

Visceral intensity

Stone portraits eerily lifelike at SITE Santa Fe

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By Leanne Goebel | *Special to the Herald*

A portrait of artist Mathew Barney is skewered with a 24-carat-gold-plated stainless steel pole. A draping of flesh hangs from Barney's neck and an eruption forms around the spike. The head is stretched vertically and layered in a Victorian Baroque relief pattern. His portrait is sculpted in Mexican onyx, a white stone with blood red inclusions. Suspended from the ceiling, the sculpture hangs alone in a gallery at SITE Santa Fe.



Courtesy Barry X Ball Studio and Salon 94, New York

On exhibit at SITE Santa Fe, Barry X Ball's portrait bust of Lucas Michael is carved in Mexican onyx. Dimensions: 10 by 5 by 6 inches.



Courtesy Barry X Ball Studio and Salon 94, New York

One of Ball's Scholars' Rocks is carved from Mexican onyx. Dimensions: 41½ by 22 by 14 inches.

The sculpture took three-and-a-half years to create and is one of 12 heads by Barry X Ball on display at SITE along with two works from his new series of "Scholars' Rocks." SITE is hosting the most significant presentation of Ball's work to date in a three-person show that includes paintings by Stephen Bush and video installations by Darren Almond.

Most of Ball's sculptures are hyper-compressed at 85 percent scale, with patterns that play up the exaggerated features of his models. Ball merges elements from ancient Egypt, classic Rome and 13th century West Africa with 21st century technology.

The stone somehow doesn't seem like stone, but something pliable, stretchy and sagging. The viewer is baffled by the realistic likeness of the portrait, the weird striations in the stone, the markings and their placement, the overlaying of lace patterning and the minute bands of fluting.

Ball's process is incredibly complex. It begins with a plaster life cast of a face. All of the portraits on display at SITE are of artists, curators and critics. Ball has cast about two dozen faces of people in the art world.

He selects faces with exaggerated features. Working from the life cast, he makes a plaster positive, which he sculpts by hand. A completed positive is scanned using a three-dimensional digital laser scanner to create a virtual model. The virtual model can be stretched, shrunk and decorated.

The computer file is sent to a computer-controlled milling machine that does the initial stone shaping using progressively finer diamond bits to mill the stone.

"The milling of one portrait can take up to 58 hours nonstop," SITE curator Laura Heon told an audience on Feb. 22. This milling allows the artist to work with hard stones like lapis lazuli that were previously impossible to sculpt.

The sculpture is hand finished in Ball's studio using dental tools. The lips, eyes, inside of mouth and back of neck are polished. The portrait is masked, sandblasted and oil-impregnated.

In one portrait of art historian and critic Laura Mattioli Rossi, Ball uses rare Belgian black marble. One eye is open, gleaming and hand polished, while the other is closed. The result is unsettling and captivating.

A sculpture of Lucas Michael is done in Mexican onyx a "wounded" stone with inclusions that become attributes of the portrait. Another Lucas Michael is in sodalite and lapis lazuli. The most arresting work hangs alone in a second gallery and features the fused heads of Mathew Barney and the screaming Barry Ball, overlaid with patterning inspired by Italian metalwork.

The scholar-rock sculptures, created using similar milling techniques, are beautiful and contemplative. Ancient Chinese scholar's rocks - found rocks, worn by wind and weather into meditative forms - are the inspiration for these works. Chinese scholar's rocks have been repeatedly copied and sold as "originals."

"Ball's deformed version (of the scholar's rocks) address the notion of connoisseurship and the cultural and monetary values that we assign to notions of artifice and authenticity," says the SITE gallery guide.

His sculptures are as authentic as the classic works of traditional stone sculptors, yet altogether more remarkable.

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