

Barry X Ball

A Profusion of Loss

1993 - 1995

silver, Corian, velvet, wood, phenolic, stainless steel

83-1/4 x 94-1/8 x 9-1/8 inches (211.5 x 239.1 x 23.2 centimeters)

Each of the work's 55 major elements is made up of the following components:

- a lacquered, repoussé, sterling silver Victorian-style frame with burgundy velvet covered edges
- a black and white striped panel of laminated, polished, solid DuPont "Corian"
- a curvilinear-profiled panel of polished black "XXX" paper phenolic

The element components are assembled with a combination of screws and adhesives. These assemblies are affixed to the wall with a system of polished stainless steel attachment disks and posts. When the piece is viewed from the front, only the striped panels and the silver frames (with subtle burgundy velvet penumbras) are visible. They seem to float mysteriously in front of the wall. When seen obliquely or from the side (i.e. when a viewer is near the wall on which the work is installed), a forest of mirror-polished stainless steel posts and the gleaming black phenolic panels on the rear of each element are visible. Here the burgundy velvet is more salient. The illusion of levitation disappears. The effect is similar to seeing the scaffolding behind theater sets.

The composition of my work is based on the Louvre Peter Paul Rubens drawing after copies of the cartoon for Leonardo da Vinci's great unfinished-and-now-destroyed *The Battle of Anghiari* (a type of relief sculpture based on a drawing after copies of a cartoon for a painting for which only preliminary sketches still exist). Parts of 7 humans and 4 horses are depicted in the Rubens drawing. Several hands, feet, and hooves are "missing" from the drawing; they are either hidden or off the page. I have taken the liberty of adding them to my constellation. Hence, the 55 elements of my piece correspond to

the heads, hands, feet and hooves of the Rubens humans and horses (11 warring "beasts", each with a head and 4 appendages). My elements are abstract versions of the various body parts they stand for. They have been chosen to correspond in size, shape, position, and orientation to their counterparts in the Rubens work.

The rear installation posts are 2, 4, 6, and 8" in length, and serve to project the elements at varying distances away from the wall into the room. In the "sparsely populated" sections of the composition, the elements are relatively close to the wall. In the more densely concentrated areas, the projection is greater. Elements overlap in many parts of the work. The posts of foreground elements sometimes pass through the "faces" of elements behind them. At points, frames and panels are heaped upon each other. The frontal elements in these luxuriant passages are at maximum distance from the wall. The areas of low and high relief in my piece do not strictly correlate with the background and foreground sections of its progenitor. I have utilized *The Battle of Anghiari* as a point of departure, not as a creation codex. The resultant translation into three-dimensions of a venerable two-dimensional "war-horse" is far from mimetic.

The stripes on the element faces are at 45 degrees to the vertical axes of the frames. If the smooth medallion at the apex of each frame pointed up, the stripes of all the elements would be parallel and run from upper left to lower right. The stripes of the all elements within each of the 5 frame type groups are identically and symmetrically sequenced (from lower left to upper right). After carefully establishing an initial diagonal perfection, I have done everything possible to obliterate it.

It is as if we are witnessing a frozen explosion. There is violence and calm, dynamism and stasis. Frames and panels seem to burst toward us. Detritus is strewn across the wall. At the elevated, eccentric epicenter is a swelling mass. Ornatly tooled silver adds a flickering visual density both ethereal and metallic (not unlike bronze Bernini "light beams").

The stripes are primary. Their optical vibrations simultaneously reinforce and counteract both apparent motion and physical depth. They are dazzlingly decorative form-destroyers. (Witness their effects in Tuscan Gothic, Venetian, and Islamic architecture, Nature [e.g. tigers, zebras, bees], WWII troop transports [camouflage], etc., etc.) Their current angular disarray is deceptive - the seemingly random orientation points to a perfect pre-cataclysmic diagonal order. The skewed striping references the current practice of restoration hatching. (The lost sections of the flood-damaged 13th century Cimabue crucifix weren't re-painted or re-gilded. They were filled in with fine hatch marks. In effecting a "neutral" repair, the conservators effectively intensified the work's poignancy. Loss, actual aesthetic/physical loss, is now an integral adjunct to that painting's iconographic content.) Leonardo's own celebrated graphic hatching is also recalled.

The silver haloes function in part like their golden antecedents in Italian panel paintings. The flat disk-like halo of the late Gothic / early Renaissance was a remnant of the earlier gold ground. It became the ultimate transcendental signifier: the boundary or marker dividing the sanctified from the secular. In this work, the silver is a vestige of my own prior precious-metal predilection. The frames serve to physically/optically separate the (figure) panels from the (ground) wall. The decorative program of the frames is typically Victorian: a ludicrous over-all pastiche of earlier decorative styles utterly devoid of clarity or elegance. Even their repoussé, work lacks crispness. All that remains is a dazzlingly seductive display of shallow luxury. Leonardo began his work on my piece in 1503. Here at the "end of history", the frames chronicle five centuries of ensuing entropic degradation. They are degenerate art historical compendiums.

My piece is in effect a polyptych, with each frame forming a type of riza. A riza (or oklat, Russian for 'covering') is the tooled metal sheet that is traditionally added to an icon as it increases in age and veneration. Openings are cut into the metal to reveal the essential sections (usually heads and hands) of the painting beneath. The head/hand (mind/body) dichotomy/union has been a recurring theme in my work. This is my most expansive treatise on the subject to-date.

I have collaborated with Leonardo to create a work that is a union of the physical and the spiritual. The piece is fastidiously fabricated, and great attention and labor has been lavished on every detail. Yet, unlike my *The Not Painting Collection* works, it does not scream, "I am a tour de force of craftsmanship." My completion of Leonardo's masterpiece is devoid of bravura tactile masterstrokes (echoing the flawless surfaces of his paintings). Its cold technical perfection serves to conceal any evidence of traditional manual virtuosity, yet it is not a work of pure conceptual art. *A Profusion of Loss* is assertively physical. Leonardo strove to elevate painting to a status co-equal with that of the other liberal arts. He was unwilling to do the same for sculpture. My sculptural transformation of his abandoned painting is intended as an internally subversive challenge to that hierarchy. Indeed, the larger challenge of engaging the quintessential Renaissance genius in a virtual *tête-à-tête* was a prime motivation for the creation of this piece.

The Battle of Anghiari is probably the most influential nonexistent artwork ever created. Michelangelo and Leonardo were each commissioned to paint large murals celebrating Florentine war victories in the Salone dei Cinquecento of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Michelangelo's subject was *The Battle of Cascina*, while Leonardo's was the *The Battle of Anghiari*. Neither painting was ever completed. In the 16th century, Giorgio Vasari painted over the unfinished works.

Working from accounts of the 1440 triumph of the Florentines over Milanese mercenaries, Leonardo made many preparatory sketches and finally finished a full-scale cartoon and part of the mural itself. The experimental painting methods he utilized were unsuccessful, and he eventually abandoned the commission when he was called away from Florence. (Leonardo reportedly employed a type of encaustic technique. Large bonfires were lit in the hall [!] in an attempt to fix the wax paint to the plaster. The results were predictably disastrous.)

The cartoon for *The Battle of Anghiari* enjoyed enormous fame. It survived for more than a century and became the model for hundreds of battle scenes throughout the late Renaissance, the Baroque period, and even the nineteenth century. We know what the central section must have looked like through the imaginative drawing Rubens made in the seventeenth century. Leonardo abandoned factual accuracy in his portrayal and created instead a dense mass of violently struggling horses and riders that presents a timeless image of the spirit of battle. The hexagonal grouping is often called the first completely High Renaissance composition. Its ferocity made earlier depictions of war (notably Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano*) seem toylike in comparison.

The nucleus of the scene is the struggle around the standard. To me, the ultimate futility of war is summed up by this idiotic fight over a flag. Leonardo's own firsthand experience with combat (he was employed periodically as a military engineer) was transmuted (possibly subconsciously) into what I view as an anti-war battle depiction. War is a great killer of humanity. It is also devastating to works of art (witness just the aesthetic losses in World War II: St. Michaels in Hildesheim, the murals of the Pisa Camposanto, the monastery at Monte Casino, Mantegna's Padua murals, etc., etc.). Tragically, artists have often glorified war (*Guernica*, etc. notwithstanding).

Bloody, beautifully rendered crucifixions, martyrdoms, torture scenes...and battles permeate the history of art. The combination of beauty and violence is powerfully seductive. With this creation, I too have succumbed. By isolating and abstracting selected elements of the Leonardo-cum-Rubens work, I have transformed an exquisitely balanced High Renaissance composition into what looks to be an *au courant* "scatter piece". Although the arrangement appears variable/random, it is not. A complete installation kit accompanies the work. The kit includes a large [2.44 meters square] elaborate two-part wooden template with precisely positioned hardened steel drill bushings. When properly employed, this jig ensures that the constellation of elements is identically configured at various installation sites.

A Profusion of Loss appears much larger than its indicated dimensions. The piece not only "holds" a large wall, it is a part of it (and vice versa). The wall becomes a matrix that unifies the elements it physically supports. Wall and work interpenetrate. There is an implied boundlessness to the radiating array. The losses mount. We are at Wall Zero.