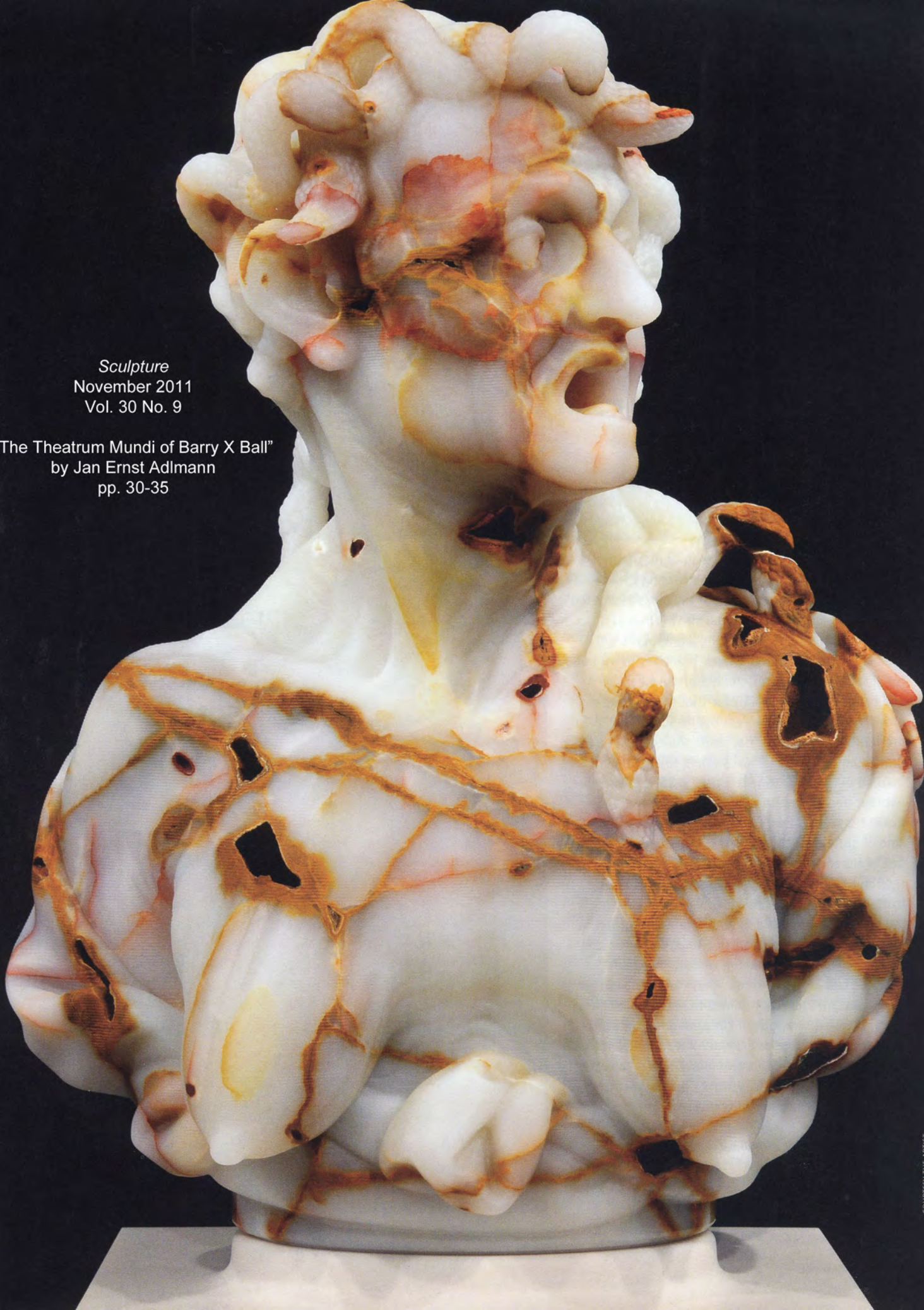


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"The Theatrum Mundi of Barry X Ball"  
by Jan Ernst Adlmann  
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# The Theatrum Mundi of **Barry X Ball**

BY AN ERNST ADLMANN

Opposite: *Envy*, 2008–11. Mexican onyx and stainless steel, 22.1 x 17.2 x 9.5 in. Above: *Dual Portrait*, 2007–10. Belgian black marble, 15.8 x 8.9 x 8.3 in. View of work in the Sala Allegoria Nuziale, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice.

A key to penetrating Barry X Ball's sculptural enterprise (though not by any means to unlocking *all* its contents) was a phrase he let slip in a recent interview concerning his solo exhibition at the Ca' Rezzonico in Venice. In musing on his engagement with "the longer history of art," he observed, "I like mixing it up with the old guys."<sup>1</sup> While grappling with sculpture's "old guys" — most strikingly with the Baroque — Ball manages to transfigure our perception of the masterpieces that he revisits, conflating the past with Post-Modernism in striking compositions. He effects these transformations by deploying sophisticated 3-D scanning and virtual modeling technology, computer-controlled milling, detailed hand-carving and polishing and, often, applying a complex resin infusion. Ball uses these processes to create contemporary works with a classical inspiration and a surreal aura.

Showings of contemporary art in historical sites is much in vogue of late. The recent appearance of Jeff Koons's towering balloon dog in a great *salon* at Versailles is a well-publicized example. Ball's retrospective at Venice's most spectacular Baroque palazzo (in the context of this year's Biennale) ratchets up such dialogues with art history. The exhibition would never have taken place at all, had not Ball's art history-roving eye fallen on two works in the museum's collection. In 2008, the Civic





Above: *Plucked from The Standard Model and elevated again / The Holy Shroud of Nature calls into question The Creator it summons...from Rock to rock*, 2002–06. Mexican onyx, 41.5 x 22 x 14 in. Work installed in the Salotto delle Lacche Verdi, Ca' Rezzonico. Left: *Matthew McCaslin Homunculus*, 2000–04. Translucent Mexican onyx and stainless steel, 16.9 x 11.3 x 8.9 in. Work installed in the Farmacia, Ca' Rezzonico.



Museum Foundation of Venice allowed him to digitally scan and otherwise “capture” two Baroque works from the Ca' Rezzonico—Orazio Marinali's *Invidia* (*Envy*) and Antonio Corradini's *La Purità*—the so-called “Veiled Lady.” This was the first time that Ball applied his elaborate process to carefully chosen, art historical touchstones, and it resulted in the museum's decision to mount a major exhibition of his “masterpieces,” in addition to a riveting series of portrait heads.

Ball's Venice installation performed a dazzling resuscitation of the paradigmatic Baroque artistic goal—the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or an amalgam of art, architecture, lighting, and ambiance that results in a reverberant, “total work of art.” The Baroque view of the universe posited the world as theater, the *theatrum mundi*—where, with much sensation of movement and rampant emotion, everything is propelled by alternating order and tension. Within the Ca' Rezzonico, Ball's works sprang to life and re-created such a sensibility, wherein life is perceived as a matter of drama, of staging. “At times, I chose sculptures that I thought would create a bit of luscious frisson with their surroundings, while at others, I tried to...set up a situation where they would almost meld with the room.”<sup>2</sup> Installed in the palazzo's cabinet of chinoiserie, several of Ball's oddly attenuated “Scholars' Rocks” took on particular resonance, melding with their surroundings, as did a startling “Matthew McCaslin” apparition, which was installed in the museum's antique chemist's shop.

Ball's penchant for seeking out sumptuous stones plays a signal role in his virtuoso encounters with various old masters. Many of his “masterpieces” are fashioned from *recherché* materials with exotic colorations and dramatic markings (including Italian *Fantastico* marble and Pakistani onyx). Other times, he selects marble or alabaster (Iranian white onyx) of an almost eerie luminosity. This preciousness of materials serves arguably rather *outré* subject matter—disconcerting here, a bit disturbing there. We are





reminded that, as Baudelaire said, “beauty is always bizarre,” that the beautiful always harbors a quotient of strangeness. Irregularity, the unexpected, surprise, and astonishment were elements of beauty for Baudelaire, and all are earmarks of Ball’s idiosyncratic vision.<sup>3</sup>

In the Ca’ Rezzonico’s Throne Room, Ball deftly paired two versions of his re-interpretations from the museum’s collection, *La Purità* and *Invidia* (Ball often creates several versions of such pieces, in different, always gorgeous, stones.) The correspondence between the two figures, one subdued and enigmatic, the other contorted with rage, seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the space. In particular, *Envy* (one of the seven deadly sins), rendered in golden honeycomb calcite, seemed aglow, “fueled” from within. The gorgeous, fractured stone seemed to amplify, tremulously, the mythical “panic cry” that contorts the screaming face. (Significantly, several of Ball’s most unforgettable portrait pieces, such as the fearful “self-portrait” *double-sex rococo scholar’s stone scream mandorla* take the form of similar screaming heads, embodiments of the shattering experience when one becomes suddenly, electrically transfixed by contact with elemental nature.)

The first work, or rather ensemble of works, to greet exhibition visitors was Ball’s *Pseudogroup of Giuseppe Panza* (1998–2001)

Left: *Envy*, 2008–10. Belgian black marble and stainless steel, 22.1 x 17.2 x 9.5 in. Below: View of installation in Sala del Trono, Ca’ Rezzonico, with *Envy* (left) and *Purity* (right), golden honeycomb calcite versions.



TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST BOTTOM: FRANCESCO ALLEGRETTO





Above: *Pseudogroup of Giuseppe Panza*, 1998–2001. Macedonian marble and stainless steel, 9 heads, view of installation in the Pianerottolo Scala d’Onore, Ca’ Rezzonico. Left: *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, 2008–10. Belgian black marble, 68.1 x 35.5 x 18.3 in.



the earliest and perhaps most fascinating of his portrait projects. Installed on a landing of the palazzo’s grand staircase, against a wall of leaded-glass windows that let in a flood of watery, Adriatic daylight, the nine portrait heads sounded successive, subtle changes on the prototype—a portrait of Ball’s early, enthusiastic patron, the great Milan art collector and scholar Giuseppe Panza.

Though the heads initially appear identical, closer inspection reveals that they differ markedly from one another, some appearing with eyes closed, others with eyes half veiled, yet all sharing an other-worldly, introspective quality. The heads—in fine-grained, Macedonian white marble, each elegantly installed atop a polished, stainless steel column—also display different surface treatments, all deriving from the myriad milling and grinding processes that Ball has developed. (It is important to note that his portraits all begin with preliminary life-casts of the subject, and he always proposes the portraits—he does not work on commission.)

The term “pseudogroup” derives from ancient Egyptian art, in which several representations of the same subject were often created. The *Pseudogroup of Giuseppe Panza* gives Ball the opportunity to demonstrate virtuosity within a limited framework; these haunting heads are like musical “variations on a theme” since each has a different scale and all have differing surface treatments. The titles of the nine heads, such as *Bloodless Purity*, *Head of a Dignitary* and *Dead to the World* signal Ball’s differing intentions. The series reminded me of the eccentric self-portrait heads of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (recently shown in an exhibition organized by the Louvre and Manhattan’s Neue Galerie).

Hands down, the most startling “portrait” in the exhibition, likely to be ineradicable in the mind of many a viewer, is the depiction, in effulgent, Mexican onyx, of the artist Matthew McCaslin (As with many Ball portraits, this work sports a long, rambling title, an enigmatic riff in free-verse, which includes such head-snapping



paired, mirrored, flayed...portrait of Matthew Barney and the artist, 2000–09. Italian Portoro marble, Portuguese gold marble, stainless steel, and metal, 2 elements, 22 x 5.2 x 8 in. each.

phrases as “concupiscent beastmaster,” “casting-call miscreant,” and “habeas corpus lightning rod” The spooky context of the Ca’ Rezzonico’s beautifully reconstructed 18th-century chemist’s shop brought the McCaslin piece forcibly to life. Set amid glass alembics and beakers, like some grisly lab specimen, the strange homunculus, with its flipper-like hands, seemed to flutter convulsively upward, a moth just released from its chrysalis. (One could not help but recall the oddities and rarities that were once avidly collected in Renaissance cabinets of curiosities.)

The “masterpiece” in the Ca’ Rezzonico show, though, was the lavish *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* (2008–10) The Louvre granted Ball exceptional permission to scan the original Greco-Roman sculpture, a key monument in its collection and in the history of art. His voluptuous yet enigmatic work—nearly life-size—amounts to “something that seems to have come out of nowhere [a work wherein] the antique, the Baroque, and science fiction all unite,” in the words of French critic Jean-Pierre Criqui The extravagant work, Criqui continues, “stands out because of the way it re-animates or calls into play one of the characteristics that is both the most archaic and the most complex of the art of sculpture, namely the characteristic of being an object that is subject to displacement, both literal and symbolic, and the focus of echoing condensations.”<sup>4</sup>

At the Ca’ Rezzonico, the glistening figure (of flawless, black Belgian marble, floating on a “cushion,” itself a marvel of lapidary illusionism in black, Carrara marble) dozed in the most regal setting imaginable, the palazzo’s high Rococo Salone Brustolon, with its priceless paintings, porcelains, tapestries, and chandeliers. Anyone might be forgiven for supposing that this strange, hermaphroditic nude had been lolling there since the moment of its creation, so handsomely did the work meld with its surroundings. Moreover the seductive figure—with his/her disconcerting sexual apparatus abundantly apparent—admirably bodied forth the conceit that “beauty is always bizarre.”

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barry X Ball: *Portraits and Masterpieces*, exhibition catalogue, (Venice: Ca’ Rezzonico, 2011), p.

43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “L’exposition universelle, 1855.”

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Criqui, “Hermaphroditum Nobilem Fecit,” in *Barry X Ball: Portraits and*

*Masterpieces*, op. cit., p. 91.

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