



# bowling

It's 2001, so isn't carving figures out of rocks a bit passe? Barry X Ball doesn't think so. And he has examples to back him up. Antony Gormley, who makes streamlined suits of armor. Or Kiki Smith, whose forte is wax. And what are Jake and Dinos Chapman's mannequins all about anyway? Unlike so-called contemporary artists, Barry Ball shuns photography and paint for portrait sculpture. But his methods are 21st century enough; he uses high-tech tools like computer-controlled milling machines and cyberware 3-D scanners and exquisite handcrafting to create his exclusively conceptual and abstract sculptures. And because they can't quite be placed in time, they had to be 'new'. All on his own he's reviving Classical.

Ball has recently turned to carved figurative heads - in Macedonian marble no less. It took a Herculean effort and two years' time to finish his nine-part portrait of the influential art collector Giuseppe Panza. Ball's preparatory studies for the eyes alone required intensive research into everything from prosthetic implants to taxidermy. But then again, the eyes are exactly what animate these pieces, even if it's in a Children of the Damned sort of way. Although his new work may bring to mind the late 18th century Austrian master Messerschmidt, whose demented sculptural heads were rediscovered just in time for our own fin-de-siècle, Ball's intentions are closer to the simple challenge of an artist of more recent vintage, Jasper Johns. In fact Ball has taken Johns' mantra "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it" and reinterpreted it to suit his own needs. It goes something like this: "Take a person. Decapitate him. Do something to his head. Do something else to it."

The natural materials he originally employed - mostly white shades of marble - have increasingly given way to rocks chosen for their artificial qualities: nearly-transparent alabaster, translucent amber and pink, black, yellow and fluorescent green marble. He continues to select fellow artists, architects, musicians, fashion designers, scientists, surgeons and other creative or pioneering individuals as his subjects (Matthew Barney was a recent victim). Not entirely surprising, he refers to the sculpted portraits as "celebratory" and sees heads "as transparent containers of the mind." And while the first works he made were rather straightforward renderings from life casts, he plans to turn his next heads inside out, flatten them, multiply them and - you could've guessed - shrink them. *Bob Nickas*