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Conceptual beauty: The portrait sculpture of Barry X Ball

Michael Fitzgerald

AROUND 1770, AFTER A LONG AND SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN VIENNA, the neoclassical sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt moved back to his native Bavaria and began his extraordinary series of ‘character’ heads. The sculptor’s starting point was the mirror, and by staring at his own reflection Messerschmidt would begin to play with his facial expressions, distorting them into sometimes unrecognisable shapes. Over 240 years later, New York-based sculptor Barry X Ball takes his cue from Messerschmidt, but in place of a mirror, the stepping-off point for his sublimely uncanny portrait sculpture is the computer. Over the last decade or so the artist has been digitally scanning faces of his friends and colleagues and, more recently, baroque statuary figures, and then, through the alchemy of 3D software, tweaking their forms before committing them to stone. The magic then begins. In choosing the most unpredictable of marble and alabaster for his computer-milled sculptures, Ball’s figures are made to fissure and oxidise before the viewer’s eyes, becoming and unbecoming. Observes the exhibition’s curator, Laura Mattioli: ‘The problem for Ball is not only technical and formal, it is also conceptual: [to ask] in what way can beauty come from the past and continue into the future.’

For his most recent project, on the occasion of the 54th Venice Biennale, Ball took as the subject of his sculptural shape-shifting the city’s venerable art museum of the eighteenth century, Ca’ Rezzonico. Among the baroque opulence of the palazzo’s rooms, the artist singled out two sculptural treasures, Antonio Corradini’s *Dama velata* (‘The veiled lady’), c. 1720–25, and Giusto Le Court’s *La invidia* (‘Envy’), c. 1670, for his creative cloning. Together these famous female figures form a study in contrast – one purified by faith and the other engulfed in jealousy – and make for perfect sculptural vessels to test the limits of Ball’s formal and conceptual games. Rendered with the rusted blooms of Mexican onyx, Ball’s version of *La invidia* becomes truly consumed by envy, while, sheathed in white Iranian onyx and almost translucent, *Dama*

velata glows. Other modern touches become noticeable. With *La invidia* Ball fleshed out the back of the figure, creating a sculpture in the round, while he erased *Dama velata*’s Latin Cross to suggest a more universal figure of faith. It’s as if these baroque figures have been quietly subsumed by a new spirit. For Ball it’s an exercise in creative control: ‘It’s basically testing the proposition of how much you need to do to make the sculptures new, to make them mine.’

Placing these figures within the baroque context of Ca’ Rezzonico provides a further complexity in this game of artistic possession. As if in a hall of mirrors, viewers slowly discern other contemporary hybrids of *Dama velata* and *La invidia* in adjacent rooms, with the two figures even being brought together in golden honeycomb calcite to radiate jewel-like against the red salon walls. Soon they are joined by the benign but ghostly personages of Ball’s other portrait sculptures, which have been drawn from private collections across Europe and the United States. A bust of Ball’s friend, the artist Lucas Michael, faces the frescoed wall of Giandomenico Tiepolo’s *Il mondo nuovo*, 1791, the mineral wounds of his head echoing the downfall of the Venetian Republic. And sprouting like a beautiful dark flower alongside Andrea Brustolon’s ebony Ethiopian warriors (c. 1700) is Ball’s staggering facsimile in Belgian black marble of the Roman *Sleeping hermaphrodite* from the Louvre in Paris.

Ball’s slavish pursuit of beauty might seem strangely old-fashioned in this era of video and installation art, and the artist is the first to admit that the ‘cabinet of wonders, where you left the world’s concerns and moved into a world of pure beauty, where words fell away, has gone’. But strolling through the gilt-and-glass-mirrored interiors of Ca’ Rezzonico, where baroque figures live on in their contemporary reflections, we can sometimes feel we’re witnessing the future.

Barry X Ball: Portraits and Masterpieces, Ca’ Rezzonico, Venice, 4 June – 11 September 2011.



installation view, right to left:
Barry X Ball, *Purity*, 2008–09, translucent white Iranian onyx, 61 × 41.9 × 28.6 cm;
Antonio Corradini, *Dama velata (La purità)*, 1720–25, Italian marble; Sala del Ridotto
o del Parlatorio, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice, 2011. Photograph Francesco Allegretto.

