

Sculpting and Transforming Bodies of Work: Barry X Ball and Bob Nickas in Conversation

BN: I remember the first time I was in your studio, in Hell's Kitchen. That would have been 1986, I believe. You were on your own then. No assistants. No machinery. Just you and your own two hands. Although it was '86, you must have shown me gold-leaf panels, which are from the early '80s, and are the earliest works in this show. I suppose if they were still around the studio they hadn't been sold. I honestly don't recall what we said that day—it was thirty years ago. But first meetings that lead to a long-shared history with an artist tend to evaporate over time. It's not the point of departure which is so important, even for a significant encounter. It's where it leads to, how that movement takes on a life of its own, and consequence reveals itself only later on in any case. This may parallel the momentum and discoveries that propel an artist over time, and keep them moving onward, with no looking back. A survey that brings together artworks from three decades, as you're about to have, will inevitably put you in the mind to retrace the steps along the way.

There is one thing I do recall from that day in the studio. You made a point of telling me that you made your own gesso. I couldn't really understand why anyone would go to the trouble. I didn't know you then. I didn't know that for you material, even an unseen ground, is directly related to subject matter—your subject is embedded in and emerges from the material. As heady as this may sound, there is an aspect of time-travel in your work as you refer to the history of art, to painting and sculpture from other centuries. So of course you had to make your own gesso.

BXB: It takes the occasion of a retrospective exhibition for me to be compelled to finally glance in the rear-view mirror. To properly respond to you, permit me to lay out a bit of pertinent history. The mathematics and economics classes I took early in my college years reinforced my predilection toward objectivity and analysis. When I did eventually focus on art, I enrolled primarily in art history classes. And when I took studio courses, the emphasis was always on concept, visual understanding, and theory—not technique, not making. I was at Pomona College, a classic liberal arts institution, not an art trade school. Upon arriving in New York, I embarked upon a self-directed manual-skills program.

BN: You leave school in order to begin educating yourself.

BXB: That's true! I figured I'd need at least ten years to learn how to even begin making things well. So I went into training. When I first acquired it in 1978, the 44th Street loft that you visited was a dark, drafty, junk-strewn cave, alternately freezing or sweltering, depending on the season. The first three years I lived there, there was no running water. I steadily began to build the interior, teaching myself carpentry, wall-building, plumbing, and electrical wiring by reading instructional books and manuals. I purchased every back issue of *Fine Woodworking* magazine and taught myself cabinetmaking. I also started acquiring the armamentarium of tools that continues to grow today.

I applied my newly-acquired skills and equipment to the making of my first works. In recalling the gesso, you focused on a key element. I wanted even my painting grounds to be unique and pure, like burnished ivory—not just anonymous under-layers, but surfaces that would assert themselves through the ensuing coats of bole and gold. So I prepared real chalk-and-gelatin gesso, the kind utilized in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance and applied 40 plus coats of it per panel. The commercial pre-mixed acrylic stuff that is now generally used is not actually

gesso.

BN: When you told me how many coats were laid down, that was my first insight into the obsessive nature of your work. In art, using the term obsessive evokes a pseudo-psychological analysis of a problem, something to overcome, where thorough, particular and driven would not. Virtues opposed to an affliction ... the cliché of the crazy artist.

BXB: I wasn't a kooky antiquarian. I simply knew that using real gesso would yield superior, unique results, and one thing led to another. Real gesso requires a rigid support, not flexy stretched canvas. So while learning how to make kitchen cabinets, I researched panel painting construction. I simultaneously read art-technical treatises, from ancient to modern, from Cennino d'Andrea Cennini's *Il Libro dell' Arte* to Ralph Mayer's *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques*.

Soon after arriving in New York, I met the group of Radical/Fundamental painters—Joseph Marioni, Marcia Hafif, Olivier Mosset, Phil Sims, Günter Umberg, et al—and absorbed their rigorous, ascetic approach to making and discussing paintings. And at the same time I began to "live" at the Metropolitan Museum, going there several times a month, falling in love with Italian gold-ground panel paintings in particular. Those two schools, separated by hundreds of years and a chasm of intent, blended as I began to simultaneously construct both my living/studio environment and my art from nothing, from the ground up. Medieval panel painting's exacting discipline and Minimalism's primary structures, together with my search for a new spirituality—to replace that of my severe Fundamentalist Christian childhood—came together in my early New York works, the gilded panels you mention. These were essentially 3-dimensional essays on painting. They weren't paintings. They had no paint. They were sculptures posited in painting's space. I've effectively been a sculptor ever since I arrived in New York.

BN: I was aware of Radical Painting, so-called, the monochrome painters, because of my friendship with Olivier Mosset, who can't really be described as ascetic. Within a group that was loosely affiliated at best, he was the "black sheep" of the family. He once told me that the big question in their meetings was: When is a painting finished? That was a regular topic of discussion. After much debate, and maybe in frustration, he once said, "When is a painting finished? When it's sold." And by that he didn't mean it was done, he meant to emphasize that it was gone, over and done with. His opinion was later revised. "When is a painting finished? When it's restored." The idea of an art restorer, someone who comes after, often long after, the artist and the original creation of the work, takes contemporary art into the realm of art history. That was not his intention with the remark, but it points to his perversity. He's looking at what is before us in the here and now, just as Smithson had done in his observation of the built, modern world as "ruins in reverse." As I got to know you and your thoroughgoing, perfectly crafted objects, I began to think of you as simultaneously the maker/restorer of your work, making things meant to last.

Whatever the Radical painters had in common, they were all very different from one another, as were their works. All monochromes are not created equally! And as you say, your gold pieces were not even paintings. They were object-type pieces that occupied the space of painting, which aligned them in some way with a kind of work being made in New York in the mid-80s, that had connections to the '60s—John McCracken coming to mind. The only other artist using gold when you were, though I'm not sure of that, was Christian Eckhart, but his works were much closer to contemporary art in relation to yours. The very modest scale of

your pieces, how they drew the viewer towards them, their quiet aura, made them resonate with icons and the inset panels of altarpieces. When I was young, I would be taken at Christmas and Easter to the Greek Orthodox church of my father's side of the family, and we had also gone to Greece on summer vacations, so a certain iconicity around painting, and its sense of mystery, was familiar. I may not have been thinking of that specifically at the time I first encountered your work, but maybe that had something to do with my attraction. That and the fact of how your work stood out at the time. Christian Eckhart aside, no one was making anything that looked like what you were making, and not aiming for a level of perfection. And since you mention your Fundamentalist Christian background, it's fair game to ask how that comes to bear on your art. The only thing I recall from you telling me about that time in your childhood, which haunted me because I'm claustrophobic, is that you would sometimes be locked into a small dark booth to reflect on your various sins. I always imagined this structure as a minimal McCracken confessional. This was, after all, in Southern California.

BXB: My grandparents, who raised me, were both ordained ministers of the Evangelical Methodist Church. The church building was a plain, cheaply-built structure with no decoration save for a couple simple crosses and a small, framed reproduction of an insipid painting of a beatific, smiling Jesus, which was hung in the lobby. A direct connection to God was emphasized. All the more sensual Christian trappings—incense, sculptures, paintings, elaborate architecture—were eschewed. I attended Sunday School and morning and evening services every weekend, and in the summers I was sent to oppressive salvation camps and what was called Vacation Bible School. The dreaded mid-week prayer meetings were held at my grandparents' house. I remember them dragging on for hours. I was required to participate in them from when I was around four years of age onward. I spent the entire meeting on my knees with my face buried in a chair. The surrounding adults each took turns praying out loud, accompanied by periodic shouts of "Amen!" and "Praise the Lord!" from the others. I spent the whole time praying that the meetings would end!

BN: [bursts out laughing]

BXB: My early immersion in such a severe form of religion ultimately shaped my approach to life and art. I rejected the simplistic Evangelical thinking purveyed by my family, but the stripping-Christianity-to-its-essence, that line of thought, eventually influenced my elemental breakdown-and-re-building approach to the creation of my first works after moving East. I had never set foot in a Roman Catholic church until I got to New York. My family had taken me to museums only a couple of times—the Los Angeles County Museum and the Huntington Library in San Marino. I remember them trying desperately to avoid looking at old-master nudity while simultaneously decrying the elaborate "idolatry" of saintly depictions. It took my exposure in college to great historical art specifically made for churches to get me seriously, positively contemplating the mix of art and religion.

BN: It's too bad your grandparents aren't here to appreciate your art, which really is so reverential. You spend more time in churches, mainly in Italy, now than ever before, and I imagine you always will. To see your art, maybe they would feel they had, in fact, done well with your spiritual education. We are, after all, formed by everything in life, even the experiences we reject. Wouldn't they also admire your work ethic, your obsessive, perfectionist nature. You recently mentioned painting their house...

BXB: Yes, one summer, when I was very young—around 8-years-old—I methodically painted my grandparents' house, masking every detail. I remember asking them to take me to the paint store to select brushes, tape, rollers, and tarps. Their housekeeping was atrocious, so I had to thoroughly clean as I worked my way through the rooms. My grandparents were full-fledged hoarders. There were mounds of stuff strewn everywhere. Enormous stacks of religious papers, missionary maps and tracts surrounded the kitchen table. I did my best to clean up the mess. I early on began to reflexively separate myself from my family, becoming fastidious and organized, focusing on my school studies, doing what I could to extract myself from the religious constrictions, constructing a new identity.

BN: The X in the middle of your name—as in ex.

BXB: Not everything about my childhood was oppressive and negative, however. Despite their lack of secular education, my grandparents somehow understood that literature and music were important. The Evangelical Methodist Church couldn't afford to pay its ministers, so they had to work side jobs. My grandmother was a 3rd grade public school teacher and taught me to read at a very early age, using the classic "Dick and Jane" books. Bible study and extensive memorization was mandatory, but I remember my grandmother reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Dickens, etc. to me and my brothers and sister. "Authors"—identifying Shakespeare, Thackeray, Cooper, and so on—was the family card game. "Real" cards were forbidden. We always had season tickets to the local San Gabriel Valley Symphony Orchestra concerts, and I studied classical piano for many years. My grandfather, raised as a Quaker, was a conscientious objector, so he was assigned alternate service in the military during World War I as a bugler. He encouraged me to take up the trumpet, and I played it, and the tuba and baritone horn, for several years in the school band. Later on came the guitar. My family disapproved of television and movies, which was probably also salutary for my intellectual development.

BN: What did your grandfather do for a living?

BXB: He was employed as an auto and truck mechanic. Working with him to repair the family vehicles, I developed the mechanical skills and thinking that have served me well as I have built my studios and my sculptures. I spent many afternoons underneath cars, draped over fenders, covered in grease, passing wrenches like a surgical assistant to my grandfather. Although we could never afford a new vehicle, occasionally he and I would stop at car and motorcycle dealers just to look and dream, treating ourselves to an illicit little bit of secular pleasure on our way to junkyards to buy salvaged parts for our decrepit wrecks. Along with religious periodicals, my grandfather subscribed to *Popular Science*, *Mechanics Illustrated*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Car and Driver*, *Motor Trend* and, inexplicably, farm equipment magazines. I read them all, cover-to-cover, every month. I made a neat little workbench out of my desk and built elaborately detailed plastic car models in my bedroom. My first drawings were car designs. Every week while my brother was taking his piano lesson, I went to a nearby Volkswagen-Porsche dealer, ran my hands over the cars, and poured through the brochures before running back for my own lesson. I saw a real Ferrari, a sensuous Dino, in Palm Springs when I was about ten—my first true religious experience! I have recently gotten to know Flavio Manzoni, Ferrari's design director. He likes my sculptures, and having him show me his latest projects at the factory in Maranello was the culmination of my passion. I may have been the only American kid pulling for the Ferraris to beat the Ford GT40s at Le Mans in the 1960s. In

retrospect, I see that my love of all things Italian—art, culture, food—started with Ferrari.

BN: What else besides cars fascinated you as a kid?

BXB: In the '60s, Southern California was the center of the aerospace industry. The majority of my classmates' fathers worked for companies like Aerojet, Douglas, Lockheed, Rockwell, and North American Aviation. Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Caltech were in nearby Pasadena, and there were hundreds of smaller firms servicing the larger ones. I remember riding down my street on my bicycle and noting that almost every one of the neighboring tract-house "garages" had been transformed into what were, in effect, small mechanical labs. Everything from boats and gliders to dune buggies and stereos were being invented and built in them. Everyone serviced and repaired their own cars. One father turned his garage into a complete machine shop and built impressive small jet aircraft engines from scratch. The men effectively continued doing the same kind of engineering they did at work in their free time. I felt that the future was being created around me, that it was possible to build absolutely anything. My grandfather's garage, in contrast, was a disorganized mess—I dreamed of someday having a shining shop stocked with tools, machines, and possibilities.

BN: And now you do—in a state-of-the-art studio, an ambitious project that you have overseen from start-to-finish. Architecture is obviously a serious interest of yours.

BXB: I grew up with SoCal modernist architecture. The high point of my youthful years was my family's annual Palm Springs three-day vacation. We always went in the sweltering summer, when motel rates there were at their lowest. I associated the intense heat with all things new and beautiful. In Palm Springs, the civic and residential buildings designed by Richard Neutra, John Lautner, and Albert Frey were visions of progress to me, at one with the technological advances of the time. Even gas stations and tramway stations were built in the fantastic "Desert Modern" style. I fantasized about someday having my own light-filled modern building, a dream that I am finally realizing with the imminent completion of my new Brooklyn studio complex.

BN: The last time I visited you had already moved in some machinery, assistants, and had new sculptures underway. You're obviously eager to get moving on pieces that have been on the drawing board for a while. All this activity, however, is against the backdrop of your first major survey exhibition, with works dating from 1982 to 2018. It's a look back at thirty-five years. How does it feel to be in this retrospective mode?

BXB: To simultaneously be looking forward and backward is disorienting. As of this conversation, neither of us have actually had a chance to see the exhibition, to assess what I have wrought. However, I can predict with assurance that many changes in my art will be evident. Thirty-five years of continuous incremental "improvement" has put my work in a radically different place than the one from which I started. Those who know only my stone sculptures of the last twenty years will not recognize my pieces from the '80s and '90s as coming from the same artist. There has always been a unity of approach, but the form is undeniably different. So are the means of production, the scale, and the materials.

I'm currently at a major inflection point. I have spent seven years designing and building my new studio, a state-of-the-art facility for creating ambitious works, as well as more intimately-scaled ones, too. To make my current sculptures, I need the help of a full team of assistants.

Even with all those dedicated people working, I only produce a few works a year. The *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in this exhibition, for example, required over 10,000 hours of hand carving, detailing, and polishing to complete, and that came after a couple years of extensive digital and machine work. If I didn't have help, I'd produce one sculpture every decade! When we first met, I worked alone. I did everything from cleaning the toilets, building the studio furniture, and crafting my own brushes, to making the pieces and their elaborate cases. Apple gave me a Mac IIx in 1988 under their "AppleSeed" program, and I started making the CAD drawings for my pieces.

BN: Computer Aided Design.

BXB: Yes. And now I have highly-skilled digital artists, woodworkers, figurative sculptors, a project manager and a studio manager working with me to produce my art. However, I continue to draw heavily on my early years as a "sole proprietor," a self-taught maker of things. I'm still the chief engineer of my sculptures. I personally choose and supervise the cutting of every block of stone. And I travel extensively to direct many of the outside fabricators—the machine shops, robot-milling studios, jewelers, and so on—that my staff and I engage to make components of my sculptures.

I will be working with several members of my studio staff for three weeks in Varese just to install and light the works in this exhibition. Since none of my current assistants were with me in the 20th century, I will be especially closely directing the installation of my sculptures from the '80s and '90s. Some of those works departed my studio and went directly to collectors' storage rooms, so they have never before been publicly exhibited. Lifting the lids on their cases will be like opening time capsules. *Air de New York*. I hope that these early works will give those who know and follow and support my current works a greater appreciation for the conceptual rigor that continues to form the foundation of all my production. The idealistic young man who made those 12-inch-square golden panels is the same guy, in body and spirit, now making ten-foot-tall figurative stone sculptures—the *Pietà* that will simultaneously be exhibited at Castello Sforzesco.

BN: You say that ten thousand hours went into the *Hermaphrodite*, which was made between 2008 and 2010. I would imagine that creating a gold panel in 1982, even making your own gesso and brushes—and although I had forgotten you did that, I do recall thinking at the time that it was ridiculous—a small fraction of the time was required. Over the years, I saw my interest in your work as a marveling at the obsessiveness, while also registering a relief that I only had to be a laissez-faire perfectionist. And if I think of you at 8-years-old painting a house in the most organized and exacting way, it's clear that you did not become an obsessed and driven artisan, you always were. Unlike the assistants who weren't even born when you made your earliest works, I have been able to see how one group led to the next, even if that passage hasn't always flowed smoothly. The gold panels hung from floor to ceiling on cables had obviously come out of the original panel works. Those had a medieval feeling. The cable pieces, because of the hardware, were more contemporary in feel. From there, panels were hung on what you describe as "composite construction," but which look to most of us like clear Lucite bars. The first was *Ejaculate, n.* in 1989. Suddenly, you were not only engaged with, almost literally, the plastic arts, but beginning to reference the body. In the material description for *Action Painting*, from 1990-91, along with 24 karat gold you list 'semen.' Forty years after the heroics, so-called, of Abstract Expressionism, the manly, viscous body of painting exemplified by Jackson Pollock and his violent end, his action death, you press the

cool, reverential monochrome into service in order to critique art made "from the waist down." With Pollock and the death of a particular gesture, one of velocity, you made an almost identical work, just as cerebral, "from the neck up" we might say, a gesture of stillness, in the very same period, titled *The Art of Dying*. What were you preoccupied with at the time, what precipitated these works and those which followed?

BXB: In 1983, I read Leo Steinberg's famous *The Sexuality of Christ in Modern Art and in Modern Oblivion*. Steinberg's thesis, that scholars had for a long time ignored hundreds of obvious painted references to and depictions of the sexuality of Jesus—including several erections—was not only a brilliant piece of academic work, but it also confirmed the way I was both looking at and making art. Steinberg performed the ultimate visual feat. He focused on something that was in plain sight which everyone else had missed or ignored.

BN: Or censored, not only in reproduction but some of the actual works themselves.

BXB: Yes, and what he saw was not at all minor. It was key to a new understanding of religious art, which, given my background, was of intense interest to me. It was pretty darn thrilling to be able for the first time to see the link between art, religion, and sex! Steinberg's approach to ancient works was ultra-contemporary, similar to the analysis of the Minimalists in that it zeroed in on the basic question: What is this thing in front of us? Coincidentally, the late Professor Steinberg is also well known for his writings on Michelangelo's last work, the *Rondanini Pietà*, the inspiration for my new *Pietà*, which will be exhibited at the Castello Sforzesco Museum in Milano concurrently with the Villa Panza show.

I performed my first Steinbergian exercise in college, around 1975. In my 20th Century Art seminar, the class was given the choice of several paintings at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art on which to write an essay. I selected a Picasso still life. I remember thinking that I had driven a long way to see this painting, that I wouldn't get a chance to come back and see it again, so I had better record everything about it. That way I would have the maximum information possible to compose my paper. So I spent a few hours in front of this work, and diagrammed it in its entirety, as if I was performing a scientific dissection. I indicated the various paint colors and textures, the brush hairs and dirt stuck to the surface, the weave of the canvas, observations of the frame and stretcher, and descriptions of the objects depicted. When I got back to school, I decided, rather than write an essay, to take a risk and hand in this drawing instead, which was dense with arrows, circles, and notes. There were no historical references, footnotes, or scholarly asides. I just described, in minute detail, the object I had seen on the wall. I was trying to get beyond depiction in my search for physical truth.

BN: And the diagram was accepted in lieu of a written paper?

BXB: Yes, and I became great friends with, the professor, the late Arthur Stevens of Scripps College, which is part of the consortium that includes my alma mater, Pomona College.

Action Painting and *The Art of Dying* were both completed in 1991, the year my first child, my son Michelangelo, was conceived. I was obviously thinking a lot about pro-creation at that moment! In my Rail/Bar/Panel series, of which these two works are a part, I was consciously striving to push beyond the phenomenological aspects of the early work, which presented gilded panels alone. With these two pieces in particular, I posited the panels as elements in a "wall system" that incorporated hanging bars, text, and rows of fasteners. The variability is only implied. As you note, I had consciously installed one panel and the rails and bars of each work

at head level, and another at crotch height. All the panels appear to have been “painted” spontaneously, but their gestural surfaces, whether of semen or gesso/bole/gold are meticulously cultured. The drips of the upper panels fall, whereas those of the lower ones erupt from bottom to top. I was spraying bullets everywhere with these works, oppositionally presenting direct and indirect experience, human and artistic creation, the sacred and the profane, while visually commenting, as you note, in a cold analytical way, on stereotypically “hot” male gestural painting.

BN: As Steinberg points out, we not only see over and over again the penis of Christ, from infancy and involving "self-touch," but the erect penis, even in death, representing the life after death, the resurrection. Art history and the posthumous rising of the artist, to be enshrined you might say, and the preservation of artworks, is the life after death that immortalizes the creative act and a multitude of creators. Around the time you made these works, you also produced two small pieces, one I'm happily surprised to see included in the Varese exhibition, *Pocket Rocket*, 1994, and *Exploring Virgin Territory*, which must be from '93, because it was included in a show of mine that opened in early '94, *The Use of Pleasure*. Both of these works, based on a prosthetic penis, or, in less delicate terms, a dildo, have protective cases. In these resting places, they take on the appearance of religious relics—the bones of a saint, for example. It's in this period, the early '90s, that you began to put time, energy and resources into the most elaborate encasing of your works, cases sometimes exhibited alongside them. This was more than a means to ensure they wouldn't be damaged in transit, but as I see it part of the work's subject. At one point the cases themselves were encased, from travel purposes, in what I believe were military grade containers. The first time I saw one in the studio, I think you said that if it fell into the East River and lay at the bottom for a hundred years, when it was brought up and opened, resurrected, the sculpture inside would be undamaged. They were hermetically sealed, a process that relates to the subsequent pieces containing pure pigment, and also one with NASA-grade perfect dust.

BXB: Before I ever had an art career, I began making cases for my works, anticipating the time when they would leave my studio. My early wooden cases were built like cabinets. I thought of them as extensions of the panels they contained. I had seen an elaborately-tooled leather case in the *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in 1986 and was struck by the fact that this case was exhibited co-equally with the gilded silver ship model it was built to contain. I also was aware of the tradition of small devotional pieces—Roman, medieval—which were intended to be portable. On my first trip to Europe, with a backpack and a Eurail pass, I carried one of my panels in its case. Made in walnut, it had dual hinged doors, brass hinges and handle. I showed it to some artists and gallerists I met on the trip, and I remember them commenting that it was the first time they had ever met with an artist who brought along one of his actual works, not photos or slides.

Before I was able to support myself through my art, my side job was as a delivery driver. I mostly transported aircraft parts for several airlines between the three New York area airports in the middle of the night. Each of the delicate electronic components I carried had a custom bulletproof case that protected its contents from rough handling. So I started adding similar rock-and-roll-road-crew or military-style cases to my pieces. For the works in my Not Painting Collection, the rotomolded black plastic “air-drop” cases were intended to prevent damage to the elaborate cabinets within, which in turn held the components of the actual wall-mounted artworks. There was an outer wooden art crate to protect all the other layers. The cases also contained a complete set of accoutrements necessary for the care, handling, and installation of

the works. There were tools, jigs and templates, detailed multi-page instructions, spare parts—everything needed to look after the pieces far into the future.

BN: You were taking elaborate precautions to avoid becoming the restorer of your work, rather than the creator.

BXB: As I came to understand the international art system, I learned that art is in constant motion. Works move between studios, galleries, museum and private collections, auction houses, and storage facilities, *ad infinitum*. The advent of art fairs has only increased the activity level. The current frenetic art-world transience is a logarithmically-accelerated extension of the progression in earlier centuries from permanent installations ...

BN: Art in churches, for example.

BXB: Yes, from permanence toward portability, from frescoes to panel paintings to the lighter, more easily-moved stretched canvases. I poured so much love and labor into each of my pieces that I wanted to do all I could to ensure they would survive the rigors of travel, handling and mishandling. Due to their high labor quotient, I still produce relatively few finished artworks in a year, even with the help of many assistants. I can't countenance damage to any of my precious works, so I do all I can to protect them. Initially, by spending so much time and effort on their cases, I was simply intending to provide comprehensive life-support. Later on, first on my part, and then by collectors, the works began to be shown along with the cases. So in several exhibitions, the cases were displayed as adjunct sculptures, as with the Nuremberg ship case I had seen at the Met. What I initially thought thorough and prudent, others considered fascinatingly obsessive, so I went with it.

BN: The Not Painting Collection, made between '90 and '93, as the title suggests, presents the signs, gestures and materials of the medium, but only as a construction, as an elaborate display. Although hung on the wall, they are vitrine-like, the pigment, red, yellow and blue, elemental and encased. They are simultaneously close to and far from painting—at least paint on canvas, paint used to represent the world, something in the world, or simply to represent space. They are just as far from Rodchenko in 1921 and Newman in 1966 as they were from their nearer relations, the "signs of painting" that flourished fashionably in the mid-to-late '80s. Your works may have, in this naming at least, kinship with Philip Taaffe's declarative appropriation of Newman, *We Are Not Afraid*, answering, twenty years after, Newman's famous *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* These works of yours, both sacred and sacrilege with regard to the medium, strike me as hi-tech reliquaries that simultaneously revere and deny painting. The pure pigment is painting on a molecular level, held in suspension, in proximity to the gestural and textural elements, to the word VIRGIN, particularly "embossed" in precious metals: gold, palladium and silver. I see these works as pivotal in that you left painting behind for sculpture, although we didn't know it at the time, and had no way of knowing what was to come—the optical Corian pieces for which you returned to cable supports—and your first figurative head, *Flayed Herm*. How do you see this evolution in retrospect?

BXB: The single most important viewing event of my life was seeing the restored Cimabue *Crucifix* in the Metropolitan's Medieval Sculpture hall in the fall of 1982. Badly damaged in the 1966 Florentine floods, it made a world tour after a herculean, many-year restoration effort. The crucifix was shown suspended in the middle of that large room, an awe-

inspiring object floating in dark space, not a silhouette on a wall. At over 14 by 13 feet, its scale only enhanced its sculptural presence. Not having ever been to Europe or inside an Italian church at that time, confronting that strange shaped painting immediately changed the way I would look at and make art from then on. Even the catalog that accompanied the exhibition of the Cimabue powerfully influenced me. It contained detailed descriptions of the restoration process and the creation of a new hi-tech armature under the ancient support. The work's wounds were very much in evidence even after restoration, and the thinking behind hatching in the missing painted passages—leaving evidence of the injuries rather than painting them out—also hit me as a particularly apt conservation approach. Object and subject, painting and sculpture, ancient and new, all came together for me in this one powerful artwork.

BN: This would have been around the time you began the first panel pieces.

BXB: Right. And also the concurrent *Largens*, with the grid-like cradling evident at their edges. These were direct outgrowths of my Cimabue conversion experience. I see now that I effectively took my first steps toward sculpture the same year I saw the *Crucifix*. I was looking primarily at paintings at that time—there are, after all, many more of them than sculptures in museums—but in the process of intellectually and physically breaking them down, then reconstructing them, I was on my way to moving off the wall and into space. The works of my Not Painting Collection were my last to reference and occupy painting's domain. As the series title suggests, these pieces are not paintings, *per se*, but physical discourses on its conventions: its elemental composition, its history, conservation, installation, transportation, and exhibition. The resultant hybrid objects unconventionally present, in a dense matrix of visual cues and art-historical touchpoints, the four basic elements of painting: pigment—colored powder; a solidified liquid medium—oil, acrylic, tempera, fresco plaster, and so on; a support—canvas, panel, the wall; and gesture—what the artist does with them. The components have been configured / utilized in this order, with the pigment suspended in a solidified liquid medium, forming “paint,” which is then applied to the support in “gestures” of infinite permutation: pictures, patterns, monochromes, layers, washes, impasto, glazes, stains.

BN: I often wondered if the amount of pigment had a measurable relationship to how much would be needed to create a painting, even as all the features of these works pointed away from the medium, to architecture, sculpture and, in a neat reversal—now you see it, now you don't—the dematerialization of the object.

BXB: In each of the Not Painting works there are four liters of pure dry pigment contained in a rectangular jar, glass being a solidified liquid medium. The support is an elaborate, architectonic shelf-like structure displaying a prominent gesture, a golden praedella stroke. The pigment for *Tableau Vivant*, Perylene Black, as I told you long ago, is the same as that utilized for the “cloaking” paint on American Stealth Bombers. Uniform-width stripes suffuse many of these works. From the alternating regularity of their supports' epoxy-drip honeycomb-layered construction to the corrugated stripe-gilded panels, an incessant rhythm is established. In *Landscape Portrait*, the “passive” etched horizontal stripes of the pigment jar, echoing the sedimentary packing of its powdered contents, contrast with the active verticality of the “erupting” gold below. Tuscan Gothic architectural stripes, Baroque-Rococo decorative flourishes, and Bernini-esque spiral thread columns frame the central pairing of stacked squares: the frosted pigment jar “paint” above an “ejaculatory” upside-down gilded “crotch mirror” panel. This vertical reversal of the stereotypical Gothic/Renaissance gold-ground/paint

orientation is echoed in the works' inverted Latin-cruciform profile. In a final, seemingly incongruous gesture of quasi-comical counterpoint, the works' rigid geometricity often dissolves, in its lower termination points, with effusive decorative flourishes. I intentionally threw everything—painting, sculpture and architecture—into these pieces.

BN: You refer to these works as the last to reference painting, but they were followed by what turned out to be a final point of departure, in 1995.

BXB: *A Profusion of Loss*, which is based on Peter Paul Rubens's drawing after copies of the cartoon for Leonardo da Vinci's great unfinished, and now destroyed, *The Battle of Anghiari*, probably the most influential nonexistent artwork ever created. My intention was to resurrect and transform it—in effect, to complete it my way. What I ended up producing was a type of relief sculpture that refers to a painting for which only traces, preliminary sketches and so on, still exist. Prior to this work my art referred to, commented on, or was inspired by older art. *A Profusion of Loss* was my first piece that directly engaged a specific historical work. It was essentially the beginning of my Masterpieces, except that it was produced 13-plus years before my initial Masterpiece stone sculptures. So, yes, this was the last of my works posited in painting's realm, although its elements appear detached from the wall, floating forward into space, anticipating my next move—the creation of my first true sculptures-in-the-round.

BN: Which include *Flayed Herm*, from '97-'98, with its black-and-white vertical striping, as if it inhabited the Siena Duomo, along with the optically rhythmic Corian cable works. *Flayed Herm* is an impaled head, though not gruesomely, on a stainless-steel pole, so that it stares back at viewers eye-to-eye. But this work was only a prelude, as it would be followed by the nine portrait heads that form the *Pseudogroup of Giuseppe Panza*, your first sculptures in marble. The heads derive from life casts, ranging from one-to-one scale to half life-size. I know Count Panza was a collector of yours from early on, and not only followed you from the minimal, gold panel pieces into the figurative but became the prominent subject of your transition. This was brave on his part, no less for being cast from life, which, because of my claustrophobia, I never agreed to. Even with his history of collecting, from Flavin and Nauman to the monochrome painters, he would have been well aware of the history of portraiture, painted and classically sculpted, in terms of an artist's patron.

BXB: Doctor Panza was, indeed, a very cultivated, educated, well-read man. Although he believed in and supported the most advanced art of his time, primarily American, he was intimately familiar with the history of European art. The transformation in my work, from pure abstraction to the human head, from my suspended Black/White Corian sculptures to the *Pseudogroup*, although rapid, was linear, logical and, in retrospect, inevitable. I first took the artificial material and the Tuscan-esque stripes I employed in both *The Not Painting Collection* and *A Profusion of Loss*, as well as *Pocket Rocket* and *Exploring Virgin Territory*, stripped away all other elements, and engaged in pure spatial play. I remember my children, Michelangelo and Soleil, protesting when they caught me with their Lego blocks. I had used them to make the models that are still on my office shelves today. Although they initially appear to be assembled from small black and white modules, these sculptures were actually made with a hybrid additive-reductive technique. I first assembled large blocks by diagonally laminating precision-milled sheets of black-and-white Corian, then cut away cubic sections of the blocks, in controlled steps, to achieve the final shapes and reveal the “checkerboard” surfaces.

BN: I didn't see them as checked patterns, but as Op art in three dimensions, floating in space, wavering on their cables. *Sculpture 6*, especially, reminded me of the Bridget Riley "wave." My association with the striping was certainly stripe painting of the '60s. You describe them as in-the-round, and it's true that we can see them in 360-degrees, but what's key is their suspension of the geometric. Even shaped canvases in the '60s didn't offer anything close to this in terms of object-type painting.

BXB: I first began to hang my later gilded panels, like the *Identical Units*, from cables, suspending them literally and conceptually between heaven and earth, physical and spiritual, human and divine, a la the Cimabue *Crucifix*. As I created the Black/White Sculptures, I researched several ways of presenting them. The Modernist pedestal struggle became mine. I even looked into magnetic levitation.

BN: Really! That I don't remember you ever telling me.

BXB: Eventually I came back to cable suspension. The cables, a form of drawing in space, implied continuation while connecting the masses to both ceiling and floor. These works can be seen variously as sections of spiral columns, reductive rectilinear boxes, or 3-D models of DNA molecules and skyscrapers. *Sculpture 17/18/19/20* was, for example, inspired by both Michelangelo's Campidoglio Senators' Palace stairs and Ronald Bladen's X—X being my middle initial. In general, these sculptures were the end products of my methodical work to solve complex spatial problems. For each, I created a detailed computer-generated, many-page playbook. From that point to completion, I just followed the numbers. In several of the pieces, I left evidence of the initial block-assembly lamination process—jagged passages with cyanoacrylate glue, embedded polyethylene sheeting, and scribbled pencil notations—standing in contrast to the meticulously-detailed almost surface-less carved planes.

BN: At the time, mid-'90s, I thought: Barry, intentionally messy—a real breakthrough! Little did I realize that your perfectionism was to be amped up in what would follow. Anyone who had never been to your Brooklyn studio back then, especially down in the basement, would be astonished seeing what emerged from it. That underground cave reminded me of the basement and garage workshops I knew from suburban childhood. There was a limit to the machinery you could have, or logistically get down there. But not all the components of your work came out of that humble, claustrophobic space.

BXB: I rely on lots of outside fabricators—metal machine shops, for example—to make various elements of my work. However, the bulk of the fabrication of my art has always been done at the studio. Through doing and observing what goes on there, I often see things that I incorporate into future works. One day, while machining one of the Black/White Sculpture blocks on my customized Bridgeport milling machine, I saw a beautiful pattern of curvilinear waves appear as a large cutter bit into the material. Up until that point, my works had more-or-less rectilinear structures. It was that simple observation—curves generated organically on the path to rectilinear precision, shapes that did not emerge from conventional “creative” decisions—that got me started on the path to figurative sculpture. The human head, the ultimate “received” curved surface, a unique readymade? Since I had an extra laminated black-and-white Corian block, I selected it for my first figurative work, *Flayed Herm*, a self-portrait.

BN: I had forgotten that it's you.

BXB: I wanted to eliminate all the conventional distractions of portraiture—hair, clothes, and so on—so as not to dilute and obscure the purity of my first portrait. So I shaved my head and stripped off my shirt before I was three-dimensionally scanned. Scanning technology was in its relative infancy in 1997, so I flew to Los Angeles to be captured by one of the early scanners used in the film special-effects industry. There were busts of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis in the room when I was being scanned. I had to hold my pose for a Daguerreotype-like 30 seconds. From the scan data, a dense plastic foam head was generated via a rudimentary CNC—computer-numerically-controlled—milling machine. I subsequently hand-refined the model and hardened it with epoxy. I then used a mechanical, indexed 3-D “duplicarver” of my own design to mill the striped Corian block, methodically dragging a nylon stylus over the surface of the hardened model to control the cuts. The final step was to hand-detail the Corian head. I was dissatisfied with the eyes of ancient and Renaissance portrait busts—a weak point of those works—so I’m particularly proud of *Flayed Herm*'s multi-layered inset irises and pupils, the product of days of painstaking jig-making and machine alignment to set up a few precision cuts. My head's accompanying stainless-steel column echoes the traditional reverse-taper form of Classical “Herm” statues. And yes, I was thinking of cranial impalement, a tradition as ancient as portrait sculpture.

BN: So this work, for all its seeming simplicity with regard to where you went in the ambition of your portrait sculptures, particularly the research and development, and the attendant problem-solving, led to the *Pseudogroup*.

BXB: Continuing my research into digital production methods, I learned that the Johnson Atelier in New Jersey had recently acquired several large CNC machines. J. Seward Johnson, of the Johnson & Johnson fortune, had financed their acquisition and the establishment of a facility dedicated to the fabrication of stone sculpture. At the time of my first visit, no one had yet successfully milled a sculpture on the machines. The *Pseudogroup* was the first result of my experiments, and all of my subsequent stone portrait sculptures, including those in the Villa Panza exhibition, were milled there. Doctor Panza almost single-handedly supported me as an artist for several years, but by 2000, when I embarked on my portrait project, he had not been collecting my art for some time. He was so important to me, however, that I immediately thought of him as the ideal subject for my first stone portrait sculpture. We were still in contact, and I asked if he would agree to be life-cast, which was the initial step. He was not a young man and the procedure—he was cast twice in a day!—must have been exhausting for him. He knew the history of sculpture, and I'm certain he understood that I was honoring and memorializing him through the creation of his portrait, that we were participating in something timeless together. Lifecasting was a new experience for both of us. I believe I am the only artist in his collection who ever made a portrait of Doctor Panza. Because he only collected non-figurative art, I was sure that he wouldn't buy the work I produced from the casts. I was right about that. I was extremely pleased when Laura Mattioli, who was Doctor Panza's friend, bought the *Pseudogroup*. I was in dire financial straits at the time, and her purchase saved my studio. In fact, Doctor Panza's final great gesture was introducing me to Laura—in effect, passing the baton to her.

BN: She's not only a collector of yours, but an art historian and a curator—this is the second

time that she has been involved in organizing a major exhibition with you—and also became a subject of your portrait sculpture. *Hard Dark Soft Light*, one of the earlier stone works, and dated 2000-02 it's one of the more quickly completed, certainly lives up to its name. A double portrait, one was made with Belgian black marble, the other in translucent alabaster. There is a serene quality, and the stone, as the Corian could not, gives this work and numerous others initiated in 2000 a sense of antiquity, the character of which, as you suggest, is timeless. There's something uncanny in coming face-to-face with a sculpture that stares back, even a gaze that's non-threatening or, more accurately, that's beguiling. I had this experience many years ago when I first saw the Nefertiti in Berlin, at the Egyptian Museum in Charlottenburg. One eye is missing, not closed, which emphasizes its strangeness—seeing, simultaneously blind—and its relation to an ankh, a symbol of life and immortality. The eyes in your portraits are sometimes open, sometimes closed. But what really strikes me is the doubling, as with this portrait of Laura Mattioli, the one of Matthew McCaslin, the two dual portraits of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, and the spiked, elongated Matthew Barney piece which, like the Jeanne portraits, has been doubled twice, with faces on either side. These all suggest the duality of the Roman god Janus, who represents beginnings and endings, life and death, the future and the past. How do you see this aspect of doubling in your work?

BXB: I have employed it for all the reasons you mention and more. First, doubling simply yields new forms. It brings symmetry to inherently irregular heads, making the dual Jeanne portrait in Belgian black marble, with its polished central foliate relief strand, a physical Rorschach. In the suspended me-and-Matthew-Barney—portraitist and subject—a dual-dual portrait, as well as in the second Jeanne in this show, I used an extraordinary bifurcated red/white specimen of Mexican onyx to expand and emphasize the mirroring. That said, these works are completely different one side from the other. The material compels viewers to circumnavigate the sculptures to experience them completely. I also employed stone from this same block—figured red on one side, translucent white on the other—to create one of my Stretched Scholars' Rocks. With *Hard Dark Soft Light*, the dual Laura Mattioli portrait, I chose the staggered two-figure, two-stone mirroring so that from each of the four principal views—front, back, left, and right—both heads are visible. The facial features on the ethereal, white alabaster head are barely readable, while those in black marble are in sharp focus. I thought of the translucent head as Laura's strong spirit hovering always nearby, an en-lightened accompaniment to her strong public face. The conventional pedagogical structure of art history lectures, the comparison of dual projected photos in darkened rooms, stuck with me, and it continues in this book with the pairing of images throughout. I think it's a great way to illustrate the contrasts and similarities in my art as I moved from one body of work to another.

BN: Essential to the portraiture, central to the subject matter of your work from 2000 onwards, since our reading and associations are so wrapped up in it, is the material. You have traveled to Italy and to Mexico, as well as sourcing stone elsewhere, to buy blocks of Macedonian marble, Portuguese gold marble, Golden Honeycomb calcite, Belgian black marble, pink Iranian onyx, and onyx from Pakistan. I'm reading from a material list here, as you can see. Sometimes the stone is polished, sometimes not. In certain instances you polish only part of a sculpture to draw our attention to a particular feature. And of course there are polished stone eyes in your work. I remember one of the earliest portraits, Lucas Michael in Mexican onyx, and how scarred and bloody the crevices and veins appeared, running from above his left eye almost down to his chin. It's somewhat gruesome, a battle-scarred alien. I know that you have a sculpture clearly in mind before it goes into production, and you always have a variety of

stone on hand. How do you decide which to use for a piece?

BXB: I, personally, have selected and cut every block of stone I have ever used. I generally have a particular piece of stone in mind for a specific sculpture, and vice versa, but I have altered the figures based on what I see in the stone. If I worked in, for example, white marble or black granite—stone that comes in large uniform blocks—I wouldn't have to be so intimately involved with the material. Early on, however, I saw that limiting myself to the conventional sculpture stones would cut off a world of expressive possibilities. On my first trip to the Carrara-Pietrasanta region of Italy, I was struck by the incredible variety of stone available. There was lots of the famous local material, white marble, but to see miles and miles of stone yards stacked with blocks from all over the world blew my mind. It seemed that all the spectacular stuff was being slabbed for bathrooms and building lobbies. I began to buy blocks and boulders just because they were unique and beautiful, often with no specific sculpture in mind. After almost twenty years, I have amassed hundreds of tons of stone. I designed my new studio, with its twin 20-ton bridge cranes, Pellegrini robot diamond wire saw, and so on, to be able to receive, move, and process all that material. I'm beyond excited about having, for the first time, my stone and my fabrication armamentarium together—all this at my Brooklyn studio, where I will be working every day, not at some far-flung facility.

BN: At the studio you will now have your own on-site quarry...

BXB: ...a place in the city where I can commune with nature! That Lucas Michael portrait is in my favorite material, Mexican onyx from El Marmol in Baja California. A couple years ago I staged an expedition to that remote desert area to excavate over forty large boulders of this material. They are currently in transit to my new studio for future sculptures. I love this stone for both its creamy translucency and amazing variety of lusciously-colored pits, fissures, and veins. To me, the "flaws" are both beautiful wounds and indicators of the stone's natural history. As I was conceiving the Lucas Michael portrait, I remembered a horrific grid of photos published on the front page of the *New York Times*, of American pilots who had been shot down and captured in Iraq. Their faces were badly bruised and lacerated, from both their crash injuries and the harsh treatment they received in captivity. The photos made me think of the intentional destruction of sculpture throughout history. The severely-damaged-but-still-ravishingly-beautiful Egyptian Amarna-period portraits, most of them purposely disfigured shortly after they were made, as Egypt returned to polytheism, came to mind in particular. The Lucas Michael portrait title sums it up: *torture prevalence compels victim-as-wounded-yet-resolute-iconoclasm-survivor portrait (Lucas Michael, soldiering on—3mm)*.

BN: What's 3 mm?

BXB: The main part of the head is suffused with a pattern of horizontal flutes—the 3 mm in the title refers to the cutter diameter and step-over, 3 millimeters, the distance from one flute peak to the next, which I specified for the final pass of the CNC mill. I often incorporate this type of corrugated surface to effect a kind of Leonardo-esque "sfumato" softening of the rendered flesh, as well as leave evidence of the digital process I employ to realize it. The interior of the neck is mirror-polished to simulate glistening viscera—fresh meat—and emphasize the violence of the depiction. The head is, after all, impaled on a stainless-steel pike. The mirror-polished eyes add a lachrymose glimmer of residual life. In this case, they work in concert with the pursed lips to give a sense of sad determination. I did extensive research into the ways

sculptors had treated eyes through the centuries. Probably the most successful are those of the 19th century French master, Houdon, for his depictions of the leading figures of the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions. Houdon's eyes have dish-shaped, radially-fluted irises, each with a tiny overhanging cube of attached marble, the "spark of life", hovering in front. I think my polished eyeballs are at least as lifelike—and they, unlike Houdon's, reflect the room and coruscate as viewers move around the portraits.

BN: Belgian black marble and translucent white onyx are the favored materials for the black-and-white *Envy* and *Purity* diptychs, as well as for the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* that you will have in the show in Varese. You alternate black and white stone for both *Envy* and for *Purity*. In this doubling you reverse the polarity in a sense, because the most common association with purity, with the virginal, would be white marble, while the milky surface upends our image of envy. This shifting of material shifts our reading of these pieces. The *Hermaphrodite*, not only in black marble but polished to a high luster, is mysterious and seductive and, even in repose, dangerous, like a black hole that can swallow a star which gets too close. And there's also a doubling between male and female.

BXB: Pure white translucent Iranian onyx is expensive and difficult to procure because a significant portion of it has been reserved for the construction of the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. My initial version of *Purity*, the first completed Masterpiece sculpture, was realized in this material. It was the "right" choice for this sculpture. That this onyx is also considered appropriate for a monument to the founder of the Iranian revolution is bizarre, but I like the strangeness. My tendency throughout my life of work is to initially seek the correct solution, the one that appropriately solves the problem I have proposed, then turn against the correctness in subsequent works. In later versions of *Purity*, I purposely made counterintuitive stone choices, as you note. The Belgian black marble *Purity*, with its leatherlike surfaces and mysterious mien, is, I believe, equally unexpected. As is, in a very different way, the "wounded" *Purity* in my effusively-figured, pocked Mexican onyx. I purposely chose Belgian black marble for the first *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* because I wanted to depict an African body. In the exhibition plan for my 2011 Venice Biennale exhibition at Ca' Rezzonico, I proposed to create the black *Hermaphrodite* specifically for installation under the famous large chandelier in the Brustolon room. The exquisite furniture in this room features carved Moors, even some in chains.

BN: ...which were striking in relation to the sculpture, as if these enslaved figures were the *Hermaphrodite's* attendants.

BXB: As I wrote at the time, "The mise-en-scène in the Brustolon room, with a beautiful sleeping black bisexual figure, openly resplendent in its naked eroticism, awakening amidst the profusion of Brustolon's carved African males, promises to be its sensual provocative climax." Of course, the second version of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in a completely different stone—fleshy, translucent pink Iranian onyx—is equally suggestive, even though its presence is completely different from that of the opaque black one.

BN: The first was site-specific in the Venice exhibition, shown in a grand palazzo—a heightened stage set, the total opposite a white cube. But all of the works you have made over the past ten or so years are time-travelers of a sort, so even in a supposedly neutral room they are going to appear out of time, out of place, estranged. For some viewers, these may not

even be considered as works of contemporary art. This is the problem of certain viewers, though maybe its “contemporary” which is the problem, one that is somehow kept in abeyance, or not problematic at all. There's a tension in your work that carves out a space in between the past and the present—another form of sculpture. Even when you appropriate something iconic, as with the *Perfect Forms*, based on Boccioni, these go far beyond the appropriation strategies of the 1980s, a photograph of a photograph, for example, and they truly seem to be something else. These particular works of yours conjure a more amplified Futurism as they emerge from the past to stride forward forcefully into our own time. While they have the same volume as the originals they echo, their visual speed seems to have increased.

BXB: For each of my Masterpieces, my intention is to hold on to all the power and essential forms of the historical works that inspired them, while at the same time I effect myriad transformations to make them definitively mine. Those thousands of subtle changes, invisible on their own, cumulatively serve to take my works far away from their antecedents. Easy “artistic” interventions don’t interest me. Jokes and parodies—one-liners—don’t resonate for very long. I’m aiming for a rich multi-layered complexity. Can I improve something recognizably great? Absolutely. I have all the advantages of the current era; vastly superior equipment, artificial lighting, access to stone from all over the planet, and, most importantly, I organize my practice to be able to take all the time necessary to bring a sculpture to a fever-pitch level of finish. I want the Masterpieces to positively vibrate with intensity. Artists have always made works “after” those of their forebears. Michelangelo’s first known painting was a reinterpretation of Martin Schongauer’s engraving, *The Torment of Saint Anthony*. Unlike artists of the past, or those you see who copy paintings at easels in museums today, I start with a cold, objective, interpretation-less scan. After sculpting the resultant digital cloud and altering every data point, precise milling paths are generated to instruct the robots that gently cut away my stones, layer by layer, over a course of months. Finally, I and my studio team continue on to hand-caress the surfaces of the sculptures, for thousands of hours on each one, with the goal of perfecting their machine-carved surfaces until all evidence of manual intervention is eliminated. The recently-deceased racing car driving great, Dan Gurney, once said, and I paraphrase, “I thrash about manically inside the car to make it run as smoothly as possible down the track.” When my sculptures have been exhibited alongside their ancient predecessors, viewers often tell me that they finally understand that something inexplicable has occurred, that my works are mirrors of, yet entirely different from their historical models. I am comfortable with the confusion as to where my works fall in the art-historical continuum. In fact, I purposely cultivate the conundrum. I’m definitely not some kind of historical re-enactor, nor am I, as you note, really an appropriator. I’m a free agent in an internet-linked world where everything from every era is simultaneously available.

BN: You mention your works being exhibited in relation to their predecessors. In about a month from now, in Milan, you will be showing your Pietà at Castello Sforzesco near Michelangelo’s last work, the *Rondanini Pietà*, which was unfinished at the time of his death. Is your sculpture, which I know you have altered in numerous ways from the original, your way of completing the work of a master? I’m also interested to know how you came up with this idea, because on the one hand it's a rather tall order, and on the other, for some art historians no doubt, totally presumptuous on your part.

BXB: My earliest Masterpiece sculptures, *Purity* and *Envy*, derive from historical works by Antonio Corradini and Giusto Le Court, artists not nearly as famous as Michelangelo. I felt that

by starting with sculptures by lesser-known figures, my works would more readily be able to attain independence. With my *Pietà* ensemble—at ten feet tall, my first monumental work—I decided to at last confront the great Renaissance master. I was not interested in scanning his much more well-known Roman *Pietà*. Rather, I chose the mysterious sculpture Michelangelo was working on up to a few days before his death at age 88. He was effectively carving his own funerary monument. The *Rondanini Pietà*, so named for the Roman family that owned it at one time, was mostly ignored for centuries. Only in recent decades has the power of this piece been recognized. Michelangelo was effectively in the process of inventing a new form of sculpture, one radically different from those he made earlier in his life, when he died. My friends, Sergio Risaliti and Claudio Salsi, are writing on my *Pietà* for this book, so I won't go into great detail here about my sculpture vs. Michelangelo's. Suffice it to say that I did introduce many changes—in material, form, and surface to make this sculpture my own. Significantly, I have substituted the face of Michelangelo for that of the roughed-out Christ.

BN: With this alteration you have, in effect, created a portrait of Michelangelo.

BXB: Yes. He inhabits his own last work. My sculpture is a mirror, flipped left-right, of Michelangelo's. I also reversed the classic pietà mother-holding-child format by eliminating the block on which the Virgin was standing and drooping her foot, thereby emphasizing that Christ-Michelangelo is carrying the Virgin on his back, supporting her in her grief. Finally, I re-incorporated an altered—enlarged and reshaped—version of the Roman funerary stele on which the *Rondanini Pietà* was displayed for many years.

When I scan historical sculptures, I always provide a copy of the data to the museums, churches and collections where they are held. Scans are useful for research and restoration. I did not know that at the time I scanned the *Rondanini Pietà* that there were plans to move it to a new location within the Castello Sforzesco complex. It turns out that the scan was utilized to make a rough copy of Michelangelo's sculpture for seismic testing in the process of designing a new "floating" base. Michelangelo's work is now beautifully presented on that base in its own Museo Pietà Rondanini. My piece will be installed facing Michelangelo's former position in the Castello Sforzesco Museum, doubling the specular flip. Translucent burnished onyx, soft inner light. The *Rondanini Pietà* has left the building. Left in its void is a radiant phantom.