

Elizabeth Cook-Romero | The New Mexican

# Flayed, impaled, and tortured to PERFECTION

**At a time** when art stars can have careers spanning a mere six months, SITE Santa Fe presents three shows that by 21st-century standards are mini-retrospectives. The 14 painstakingly crafted stone heads and scholars' rocks by Barry X Ball constitute half of his output from the past five years. Darren Almond's installations, spanning the period from 1995 to the present, show the evolution of his work from video to film to high-definition technology. Stephen Bush's recent landscapes, which seem painted with the acid tones of a chemical spill, are supplemented with monotone paintings from the 1990s and a few small, nearly classical paintings from the late 1980s.

The shows open Friday, Feb. 9, at SITE Santa Fe. On Tuesday, Feb. 13, Liza Statton, SITE's Thaw Curatorial Fellow, presents an informal talk with Bush about his work and on Feb. 22, a reception and talk with SITE director Laura Heon focuses on the Ball exhibit.

Ball's sculpture recalls precious treasures — objects that have always been far outside the reach of most of humanity — scholars' rocks, ancient Chinese stones shaped by natural forces into fantastic landscapes; portrait busts carved out of rare stone; and trophy heads that presumably once were attached to one's enemies. Ball combines the most advanced technologies with traditional craftsmanship to transform exotic rocks into these extraordinary objects.

At SITE a week before the show was to open, Ball was completely absorbed in lifting each small head from its box and connecting it to a rod. The music and ear-splitting noise that usually accompany the installation process at SITE were kept out of the gallery where Ball worked, and the installers seemed to tiptoe around the artist.

The next day, almost all of the dozen stone heads in the show were arranged on simple bases, which the artist said would barely be visible when the gallery was properly lit. The heads range in dimensions from 50 to 85 percent of life-size; some look stretched, pierced, covered with designs, or worn away. The odd, small scale can make viewers feel compelled to approach and examine each closely. Of the diminished size, Ball said, "It's an old Egyptian trick that removes them from our world."

Tight rows of tiny diagonal grooves, left by a computer-controlled milling machine, act as contour lines that trace every nuance of a cheek or the edge of an eyebrow. The machine that cut these heads cannot make undercuts, nor can it complete the top of each head. Ball and his assistants spend hundreds of hours finishing each portrait — for instance, they carve the folds of the ears, adding the same grooves the milling machine would have left if it had produced that detail.

Each head starts as a realistic three-dimensional plaster model that is then scanned and digitally manipulated. A special-effects laboratory in Los Angeles made a model of the artist's screaming face that has become the basis for several of his works. Artists Lucas Michael, Jon Kessler, and

Barry X Ball: a portrait of the artist, Lucas Michael, as he appeared in 2000, with lips pursed so as to prevent labial sag, at 65% scale, with miniscule vertical/radial fluting throughout (except for the smooth, highly-polished eyes and neck recess viscera), in an aggregate of lapis lazuli and other indeterminate stone types (commonly-called 'Sodalite') which the artist procured in Carrara, Italy, in June, 2003 2000-2005, lapis lazuli aggregate, 9 x 4.75 x 5.75 inches; courtesy Barry X Ball Studio and Salon 94, New York



Darren Almond: *If I Had You*, 2003, installation view; courtesy the artist; Matthew Marks Gallery, New York; Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin; Jay Jopling, White Cube Gallery, London

## Relativity by rail

Darren Almond is fascinated with time and trains, but he also makes art about memory. Three out of four of Almond's video installations in an exhibit at SITE Santa Fe take place on or near iron rails. *Darren Almond* opens Friday, Feb. 9.

*If I Had You*, a 2003 work that features short video loops of the artist's widowed grandmother and scenes of Blackpool, a British vacation destination she used to visit with her husband, earned Almond a nomination for Britain's Turner Prize. The old woman's kind and intelligent face juxtaposed with bits of film that could represent the resort today or four decades ago create a bittersweet riff on longing and mortality.

*In the Between*, Almond's 2006 three-channel video, features the controversial train that runs between Beijing and Lhasa, Tibet. Parts of the video were shot inside the train from the vantage point of the passengers; other sections were shot from outside, which gives a sense of the brute power of that machine. Almond has included a third point of view — that of traditional Tibetans. Chanted prayers, fluttering prayer flags, and the inside of a monastery represent the fragile culture the Lhasa train is speeding toward. *In the Between's* trio of viewpoints makes a powerful statement about the fragility not just of individual lives but of entire cultures. — E.C.R.

### details

- ▼ Darren Almond
- ▼ Opening 5-7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 9; exhibit through May 13
- ▼ SITE Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta
- ▼ \$10, \$5 students & seniors, Friday no charge; 989-1199



Stills from *In the Between*, 2006, three-screen HD video, installation with sound, 14-minute loop; courtesy the artist; Matthew Marks Gallery, New York; Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin; Jay Jopling, White Cube Gallery, London

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Matthew Barney have allowed Ball to make life casts of their heads, a process that allows for far greater detail than the special-effects models. "I make portraits of people whose work or heads I admire," Ball said.

Ball fashions clay additions for the plaster casts — bits of skin extending from the necks that suggest the person has been flayed — or a protrusion at the crest of the skull that makes the head look as if it is impaled on a pointed stick. Ball refers to his models as victims, and he explained that by making the heads disembodied, he is able to get rid of the symbols of rank and power most portraits flaunt. "That's why they don't have hair or clothes I thought I could do things in a new way, an objective way."

Some of Ball's stone heads have received only mild manipulation; they have been reduced in size and then milled using stone too fragile for traditional carving, such as lapis lazuli aggregate and Mexican onyx filled with inclusions. Although the insides of the necks are polished to a high shine that enhances the illusion of viscera, they have an other-worldly beauty.

Some of the other heads are downright disturbing. The impaled heads, Ball said, refer to the collecting and displaying of enemies' heads, a practice found in parts of the world. In two recent works Ball has added his own screaming head to the back of Barney's. "I'm sticking my portrait on the back of my portrait victim's head," Ball explained. The stretched, decorated Ball-Barney Janus head is impaled on a gold-plated javelin. The raised and polished designs that cover the faces don't have the organic look of scarring; they have the elegance and symmetry of Renaissance cut velvets.

The version of the impaled Ball-Barney portrait included in the SITE show had not been unpacked, so Ball showed me an image of it on his laptop. It was milled from stone with a dramatic natural pattern that resembled a red-and-yellow supernova. Flecks of white ran down Ball's carved, screaming face and spilled onto his highly polished tongue.

"These are a bunch of my victims," Ball said while displaying dozens of carved heads on his laptop. "I can emboss or do just about anything I want to them." He enlarged a Ball-Barney portrait and pointed out symbols of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in a textile-like pattern covering both faces. Ball seemed delighted when asked if there is a parallel between his own work and Victorian decorative excess. "The Victorians were the first postmodernists," he said. "They jammed everything together to create a surface buzzing with sensation."

Such complex works present ever new technical challenges and cannot be rushed. "I finished one work in 2003. I was invited to do a show of one portrait, and I said, 'Let's make a piece with everything in it.' ... If one element is not better than another, why not have it be dense? I've come a long way from my initial idea of having it be objective. Now there is more of me in it."

Perhaps, Ball suggested, his view of the history of art was shaped by growing up in California. Europeans with a strong knowledge of art history are too influenced by the original contexts in which ornaments and designs were first created, he said. "I'm a victim of everything I've ever seen. And I'm just unconsciously stealing everything I see." ◀

### details

- ▼ Barry X Ball  
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SITE Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta  
\$10, students & seniors \$5, Friday no charge; 989-1199
- ▼ Laura Heon: "A Contemporary Encounter," lecture with reception  
7 p.m. Feb. 22  
SITE Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta  
\$25; tickets at the Lensic, 988-1234

## Babar in unexpected places

Aesthetically speaking, Australian artist Stephen Bush is on a seesaw, teetering between flamboyant spontaneity and staid predetermination. *Stephen Bush: Gelderland*, opening Friday, Feb. 9, at SITE Santa Fe, features three distinct bodies of Bush's paintings — small oil paintings from the late 1980s, with beekeepers set in landscapes inspired by 19th-century American artist George Caleb Bingham; later landscapes that began as pours and spills of colors more easily associated with tropical blossoms than landscapes; and monotone seascapes that are predictable classical compositions populated by stuffed Babar toys.

On Tuesday, Feb. 13, Bush joins Liza Statton, SITE's Thaw Curatorial Fellow, in a public conversation about his work.

Most artists finish a series and then move to the next. Not Bush. Since the mid-1990s he has been occasionally painting a new rendition of *The Lure of Paris*, the sepia-colored seascape with one plush Babar standing on a rock and two other Babar toys playing on a nearby cliff. "I've painted *The Lure of Paris* I think 28 or 29 times," Bush said during a phone interview from his studio in Melbourne. "I work like a set painter or a sign painter, putting the sky in and then working forward."

The SITE Santa Fe exhibit contains five versions of *The Lure of Paris*, and Bush said most viewers find themselves looking from one to the other and noticing the subtle and unintended differences, but those differences are not Bush's point. Making another version of the painting, he explained, is an investigation of his own enthusiasm for the image. Artists of all kinds — movie directors, painters, and musicians, for instance — are always under pressure from the market or their fans to keep repeating themselves. Bush is re-creating the same painting to see how long he can keep it up before it starts to feel like an empty chore, and he indicated that the breaking point may have arrived.

In between painting versions of *The Lure of Paris*, Bush makes landscapes in which recognizable objects such as cabins, stacks of logs, or power stations are painted on top of zigs and swirls of saturated color. Bush's clashing combinations of pinks, reds, purples, and greens fill the eye, but each canvas contains few colors, proving that sometimes less is too much.

Bush's raw and whirling colors suggest chemical spills or an environment polluted by nuclear waste, but the artist insists that's all in the viewer's mind. "Everything changes with time or with the baggage you bring to it, and basically there is nothing there. It's just a lot of paint, and you end up reading it as a landscape, but everything is psychedelic, hallucinogenic, or postapocalyptic."

Bush grew up on a farm that had cattle, sheep, and peas; rustic buildings, stacks of firewood, and a beekeeper or two are common themes in his paintings. Tumbledown shacks, Bush said, standing on a ground of swirling color can also represent the fragile experience of having a place in the world: "Some sort of shelter, some form of sustenance, and a sense of belonging; they are metaphors for that, I think." — E.C.R.

### details

#### ▼ *Stephen Bush: Gelderland*

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#### ▼ Stephen Bush and Liza Statton in conversation

6 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 13  
SITE Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta  
\$10, \$5 students & seniors; 989-1199



Stephen Bush: *Bimblebox Poplar*, 2005, oil and enamel on linen, 66 x 78 inches; courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia; Collection of John and Irene Sutton, Melbourne, Australia



*The Lure of Paris, #22*, 2002, oil on linen, 72 x 72 inches; courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia; private collection, Sydney, Australia