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Barry X Ball puts his own spin on classical sculpture in exhibition at Dallas' Nasher

The artist mixes modern computer technology with traditional techniques.



Barry X Ball's "Envy" and "Purity" busts reveal a stark contrast. (Barry X Ball Studio)

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By John Zotos

7:00 AM on Feb 19, 2020

If you were to survey the exhibition history of major U.S. museums and art venues over the last two decades, the trends would be heavily weighted toward modernist and contemporary art.

This is what makes “Remaking Sculpture,” an exhibition of new work by American artist Barry X Ball, so startling: The sculptures on view are completely about classicism.

As the title of the show suggests, many of the pieces are copied from original masterpieces and remade to Ball's specifications. This show at Dallas' Nasher Sculpture Center is his first solo show in a U.S. museum.

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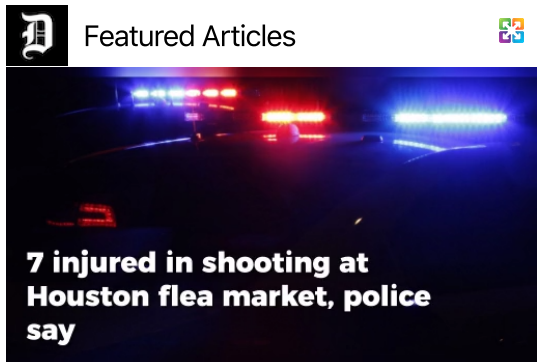


Replay

Ball started out in the 1980s as a post-minimalist artist in New York, after graduating from Pomona College. His abstract paintings slowly began to become three-dimensional objects that pulled away from the gallery wall.

Eventually, the work was transformed through his love of classical sculptures in the Western canon plus a steep technical learning curve. It ultimately evolved into his particular interpretation of these art historical masterpieces that I can only describe as a new classicism, or perhaps contemporary classicism.

Ball uses 3-D scans and printing methods designed with complicated computer-assisted programs that allow him to work in stone in ways that were unthinkable even two decades ago.



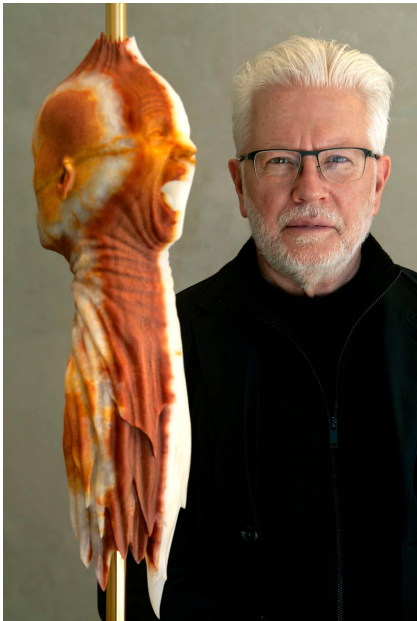
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Artist Barry X Ball, photographed with a piece that includes a self-portrait, in Mexican onyx, stainless steel, 24 karat gold and various other metals at "Barry X Ball: Remaking Sculpture" through April 19 at the Nasher Sculpture Center. (Nan Coulter)

His finished products start as blocks of stone, chosen with care. The first part of the physical process yields a sculpture in the rough, with an outline-form created by a milling machine.

Afterward, the real task begins with the help of assistants, who work by hand to refine the surfaces in the same way Michelangelo would have done five centuries ago.

This isn't a matter of hitting the print button and suddenly one of his beautiful pieces appears. On average, the full, standing figures in this exhibition took 10,000 hours of labor after the initial

machine phase.

Clearly, the operative word here is "beautiful," because with this body of work Ball has succeeded in retrieving a concept that had become outmoded when referring to ambitious art made after the 19th century.

Ball's art is not a mere copy of an original work, but a completely new interpretation achieved via structural changes, new materials and modified details, through which the pieces become original contemporary sculptures.

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What he and the curators have put on view here are works of art that have reinvented sculptural practice as we know it. Ball believes that in art, we find “what’s best” about humankind.



Cross-hatching retained from the mechanical process tensely interacts with both matte and highly polished portions of the finished sculpture in “Janusian meta-portrait.” (Barry X Ball Studio)

Commonly repeating motifs in Ball’s pieces are those ideas related to doubling, mirroring and the interplay of texture on the surface.

For instance, cross-hatching retained from the mechanical process tensely interacts with both matte and highly polished portions of a finished sculpture, like in the *Janusian meta-portrait* (2007).

Furthermore, Ball inserts his effigy into several of the pieces in the same way that Renaissance artists like Michelangelo or Raphael autographed their paintings by placing their portraits somewhere within their compositions.

In *Janusian meta-portrait*, he coupled his screaming face, obtained by a scan in Hollywood during the 1990s and based on *The Yawner* by 18th-century German artist Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, with that of contemporary artist Matthew Barney. The doubled sculpture is made from a beautiful Mexican onyx,

light red with touches of white. This piece from the “Portrait Series” was made with scans of actual people and modified on the computer.



Barry X Ball's mesmerizing "Sleeping Hermaphrodite" is more striking and erotic than the model it's based on, which resides at the Louvre in Paris. (Barry X Ball Studio)

By contrast, the “Masterpiece Series” takes scans from existing sculptures that Ball, by design, always executes as a mirror image. In translucent Iranian onyx, his mesmerizing *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* takes your breath away, radiant with a glistening sensuous beauty that’s more striking and erotic than the model it’s based on.

The original, now in the Louvre in Paris, was a 2nd century Roman copy in marble of a Greek bronze from the 2nd century B.C., discovered in the 1600s, that was placed upon a mattress and pillow executed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

Through his process, Ball was able to augment the surface and finish certain portions of the face left undone by the original artists. The sexual duality — female breasts and male genitalia — represented by the figure appeals to Ball’s thematic interests and links ancient trans culture to today’s social issues.



In the second pairing of "Envy" and "Purity," Barry X Ball placed deep cuts into the marble of "Purity," revealing dark reds as if decay had taken hold. (Barry X Ball Studio)

Two pairs of exquisite busts, one dubbed *Envy* and signifying that emotion, the other named after the state of *Purity*, are based on originals by Giusto Le Court and Antonio Corradini, respectively.

They play out a dialog between the two ideas with black Italian Portoro marble for *Envy*, which features an emaciated gorgon draped in snakes for hair like Medusa. Conversely, white Iranian onyx was used for *Purity*, a luxurious veiled figure worthy of Italian sculptor Antonio Canova.

In the second pairing, Ball pushed the boundaries further by placing deep cuts into the marble of *Purity*, revealing dark reds as if decay had taken hold, perhaps compromised through her empathy with current worldly ills.

In the main gallery, a powerful piece recently completed and on view here for the first time, *Saint Bartholomew Flayed*, was based on an original by Marco d'Agrate from the Duomo in Milan.



"Saint Bartholomew Flayed," a new piece on view for the first time at the Nasher exhibit, is based on an original by Marco d'Agrate from the Duomo in Milan. (Barry X Ball Studio)



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Wrapped in his own flesh as a symbol of his martyrdom, this harrowing figure was augmented by Ball in several ways. The flayed tissue originally held an image of the saint, which Ball substituted for his own.

He intensified the horrors of flayed skin by using intense Rouge du Roi marble, which is never used in Italy for fine art, only as tiles or decorative objects. The imposing deep red figure representative of piety, sacrifice and hope greets visitors, and perhaps unsuspecting guests, to an exhibition that places classical sculpture front and center, in a new context with bold new techniques and more than a touch of erudition.

Details

“Barry X Ball: Remaking Sculpture” runs through April 19 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. \$10. nashersculpturecenter.org.



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