestured, "this is a courtyard where the stone can also arrive and I'll have 20-ton bridge cranes running along here and inside. Here's a car so you can get and sense of scale and how large this place is. It's going now already. We're actually setting up a pop-up studio in this building while the whole permitting process is going on. We're going to work on some large pieces just using the shell of a building for right now because we're out of space here." One of the reasons Ball is moving the studio is to give him the ability to make significantly larger sculptures.

Digital offices. Twenty-ton bridge cranes. A courtyard with stone. Antonio Corradini and Giusto Le Court. Unique Forms of Continuity in Space. The Sleeping Hermaphrodite. Greenpoint and MacBooks. What's going on here?

What is going on is that Ball has managed to convince European authorities to allow him to employ the most advanced technologies to digitally scan in 3D their priceless patrimony on site – an impressive feat for anyone familiar with the European art bureaucracy. The resulting scans are then worked over to push and render the original pieces more extreme in their physical presence or more perfect, for instance, by re-imagining and completing them in the round in ways the original artist could not do or it did not make sense to do (because, say, no one would ever see the back of the sculpture anyhow).

The worked-over scans are then taken to a world-class computerized milling facility (fewer of those than one would be led to believe based on headlines blaring about our 3D printing futures).

There, after logistical hurdle, heaving blocks of stone, such as the rare Belgian black marble and the Carrara marble, that Ball has sourced internationally are milled. Over hours, weeks, even months of milling, the historical source material begins to become recognizable. This rough draft, as it were, is then returned to the studio where in the tenement courtyard, Ball's young assistants spend days upon days in small sheds refining, shaping, polishing and perfecting the sculpture, hovering over each work like a dentist with a gas mask and ear buds.

That is what is going on in a literal sense. From the second floor offices we go down to the first floor, with its staging area of sorts for finished work and work in process, through a storage area of sorts piled ceiling high with casts of heads and wildly distorted sculptures. One of the sculptures, made out of a block of onyx, incorporated the little hands and arms of one of Ball's children merged with the cast of an acquaintance's head and onto a dwarf's torso is a perfect example of Ball's style – dizzying and grotesque.

We continue out the back door and onto a small courtyard with the finishing sheds, blocks of raw stone, and failed sculptures lying like dead soldiers, and then into the basement. This space is comfortingly old-school with tools on hooks and sculptural models and WWII era machinery where, in a sense, Ball's career began. His life film runs in reverse, from the blueprints of the new in the light of day down to the basement machine shop where it all started, if not literally, some decades ago.

That is the what. The why is more challenging to address. Ball's work is not easily boxed up in contemporary terms. The knee jerk reaction is that it's all just a clever a copy, a lavishly produced appropriation, but the reality is much more complex and awe-inspiring. It is an homage, a result of Ball's dissatisfaction with the vacuous world of contemporary art. But even more, the work represents the dialogue of an incisive contemporary mind, with its contemporary concerns, with the work of artisans who would have been peers centuries ago in technical skill, intellectual hunger and capacity to patiently handle large-scale projects over time.

[Part 2](#)

All photography by Eugene Rabkin
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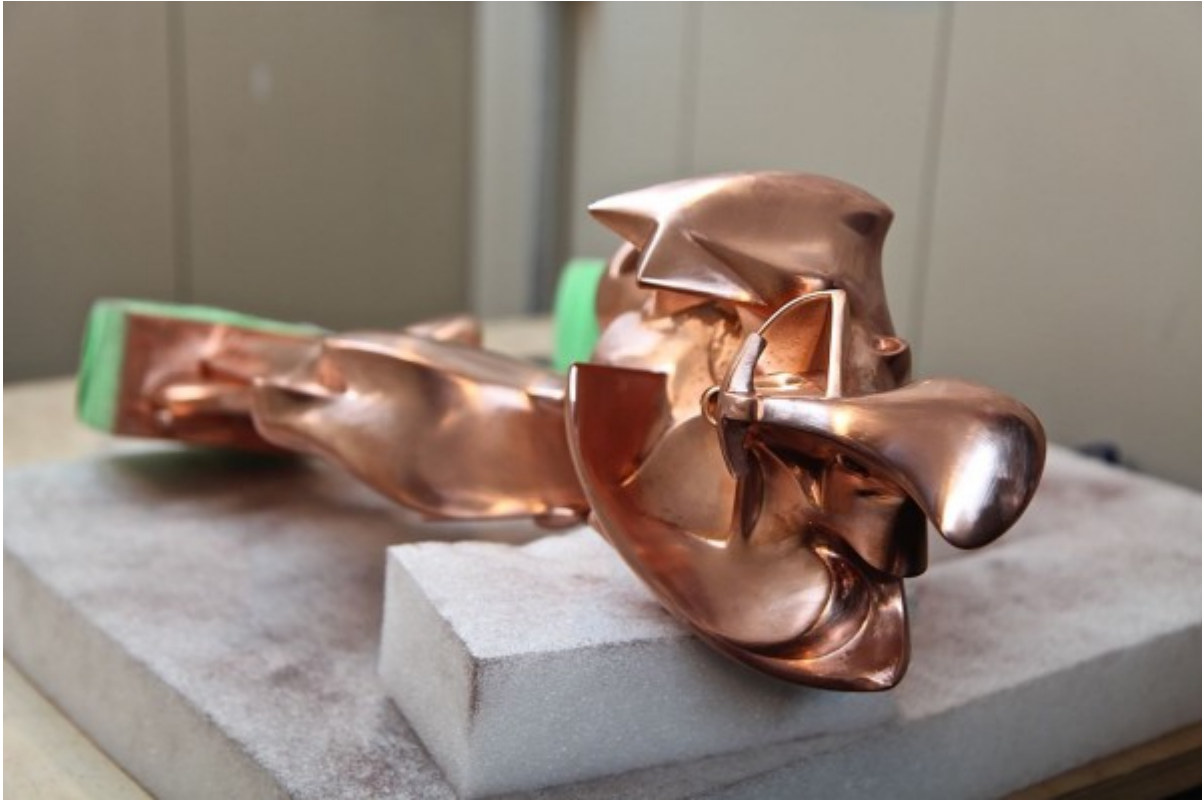












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Barry X Ball: Part 2

by [Matin Momen](#)



Bookshelves line the walls of the American sculptor Barry X Ball's compact office and, while walking me through the blueprints depicting his new Greenpoint, Brooklyn production facility and studio, he directed my gaze up to some palm-sized sculptures resting on them.

“Those are some of my first milled heads in marble,” Ball said. “I always played with scale and I like the concentration and the kind of intensity of something that wasn't life-size. It's almost like a distillation of reality — it's an old Egyptian trick, I didn't invent that. But now we want to work larger. I did one large piece, The Sleeping Hermaphrodite, which has been traveling around a lot. And it weighed a ton for the base and for the sculpture another ton. And that was barely doable here with all kinds of histrionics in this little tenement, so it was time to deal with things in a serious way.” Hence, the need for a dedicated 3D stone-milling production facility on a world-class scale.

This exchange occurred within minutes of our studio visit with Ball. Aptly, it captures so much of what Ball and his work is about. Possessed of a fierce, relentless intellect, Ball deploys his hard-won smarts with generosity; partly because he is self-taught, but more likely because he is hyper aware of the effort required “to deal with things in a serious way.”

It was this intellectual honesty that won over European and Church officials to grant Ball access to 3D-scan sculptures in their collections on site and to return to exhibit his own works among them.

At the same time, Ball is disarming in a wide-eyed Huck Finn way like, for example, the time we revisited the studio and found Ferrari renderings personally dedicated to Ball on his assistant's desk.

Ball had the opportunity to visit the Ferrari design offices and he sang us their praises – not as luxury goods makers, but as craftsmen. Where I saw only a luxury sports car, Ball saw the perfect curve, realized by long hours of engineering and handcraft. As an artist in whose studio time slows down and where nearly two thousand hours go into a bust after the 3D machines have done their thing, Ball delights in that curve because he knows what went into it. The author Robert Pirsig once wrote in his book “Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” that art and technology are not far removed, because both deal with the making of things. Nowhere you could see this better than in Ball's complete understanding of what care, pride of workmanship, and desire for excellence that goes into a Ferrari, as it does into a sculpture.

Ball let me in a bit on why he chooses to revisit classic art. “That model of the world beating a path to your door and you're doing whatever the hell you want is a pretty late development in the history of art. Everyone was a hired gun. Sculpture especially because it is pricey to make. Stone was really hard to get. So, sculptors worked to an order. ‘I will deliver to you the allegorical figure of Envy. It will be this size. It will be in white Carrera marble. ‘ And they got the front part of it done, and they knew it was going to be on a niche, or up on a wall, so the back part wasn't finished. I've looked at a lot of

great works, at Roman works... they all seem unfinished to me. I just feel you can go further.” One look at the back of a Purity by Ball and you get a sense of just how far further can be.

Ball is a self-taught Californian, a tinkerer who grew up solidly middle-class American, until he began learning art history in college, which blew his horizons wide open. He became a self-described “worshipper of all things from the past.” “But,” he continued, “I also see all the exigencies of their production, the compromises, and the terms that must have informed that.”

“There have been very few times in the history of art where somebody had the set up that enabled you to go crazy. Egyptian Amarna period portrait sculptures are exquisitely jewel-like. Some state gifts, like the things you have in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, all those crazy kunst und wunderkammer objects, those are amazingly crazy. That’s kind of what I’m going for. Even on a large scale. “

At one point Ball even likened himself to a producer, a “setter in motion” he said, so the craftsmen, both digital and hand, can push their skills to the fullest.

In this sense, Ball occupies a place in the contemporary art world that is hard to define. Some “see” only copy (“see” in quotes because they probably only ever saw a jpeg). Others see fetishized technology (if you stop reading at 3D milling machine, perhaps). I even came across reference to Ball as an artist who does not make anything (I will get back to you on that one).

There is noisy talk these days that creative work will soon go the way of certain manual labor and become extinct, like the chimneysweep. Software will henceforth produce screenplays, TV shows, journalism, architectural renderings, and clothes design. This is probably already happening for all I know. The role of human beings in this scenario is that of exercising judgment, of choosing the best from the algorithmic possibilities and perhaps tweaking it. Perhaps what the future generations will come to see as remarkable in Ball’s work is the exercise of artistic judgment. What they will miss is the self-created know-how and the daily struggles that go into Ball’s production.

That undefined space is all his own though, which is fitting for an artist who remarked to me only half-jokingly that he is only starting at the point where most other sculptors today think they have finished.

One has to delight in the fact that Ball turned to the local woodworker responsible for Donald Judd’s sculptures and to precision glass makers to help construct the display cases for Unique Forms of Continuity in Space.

Even more delightful is that the polishing for “Unique Forms” which helps render the sculptures liquid in the light rather than anime-mechanical, as we have come to know it, was done by a North Carolina man in his garage. That same man devotes most of his working hours to polishing Nascar trophies to a perfect gleam.

It was a revelation to me to learn from Ball that the various versions of Unique Forms of Continuity in Space by Umberto Boccioni that we know are posthumous castings. Where the rest of us stop and denote a masterpiece in a museum gallery, Ball sees a project waiting to be taken closer to perfection and is modest and intelligent enough to know when to include the experts in the project.

I am reminded too of remarks Kirk Varnedoe made about Donald Judd in his Mellon lectures. “There is something small-time and peculiar about the fabrication of a lot of minimalist works that suggest

not industrial mass production, but old-fashioned craftsmanship. In this sense, minimalism seems to express a nostalgia for small-product America, for chopper shops and body shops or businesses that make metal door frames or install aluminum siding.” It is just this native sensibility that Ball and his studio assistants push to its furthest extreme.

And remember this, the next time you have opportunity (and I hope you do) to see a sculpture by Barry X Ball in person: by making uncompromising standards for himself and his work, he has made our, the viewers’, job easy. “I think that the viewer, collector, gallery, whoever, will never see the thousands of individual differences, the little details that we pay attention to. I just believe that cumulatively it has a buzz. That there is a vibration to an object that is made like that. That it just feels different.”

All images courtesy of Barry x Ball
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Note, full titles for portrait works are:

For Dual Jeanne, Belgian Black Marble

A dual-portrait, realized at 100% scale, in the rare, uniquely un-figured black marble known as ‘Belge Noir’, exhibiting a layered ‘sfumato’ surface suffused with miniscule opposed-diagonal fluting overlaying a coincident enveloping foliate relief. In culmination, a glistening “Rorschach” garland – symmetrically splashed, sharply-delineated, avian, sinister – traverses the work’s midline. The artist-designed integral / modular base / pedestal unit, its tapering parabolic sweep flowing into the sculpture’s glass-polished flute stem (which, in turn, terminates in a silhouetted arboreal fringe), conceived in parallel with the sculpture, precisely-fabricated in stainless steel, acrylic-spray-lacquered aluminum and wood (and a variety of subsidiary materials) by a studio-coordinated consortium of disparate fabricators, is reminiscent, alternately, at its apex, of traditional ‘socles’ and Saarinen furniture pedestals. Here, in an attempt to reinvent and reinvigorate the sub-genre of romantic portrait sculpture, the artist has conjoined his signature fever-pitch execution intensity and a newfound conceptual tenderness. The resultant bilateral Janusian abstraction, created with deep reverence for and specific focus on the history of sculpture, makes an expansive case for the critical reconsideration of prevailing contemporary practice, while simultaneously probing both the subject’s psychology and her complex relationship to the artist. The stony double-surrogate captures, in soft Galatean contravention of its obdurate materiality, a moment of poignant reflection, reflected.

2007 – 2010

For BXB + Matthew Barney Dual Dual Portrait Black Yellow:

paired, mirrored, flayed, javelin-impaled, cable-delineated-pendentive-funnel-suspended, squid-like, priapic / labio-vulval, Janusian meta-portrait lozenges, in turn pairing Matthew Barney, with eyes alternately open and closed, and the artist, in two guises: screaming and ‘defaced’-in-the-style-

of-a-melting-Chinese- Scholars'-Rock (with said disfigurement contained in a symmetrically-bordered peel escutcheon), with the composite figures richly embossed, in a manner reminiscent of late- Renaissance Milanese parade armor, with a cornucopia of silhouetted motifs: Abrahamic ecclesiastical symbols, animals, decorative flourishes, and protuberant, warty, half-spheres, one in subtly-figured, richly-colored Portuguese Gold Marble; the other in Italian Portoro Marble, variegated black, electrically-laced with orange and white veins, with differing surface treatments keyed to the corresponding swag-draped corporeal flay strata: a glistening sheen for the splayed entrails, miniature horizontal flutes for the mid-level viscera, and gnarled, ridged, sfumato-esque soft-focus ornamental relief for the epidermis, with eyes, oral features, and the mutilated face gleaming, respectively, with a moist, lachrymal / salivary / mucosal polish, with mannered, attenuated, crown-like cranium-top shatter-burst exit-wounds

2000 – 2009

For Dual Jeanne, Mexican Onyx

A dual-portrait of the artist's New York gallerist, realized at 85% scale, in an exceptional specimen of dramatically-figured, exuberantly-colored translucent onyx, selected for veination and contrasting opacity so as to differentiate the mirrored images, exhibiting a layered surface suffused with a 'sfumato' overlay of foliate relief and coincident miniscule circumferential terracing. The artist- designed integral / modular base / pedestal unit, it's tapering parabolic sweep flowing into the sculpture's glass polished flute stem (which, in turn, terminates in a silhouetted arboreal fringe), conceived in parallel with the sculpture, precisely-fabricated in stainless steel, limestone, acrylic-spray-lacquered aluminum and wood (and a variety of subsidiary materials) by a studio- coordinated consortium of disparate fabricators, is reminiscent, alternately, at its apex, of traditional 'socles' and Saarinen furniture pedestals. Here, in an attempt to reinvent and reinvigorate the sub-genre of romantic portrait sculpture, the artist has conjoined his signature fever-pitch execution intensity and a newfound conceptual tenderness. The resultant deceptively-diminutive bilaterally- symmetrical Janusian abstraction, created with deep reverence for and specific focus on the history of sculpture, makes an expansive case for the critical reconsideration of prevailing contemporary practice, while simultaneously probing both the subject's psychology and her complex relationship to the artist. The stony double-surrogate captures, in soft Galatean contravention of its obdurate materiality, a moment of poignant reflection, reflected.

2007 – 2008



[Belgian Black Marble Purity Right View Detail](#)



[Barry X Ball - Perfect Forms - 24K Gold - Rendering](#)



[BXB - Ca' Rezzonico, Venice - Dual Belgian Black Marble Jeanne Rohatyn in the Nuptial Allegory](#)



[Envy, Mexican Onyx](#)



[Sleeping Hermaphrodite](#)



[BXB + Matthew Barney Dual-Dual Portrait Black-Yellow](#)



[Purity at Palazzo Mansi in Lucca III](#)



[Dual Jeanne, Mexican Onyx](#)



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