

Barry X Ball In Conversation with Bob Nickas

BN: The idea of confronting historical sites with works of contemporary art is not a new one, particularly in Italy. The contrast when looking at, for example, a work of arte povera installed in a Baroque palazzo, is quite high and, by now at least, almost formulaic: a poor object in a rich interior. The juxtaposition can still be startling, and satisfying, as with the exhibition of works by Louise Bourgeois in the Capodimonte museum. In recent years, there have been interventions with contemporary art at Versailles. Though not generally appreciated by the current nobility, works installed there by Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami have met with popular success. Some sculptures by Koons blended almost seamlessly with the architecture and decor of the palace, while others unfortunately appeared to have been photo-shopped into its rooms. But I can imagine that your works, which are simultaneously contemporary and classical, will have it both ways in Venice: they can be seen as both strange invaders and, in many cases, to have always lived in the rooms of Ca' Rezzonico. How do you see the overlay?

BXB: A corollary to the installation of contemporary works in elaborately "decorated" historical spaces is exhibiting historical works in clean contemporary galleries. Seeing ancient paintings in stark white rooms — as in the current show of Italian Baroque works at Sperone Westwater gallery in New York — is a bracing experience, something fresh and exciting that enables us to experience those works as surprisingly direct antecedents of contemporary paintings. In the 2006 Boccioni exhibition at the Palazzo Reale in Milano, which Laura Mattioli also curated, there were some incredible 1913 photos of the Boccioni sculpture show at Galerie La Boétie in Paris — Modernist icons placed on high, fabric-draped pedestals in a dark room, replete with wainscoting, brocade-covered walls, carpeted floors, and richly-carved architectural elements: radical works in a traditional setting. Of course in 1913 there weren't many spaces as innovative as the Boccionis! In 100 years we will undoubtedly be equally shocked to see photos of current gallery installations — objects floating in uniform, glaringly-colorless cubic isolation chambers. I can't add much to all that has been written about the contemporary white cube gallery. There may be a general yearning to move to the next thing, or perhaps now that we are officially free of Modernism, to reconnect with the longer history of art. I like mixing it up with the old guys. I'm sure the Versailles administrators have been happy to have their audience expanded to the contemporary art set.

BN: How will your show be different from those interventions we've seen in Versailles and elsewhere?

BXB: What I'll be doing in Venice differs in one important way from those shows in that some of my exhibited sculptures have been specifically made "after" historical works in the Ca' Rezzonico collection. I'm not just plopping my works down in a fancy palace! In 2008 Dr. Pedrocco of Ca' Rezzonico and Dr. Romanelli of the Civic Museum Foundation of Venice generously granted me extraordinary access to Antonio Corradini's *Dama Velata (La Purità)* and Orazio Marinali's *La Invidia*, Baroque-era marble busts in the permanent collection. My team and I digitally scanned and comprehensively photographed both sculptures as the first step in creating my *Purity* and *Envy* sculptures, the initial works in the "Masterpieces" series. A few versions of these works of mine will be in the exhibition. I am particularly excited about the installations that directly pair the Ca' Rezzonico works with my corresponding sculptures. Before, during, and after the 3D scanning, I spent a lot of time reading about and exploring the

museum. I discovered a wealth of formal, stylistic, and conceptual links between Ca' Rezzonico, its collection, and my stone works — hence the expansion of the show to include several of my *Portraits*, three of my *Scholars' Rocks*, and my *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*.

BN: Which you were able to briefly exhibit at the Louvre last year, not far from where the original is installed. In Paris, the two "hermaphrodites" never actually met, but in Venice your sculptures and those which inspired them will be in close proximity.

BXB: That's right. And in the incredibly intimate process of scanning the Corradini and the Marinali, and later the Louvre Hermaphrodite, I may have had more intense, complete contact with and perception of those works than their creators had. The intimacy extended to my experience of Ca' Rezzonico as a whole, having spent many days working there and absorbing its spirit. I've returned on several occasions recently, to walk through the palace, looking for specific correspondences with my work. I suppose the reason I found so many is that during the time I have known and loved Ca' Rezzonico, I've made quite a few sculptures which, although not as directly linked to the museum as *Purity* and *Envy*, are intensely, though subliminally, influenced by the museum and its contents. Everything from the colors of the stones I have chosen to work with, to the "Baroque" surface patterning on some of the portrait heads, to particular subjects have direct counterparts in the Ca' Rezzonico decoration, furnishings, and artworks. I hope that those connections are immediately apparent, although I have worked hard to avoid a strictly didactic installation scheme. At times I chose sculptures that I thought would create a bit of luscious frisson with their surroundings, while at others I tried to, as you alluded, set up a situation where they would almost meld with the room.

BN: Of the many interventions that you've planned, one of my favorites is your idea to place the *McCaslin Homunculus* in the museum's re-created pharmacy. Against the backdrop of various vessels and jars lined up on shelves, the distorted figure will probably look like a medical specimen, something of the past gone very much awry, and in this sense something almost sci-fi, a fascinating yet terrifying glimpse of the future. It should prove to be one of the more evocative, as well as disturbing, moments in a highly orchestrated show. What would you say are some of the moments in the installation that are personally satisfying for you?

BXB: The many, often anachronistically insensitive, depictions of Africans, "Moors," and slaves in Venice call attention to the fact that the city was and is the "crossroads of the world," a meeting place for a wide range of peoples and cultures. My temporary repatriation to Italy — in ironic homage to that great patriotic diplomat of the Veneto, Antonio Canova — of a transformed version of a Napoleonic acquisition, the *Ermafrodito Borghese*, will expand the exhibition's scope to encompass both race and gender. The exhibition will be dominated by the depiction of women — young, old, beautiful, ugly, pious, sexy — and I hope the mise-en-scène in the Brustolon room, with a beautiful sleeping black bi-sexual figure, openly resplendent in its naked eroticism, awakening amidst the profusion of Brustolon's carved African males, will be its sensual, provocative climax. My version of the Hermaphrodite will add another chapter to the work's complex, multi-era tale. Originally created in Greece — probably in bronze — it was copied in Greek marble in ancient Rome, unearthed in Baroque-era Rome, restored by David Larique, 'bedded' with Italian marble by the 21-year old Gianlorenzo Bernini, installed in Cardinal Scipione Borghese's Villa, and removed in the 19th century to the Louvre. Now monolithically consolidated and transfigured, the Hermaphrodite is ready for a 21st century voyage to Venice, a city as rich and layered as the sculpture.

BN: The palazzo and its contents reflect the wealth, power, and status of Venetian aristocracy. In every way the museum is an incredible 18th century time capsule, offering a real sense of those families, both noble and simply moneyed, and how they served as patrons for architects, artists, and artisans. There are fantastic frescoes, including some by Tiepolo, tapestries, paintings, furniture, and of course spectacular glass, and your works, temporarily at least, will become a part of this repository. As an artist who has always relied on patrons as opposed to those who are merely collectors, someone who produces commissioned sculptural portraits, who insists on the most exacting craftsmanship, Ca' Rezzonico is probably the ultimate setting for your work. It's one thing to see your *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in a Park Avenue apartment, and quite another to see it on display in this magnificent palazzo. This is a show that you've envisioned for some time now. As these plans come closer to being realized, how does the project feel to you?

BXB: Fantastic! With this show, I have chosen to dive all the way into unfamiliar waters — no Venice pun intended. When I embarked on my portrait sculpture project in the mid-'90s, I made a conscious decision to do something completely outside my comfort zone and far from my area of expertise, something weird and deranged, in the belief that discomfort marks the path to the new. Although I think the show makes sense, the actual experience feels, as I had hoped, wonderfully strange. I grew up and was raised a strict Fundamentalist Protestant Christian in the Los Angeles suburbs in the 1950's and '60s, where very little in the surrounding built environment was more than 20 years old. My father and those of most of my friends worked in the then-booming Southern California aerospace industry, on the cutting-edge of technology. Disneyland opened the year I was born, and Tomorrowland was my real church. I really believed that the future was being created on the bleeding western edge of the New World. In college, my favorite artist was that iconic proto-radical, Marcel Duchamp. I also loved Donald Judd, James Turrell, and Robert Ryman because of the way they broke almost completely with the past to build something new. In bizarre contrast, I am now on the verge of exhibiting in an ancient Venetian palazzo, redolent of Catholicism, with many of my sculptures directly intertwined — conceptually and physically — with the historical works it contains. This is so “wrong,” but somehow it feels right.

BN: Who would have predicted that an artist coming from the West coast in the '60s, with the whole vibe of "light and space," from Duchamp — and your works are anything but readymades — and the Minimalists, would end up crafting such over-the-top, classical "masterpieces," even if it is a perverse classicism. And yet anyone who follows the trajectory of your work, from your earliest objects, the reductive, shimmering gold panels which echo religious icons and altarpieces, to your most recent, the stone sculptures of the last ten or so years, can trace the connections. Your path, as we might imagine it, from Venice, California to Venice, Italy, may not have been direct, and certainly involved some "time travel" on your part, but you seem to have arrived at an unexpected destination you were bound for all along. I can't help but think of one of your first serious collectors, Count Panza, represented in the Ca' Rezzonico show with the nine-part installation, *Pseudogroup of Giuseppe Panza* (1998-2000). If he were here today, I'm sure he would be wondering: Just what have I gotten myself into?

BXB: Mr. Panza was extremely generous to me. His death last year was a great loss for all who knew him. His patronage of American artists, in particular, is legendary. He almost singlehandedly supported my studio for several years from the late '80s to the mid '90s. At the end of this period, he introduced me to Laura Mattioli, who has gone on to be another strong advocate of my art. Mr. Panza agreed to be life-cast — twice in one day! — at the very

beginning of my portrait sculpture project. Working from these casts, I made the *Pseudogroup* heads, my first stone portrait sculptures. It will be bittersweet to show them at Ca' Rezzonico. Mr. Panza was a genteel, modest man. Perhaps he would have been embarrassed to see himself personally memorialized sculpturally. His highly-refined sensibilities led him to seek out art of purity, light, and spirituality. Mr. Panza never saw the finished *Pseudogroup*, which I intended as a sincere tribute to him in all his human complexity. I hope he knew that this work was created out of love.

BN: Of all the works in Venice, the Panza installation is probably the most contemporary. The most ancient-appearing works would be the *Scholars' Rocks*, three of which you'll be including in the show. Your portraits in stone have a material relation to landscape, and you always identify the places from which the stone has been quarried: marble from Macedonia, Italy, and Portugal; onyx from Mexico, Pakistan, and Iran. Scholar's rocks directly refer to mountains, to ideal forms in nature which have been brought inside, and are meant to serve as meditational devices. How did you come to work with this subject?

BXB: The subjects of my portraits and the stones I have chosen are interrelated. I have spent a lot of time in the last several years poking around quarries and stone yards in the U.S. and Europe. I generally buy beautiful stone when I come across it, even when I have no immediate plans to use it. As a result I've amassed quite a large rock collection – probably over 100 tons worth. I like to stroll among my stones, with sculpture drawings and maquettes in hand, trying to find just the right — or sometimes, obstreperously, the “wrong” — mix of form and material. After thirty-plus years in New York City, I'm a very urban guy, so combing my rock pile is about as close as I get to communing with nature!

Most sculpture stone is quarried and sold in rectangular blocks. Mexican onyx, by contrast, one of my favorite materials, comes in rough chunks — veined, pitted, fissured, oddly shaped boulders with crusty oxidized rinds. Inspired by those formations, I came up with the perverse idea of carving rocks from rocks. For my model, I bought a fake, stereotypical “scholars' rock” at a 2nd Avenue junk shop. I intended for my sculptures to be like “natural” inverse readymades, petrified commentaries on both the tradition of Chinese scholars' rocks and natural selection, as well as the parallel Duchampian gestures: re-contextualization and industrial selection. I added a clay-sculpted, rippled penumbra around the model's wooden base for my *Stretched Scholars' Rocks*. In the resultant pulled stone versions, the “liquid-emergence” socles stretch upward, and the vertically extended perforated upper stones terminate in jagged arched peaks. These will correspond to the foliate tops of the Rococo mirrors in the Ca' Rezzonico rooms where my rocks will be displayed. I want these works, although intensely artificial and hand carved, to celebrate nature.

BN: Marble or onyx isn't exactly a contemporary material.

BXB: That's true. For centuries, stone was the primary medium of sculpture, but in recent times it has become, with a few, mostly ironic exceptions, an almost déclassé material. Weighty, airy, solid, penetrated — I hope my diminutive monuments make a sensual case for stone's reconsideration as a medium for creating advanced contemporary art. My *Scholars' Rocks* are the most direct examples of the balance I am trying to achieve in my work between what I do and what I accept.

BN: In a world of laissez-faire perfectionists, you really stand apart. You may work for many years on the conception and realization of a single piece, and you've always had very high,

exacting standards for your craftsmanship. Like Ca' Rezzonico, this model of the artist belongs more to another century than to our own, while the meeting of your work in the palazzo in many ways represents a pinnacle for the exhibition of your art. Since I can't imagine you'll be able to install anything in James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, I'm wondering where you'll go from here.

BXB: More Portraits and Masterpieces! With these two bodies of work, I feel I am on to something that has so many possibilities that I may never exhaust them. Even so, I continue to obsessively experiment with completely new kinds of pieces. There are always sculptures in my studio that are years apart in terms of being finished. Not only is my work in dialogue with that of artists long dead, even at my studio, among my own sculptures, some strange time-shifting goes on. So while my team and I are impregnating a stone portrait with resin, the final step of a journey that started years earlier, I'm simultaneously involved in the digital scanning of a historical sculpture in a museum in Europe — one of the beginning stages in the long, convoluted process of creating my work.

BN: Not only are many sculptures just starting to appear in nascent form as others near the finish line, but your R & D, research and development, both material and historical, that your work demands, is a never-ending activity. It's as if you're conducting a number of orchestras at the same time. As preparations for the show in Venice have intensified over the past couple months, I'm wondering what sort of scene someone visiting your studio might have encountered?

BXB: A recent studio visitor would have seen the following: hand stone carving of new versions of both *Envy* and *Purity*; work on rapid-prototyped models for sculptures inspired by Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* — my first riff on a Modernist icon!; the attachment of some just-completed stone portraits to their pedestal assemblies; the addition of skin and hair detail to a reduced-scale wax portrait model of Jean-Marc Bustamante; sandblasting of a multi-ton natural Iranian Onyx formation that will become the "Africa Bed" for a huge, multi-component, Hermaphrodite-cum-Fuseli's-Nightmare commissioned sculpture that I'm making for Thomas Olbricht; cleanup and virtual sculpting of the digital file of Jacopo della Quercia's *Ilaria del Carretto*, a poignant, drop-dead gorgeous work — maybe the first true Renaissance sculpture — that I scanned in Lucca in October; and preparations for the scanning of the fantastically-strange St. Bartholomew in the Milano Duomo. At the same time, I am always writing letters and running tests, hanging out in museums and visiting technical trade fairs — setting the stage for my future work. Even if I stopped gathering data today, I wouldn't complete the pieces I have in progress for a decade or more.