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CARL ANDRE TAUBA AUERBACH JONATHAN BOROFSKY CÉLESTE BOURSIER-MOUGENOT MARK DI SUVERO
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Envy / Purity, 2008–12. *Envy*: Pakistani Onyx, stainless steel, Macedonian marble, wood, acrylic lacquer, steel, nylon, and plastic, 172.7 x 43.8 x 30.5 cm. overall. After Giusto Le Court (1627–1679), *La Invidia*, circa 1670, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice. *Purity*: Mexican onyx, stainless steel, Macedonian marble, wood, acrylic lacquer, steel, nylon, and plastic, 175.3 x 41.9 x 30.5 cm. overall. After Antonio Corradini (1668–1752), *La Purità*, 1720–1725, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice. Photo: Kevin Todora

Remastering Masterworks: A Conversation with Barry X Ball

March 9, 2020 by Paul Laster

Celebrated for his striking sculptural portraits of art world figures and exquisite remakes of art historical masterpieces, Barry X Ball dynamically connects the past to the present in his sophisticated and sensitive work. Employing computer technology and immeasurable hours of handwork, he carves precious stones into extremely expressive works of allegorical art. Twenty-first-century techniques such as 3D digital scanning, virtual modeling, rapid prototyping, and computer-controlled milling, as well as tried-and-true, traditional hand-carving and polishing practices, transform rough blocks of quarried stone into sensual figurative sculptures. Often working for years to realize a single piece, Ball makes mighty art like a Renaissance master, while imaginatively using space-age methods.

His current survey of sculptural works from the 1990s to the present, “Barry X Ball: Remaking Sculpture,” is on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas through April 19, 2020.

Paul Laster: How did you evolve from a 20th-century Minimalist painter to a 21st-century figurative sculptor?
Barry X Ball: The thought process and analysis are the same, even though the form is radically different. I think people associate Minimalist forms with rigor of thought, while they think that making figurative sculpture is a completely different discipline—one ruled by emotion and historicism. Honestly, I view it as a linear path from my prior work, which came out of Minimalism and was redolent of our far past, including Italian Trecento and Quattrocento painting. Getting to figurative work was the next step rather than a complete break. It wasn’t that I had lost faith in reductive forms.

paired, mirrored, flayed, javelin-impaled, cable-delineated-pendentive-funnel-suspended, squid-like, priapic / labio-vulval, Janusian meta-portrait lozenges of the artist, screaming, and Matthew Barney, in two guises: determined combatant and recently-deceased, resigned stoic,
with the first composite figure richly embossed, in a manner reminiscent of late-Renaissance Milanese parade armor, with a cornucopia of silhouetted motifs: Abrahamic ecclesiastical symbols, animals, decorative flourishes, and protuberant, warty, half-spheres; and the second devoid of embellishment, in book-split, medially-bifurcated onyx from Baja California: half an exuberantly-variegated, intensely-colored, fractal-patterned, striped-and-spotted white-yellow-red; half a comparatively-uniform semi-translucent, nacreous, pale yellow-white with differing surface treatments keyed to the corresponding swag-draped corporeal flay strata: a glistening mucosal sheen for the splayed entrails, either miniature horizontal flutes or a micro-stippled matte finish for the mid-level viscera, and either gnarled, ridged, sfumato-esque soft-focus ornamental relief or, again, diminutive horizontal flutes for the epidermis,
with eyes and oral features gleaming, respectively, with a moist, lachrymal / salivary polish,
with mannered, attenuated, crown-like cranium-top shatter-burst exit-wounds (detail), 2000–07. Mexican onyx, stainless steel, 24k gold, and various metals, figures: 55.9 x 13.3 x 20.3

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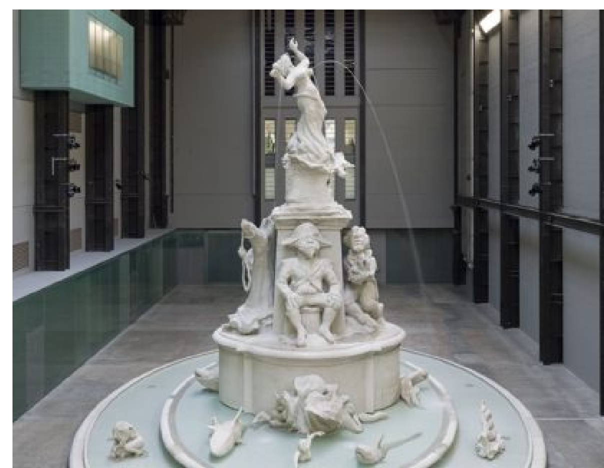

HYUNDAI COMMISSION KARA WALKER

Ruby Neri

Rachel Harrison: Life Hack

cm. each, stone/shaft assembly: 139.7 x 13.3 x 20.3 cm. each. Photo: © Barry X Ball, Courtesy Barry X Ball Studio

PL: When did you first start using digital technology?
BXB: It was there from the beginning of my figurative work. I heard about 3D scanning in the mid-'90s, but at that time, it was only available to the military and the film industry. In its infancy, I went out to Los Angeles and used myself as my primary subject. I realized that people are concerned about how they look in portraits, so I wanted to be able to experiment without offending anyone. Portraiture has always been a dance between the artist and the subject. We now think more about Diego Velázquez than we do of King Philip IV of Spain. It was simpler to first incorporate myself and then my fellow artists, who were equally open to experimentation. I wanted to add a level of intensity to the work, so the first scanned 3D portrait was of me screaming. I shaved my head and went to Burbank to a special effects house, where there were busts of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, who had been scanned for their projects. I sat in the studio and screamed during the 18-second scan cycle. That portrait was pretty much typical of every following one I have made. It was created through advanced technology. In the beginning, however, many of my models were life-cast, and then I would scan the resultant plaster model and manipulate the data. Ultimately, I would produce a physical stone sculpture.

PL: Why did you decide to work in stone?
BXB: Shortly after my initial scanning, I heard about the Johnson Atelier in New Jersey. It was probably the largest art fabrication facility in the United States at the time, and Johnson subsequently established a Stone Division by buying an incredible suite of CNC milling machines, scanners, and a robot wire saw without any idea, initially, of how to use their capacities. Johnson was convinced that technology was the future, so they jumped in. I was one of the first artists to use the equipment and figure out how to work with it to make finished products. I stood there, side by side with the machines, for many days and months; from the beginning, I was intimately involved with the technology—not just ordering sculptures from a fabricator—and by chance the technology was linked to stone.

PL: While working on your first portrait sculptures you simultaneously produced the *Scholars' Rocks*. What was the point of departure for these sculptures, and what did they teach you about your new pursuit?
BXB: My favorite artist coming out of college was Duchamp. I wanted to enter a profession where there were no boundaries, and, to me, he was the artist who defined the most open way to make art. His readymades particularly impressed me, in the way that he recontextualized something that was industrially produced, like a snow shovel or urinal. By taking it out of its normal usage or presentation and putting it on a pedestal in a gallery, you read that object in a completely different way. When I started to use stone, it was not a tradition that I knew. I needed to examine why I was using this material, and I came across the Chinese tradition of the scholars' rock, which I saw as a "natural readymade." By the pure act of connoisseurship in selecting a beautiful rock from nature and putting it on a base, you made an artwork—something completely new. There is a long tradition of both finding them and copying their natural forms. I even like the perverse gesture of carving a rock from a rock.

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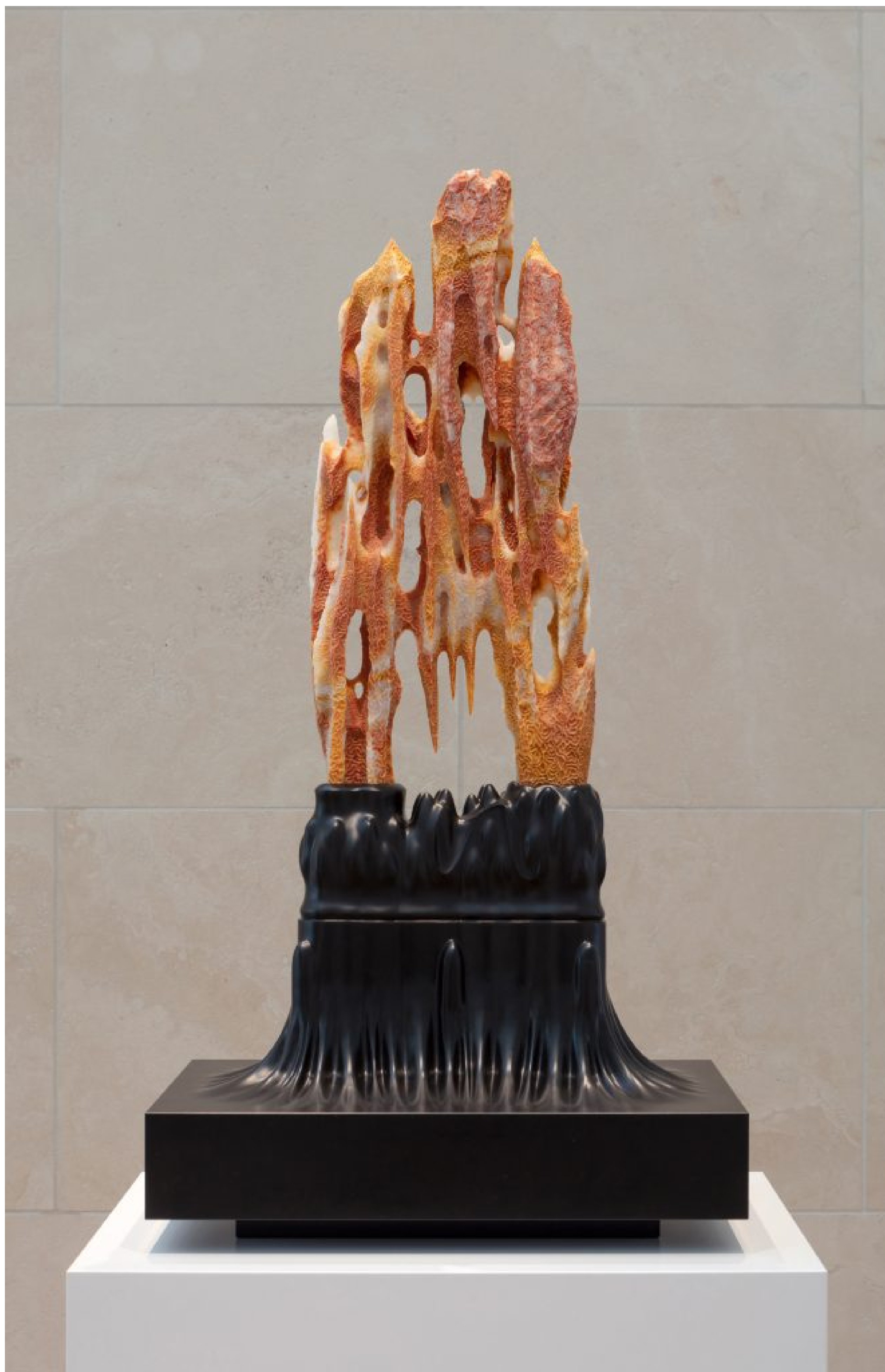

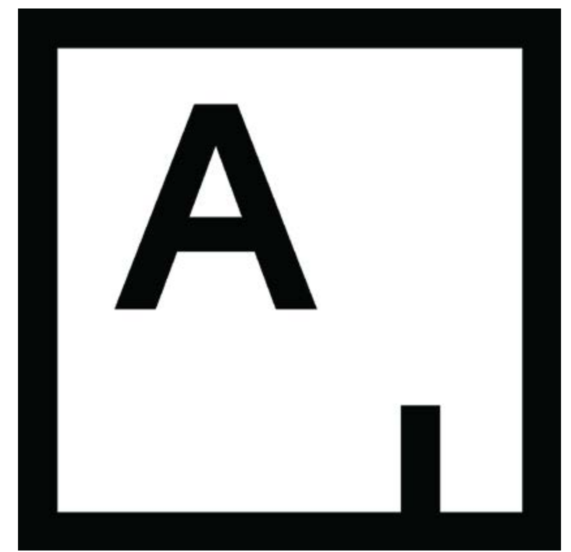

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2002–06. Sculpture: Mexican onyx and Belgian black marble, pedestal: wood, acrylic lacquer, steel, nylon, and plastic, 189.2 x 55.9 x 35.6 cm. overall. Photo: Kevin Todora

Paying attention to the stone, not automatically choosing blank white marble or blank black granite, I worked back and forth with what I was making formally and the material. This way of working has characterized my approach. I believed stone was an underused, under-appreciated stuff that called for re-examination. On my first trip to Carrara, Italy, I saw 30 miles of stacked blocks from all over the world—it's the stone shopping center of the world. And I thought, "Why haven't artists fully used this material for its expressive possibility?" It has a rainbow of colors and incredible textures with veins and pits and holes. I immediately wanted to explore stone, and I still feel as though I have a lifetime of experimentation ahead of me.

PL: What led you to remake Giusto Le Court's *La Invidia* (c. 1670), which captures the emotion of envy in the form of a tortured soul, and Antonio Corradini's 18th-century bust of a veiled woman, which serves as a complementary symbol of purity?
BXB: In all of my figurative works, I've been looking for extreme examples, such as myself

screaming. I saw *La Invidia* at Ca' Rezzonico in Venice, and strangely, the museum didn't know who had made it. It had been anonymously displayed on a shelf for years. Laura Mattioli, an art historian and my great friend and supporter, helped identify the artist and subject. I chose it and Corradini's *Dama Velata* (*Veiled Woman*), in the same collection, because of their intensity. There was a screaming old crone filled with bile and then an innocent young woman; from the beginning, I viewed them as a pair. They were two opposite visions—Purity and Envy, both allegorical. A lot of people assumed that the figure of *La Invidia*, a woman with snakes in her hair, was Medusa; but Laura discovered the true subject from an allegorical playbook that Baroque-era artists used. The book basically said that if you want to depict envy, use an angry old woman with snakes in her hair. Her striking mien, the materiality of the stone, and the intensity of the making on my side all go together. I'm trying to make a riveting object, not just another figurative thing where getting a likeness is good enough. I want to make it maximally acute.

PL: Your work has been condemned by uninformed critics as simply being a copy of an original. How does what you create go beyond a replica?
BXB: My goal is not to make appropriation art, which usually deals with how images and objects have been passed down to us. I'm adding layers and layers. There are the features of the figure, the color and venation of the stone, different textures—mirror-polished, matte, milling-pass micro-fluted—sometimes applied patterning, all superimposed. My goal is to retain all of the power of the original while taking it to a completely new place, not to make some quick, humorous gesture. Digital scanning produces a perfect copy. I then analyze what's really there. It's cold data, not an interpretation. The scanner gathers the facts, which I bring back to the studio to evaluate. I'm interested in what the artist was trying to achieve conceptually and physically; I then push things, either in their direction or counter to it. I have a much wider range of materials available to me. With the incredible technology that I can apply to the creation of my sculptures, I should be able to exceed what my forebears were able to achieve. When my works are shown in direct confrontation with their historical antecedents, I don't have to explain to people that it's new work. They get that mine are not copies.

Installation view of "Barry X Ball: Remaking Sculpture," Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, 2020. Photo: Barry X Ball

PL: What role does research play?
BXB: Research is at the core of the work. Again, I'm not dealing with distanced reproductions of historical sculptures. I'm scanning originals and want to understand everything the artists were trying to do. I'm not an art historian, but I do a lot of historical research. For example, when working with Michelangelo's *Pietà*, I tried to learn everything about it, including anecdotal evidence about how it got to be in Milan, as well as the whole history of its display and rediscovery. If I'm going to be devoting thousands of hours to an object, I want to know what the preceding artist was up to. I'm not just looking at surfaces. I have the advantage with the technology of seeing historical artists' works in ways that they never could—from all angles, even from inside. It would be lazy of me not to learn as much as I can about all of my "Masterpiece" series antecedents, my historical

models. Another example is Medardo Rosso. I worked directly with his sculptures in a beautiful exhibition at the Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA) in New York. There, I collaborated again with Laura Mattioli, the founder of CIMA, to design the pedestals and the lighting for the show. I was intimately involved with the pieces and was ultimately able, with the assistance of Laura and Danila Marsure, Rosso's heir, to scan 39 of them—interacting with them on a visceral level, while preparing to make something new.

PL: How important is your choice of stone for the realization of these figures and your other stone sculptures?
BXB: It's critical. It's one of the things that distinguishes my work. If you look at Bernini's work in marble, it's almost all white. That was the stone you used. Michelangelo used it, too. In modern times, we have access to stone from around the world—Bolivian, Vietnamese, Portuguese, French, and more—all laid out for us in Italy. I also get stone directly from Mexico, Utah, and other places. The expressive possibilities of the material, working in concert with the forms, is something I'd be stupid not to explore. I now have a new state-of-the-art studio, which I specifically built so that I could work back and forth between what I want to make and the materials that I have at hand. I can alter the forms based on what I see in the stones and use stones that lend layers of significance to the work—violence, spirituality, humanity, strangeness.

PL: What's the process for creating these types of pieces, from start to finish?
BXB: I'm lucky to be working often in Europe, where I spend a lot of time in museums. Finding a particularly resonant historical work and gaining access to it is the first step. Then, I 3D scan it and analyze the resultant objective data to see where I want to go with it. Next, I look into the material that I want to realize it in. I primarily work in stone, but I'm also making pieces in metal. I've personally chosen and cut every block of stone for every one of my sculptures. The first piece of equipment I ordered for the new studio was a fantastic custom-made, computer-controlled diamond wire saw that I use to cut through the stone crusts to reveal what's hidden inside the blocks. When I finally complete the extensive digital manipulation—virtual re-sculpting of the scan data—I use that data to drive computer-controlled stone carving machines, which are anthropomorphic robots, like those you might see in a car factory. Milling the stone can go on continuously for many months on machines working 24/7. I work with robot firms in Italy and New York. Finally, the sculptures come to my studio—there, handwork goes on for up to 10,000 hours on each sculpture to detail, polish, and carve the undercuts that the machine couldn't get and to bring the pieces up to the fever-pitch level of finish that I want them to have.

Hard Dark Soft Light, 2000–02. Belgian black marble, Italian translucent white "Scaglione" alabaster, and stainless steel, each head: 32.39 x 14.92 x 19.1 cm. Photo: Kevin Todora

PL: What inspired you to create your version of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*?
BXB: The *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* in the Louvre may be the most famous composite artwork in the history of art. It was worked on by multiple artists over more than two millennia. Originally a Greek second-century BC bronze, it was copied in the second century AD in Rome in marble. When it came to the collection of Scipione Borghese, it was given to Bernini, at age 19, to transform. He made the magnificent bed, which upped the sexiness of the stirring he-she figure. Other artists, like David Larique, did figure restorations. The Louvre work is a mosaic, composed of multiple pieces of assembled stone. My idea was to make a 21st-century consolidation—a monolith cut from one extraordinary piece of translucent pink Iranian onyx. I searched for this particular piece of stone for many years. Locating another block like it could possibly take 10 years. The onyx has that sensual fleshy color and soft translucence that is there in a lot of my sculptures. I'm always trying to break through the stony surface and make my pieces appear to have an inner light. I do everything possible to work against the obdurate toughness of the material and imbue my creations with ethereal spirituality. You can't look at my *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* without thinking about the combination of what a person did and what nature, or God, did.

PL: What's the story behind your remaking of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, and why did you complete it with a tributive twist?
BXB: Besides it being a mirror image, I made two major changes. Instead of the face of Christ, I morphed Michelangelo's likeness into it. Michelangelo went down fighting and inventing on his way to the grave. He may or may not have known that this was his last work, but he was, in effect, carving his own funeral monument. It's an extraordinary piece that was ignored for a long time and nearly forgotten. It was in the inventory of the contents of his house when he died, but it later came to the Rondanini family and was stored in the courtyard of their palazzo. There are pictures of the Rondanini children playing with their toy cars on it into the 20th century. It's a misfit that doesn't seem to conform to the Michelangelo canon. But now when we look at its ethereal figures, we wonder why anyone ever overlooked it. It's him inventing Mannerism, elongating, making weightless figures in the tradition of El Greco, Pontormo, and Bronzino.

There's a neo-Gothic kind of spirituality to it. Michelangelo was very religious at the end of his life. He was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and donated his architectural work at Saint Peter's. He was carving this piece without a model, it seems, working directly into the stone, which was not how he always made his sculptures. There's everything from raw and semi-finished surfaces to very roughly carved and polished passages in this work. It's a catalogue of stone-working techniques. The great art historian Leo Steinberg said this was different from every other *Pietà* because instead of a mother holding the body of her dead son, it was as if the son was supporting the mother in her grief, carrying her on his back.

There are side views, at both the left and right, that we seldom see reproduced. The lateral composition has an extraordinary elongated curve—almost Brancusi-esque in its purity—and in my version, I wanted to enhance that swoop by eliminating the block on which the Virgin stands. I also drooped her foot, as it would hang if her son were carrying her. I applied a variety of surface textures, working with the translucent stone. I wanted to make an ethereal, spiritual work, which I hope has all of the power of Michelangelo's sculpture even as it has become mine. I worked very hard to refine my piece's robot-milled fluting so that my marks are superimposed on Michelangelo's chisel marks, as if we were working side-by-side on the same piece.

Sleeping Hermaphrodite, 2008–17. Sculpture: translucent pink Iranian onyx, pedestal: Greek Thassos marble and stainless steel, 105.4 x 189.9 x 105.4 cm. overall. After the *Hermaphrodite Endormi* (*Ermafrodito Borghese*), Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Kevin Todora

PL: What made you think Marco d'Agrate's 16th-century sculpture of Saint Bartholomew would make a good subject for your work, and how did you alter it?
BXB: I first saw the *San Bartolomeo* from across the interior of Milan Cathedral, one of the largest churches in the world. It looked like a Roman figure wearing a toga, until I got closer and realized that it was a saint calmly standing in a contrapposto position, with his flayed skin ripped off and draped over his shoulders. It's a bizarre sculpture. I was immediately attracted to its astounding strangeness. In my version, I substituted my screaming self-portrait for the original features on the skinned head.

Marco d'Agrate has links to Michelangelo, who, in his only self-portrait, depicted himself as the skin of Saint Bartholomew in the Sistine Chapel in *The Last Judgment*. My self-portrait in this work is derived from the same screaming scan that I have been using for the past 20 years. It links the guy who made the sculpture with the subject of the sculpture. I told my good friend, Marco Lombardi, who has long been my stone sourcer in Italy, that I wanted to find a bloody red, meaty stone. We spent a day driving between the stone deposits, analyzing the structure and color of several red stones he had located. Ultimately I decided on Rouge du Roi (King's Red marble) from Languedoc, France. I purchased a giant, 22-ton piece, which is the biggest block I've ever bought, larger than a car. I suspected that it would be difficult to carve because this stone has never been used for sculpture, as far as I know. It's got a meaty, "USDA Prime" fat marbling, with white veins and varying densities, which makes it very difficult to use for sculpture. But I was trying to increase the sense of Saint Bartholomew being a flayed piece of meat. The sculpture cried out for more than calm white marble. I wanted a material that really worked hand-in-hand with the grisly subject.

PL: Was this the first piece to be fully realized in your new Brooklyn studio? How is this state-of-the-art facility impacting your production?
BXB: The *Pietà* was partially made in the new studio, even before we completed the building, but yes, *Saint Bartholomew Flayed* is the first entire one. I could not have realized it in the old studio, which was housed in a small New York tenement building. I was there for 30 years and did a lot of work in that studio—mostly bust-size or smaller pieces. But I need my 20-ton overhead bridge cranes and other massive pieces of equipment to handle big stones. *Saint Bartholomew Flayed* required the most intense physical carving, polishing, and detailing of anything I've ever made. I have an extraordinary group of people working with me, and I had nine members of my team laboring 18 hours a day in two squads for weeks and weeks to give this thing a realized intensity equal to that of the material.

Saint Bartholomew Flayed (detail), 2011–20. Sculpture: French Rouge de Roi marble and stainless steel, platform: aluminum, acrylic lacquer, stainless steel, and ABS plastic, 236.6 x 151.5 x 151.5 cm. overall. After Marco d'Agrate (c. 1504–c. 1574), *San Bartolomeo*, 1562, Duomo di Milano, Italy. Photo: Kevin Todora

PL: What was the arc of your artistic production that Jed Morse wanted to explore in "Remaking Sculpture," your current Nasher Sculpture Center exhibition?
BXB: There are examples of most of my production from the last 20 years. Though not completely comprehensive, the exhibition incorporates pieces from the beginning of my stone works, the portraits, up to the latest sculpture in the "Masterpiece" series—*Saint Bartholomew Flayed*, which was immediately put in the crate and exhibited at the Nasher two weeks after it was completed. The theme of doubling or mirroring runs through the show, from the two sexes of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* to the dual portraits of Matthew Barney and me, to *Envy / Purity*, to Saint-Bartholomew-with-me-over-the-back-shoulder, to a dual portrait of Laura Mattioli (*Hard Dark Soft Light*), to the dual screaming self-portrait ensemble. This theme even extends into the Nasher's collection with my Medardo Rosso Project works. Jed installed a selection of the museum's (and Howard Rachofsky's) Rosso sculptures that mirrors my variations. There's also the doubling in the *Pietà* of the man and woman—Michelangelo and the Virgin—repeated in the pedestal with a Roman male and female couple. In my grand endeavor, the "Masterpiece" series, I'm doubling by mirroring those masterworks. It's funny that I didn't mention that theme previously because it's pretty salient. Almost every work Jed and I selected fits that thrust of the exhibition.

PL: Did you decide to start remaking Medardo Rosso pieces in advance of the exhibition so that you could present them in dialogue with his works in the Nasher collection?
BXB: This show was in germination for nearly eight years. When we first started discussing it, I had just become familiar with Rosso's work. I don't remember the exact sequencing, but I ultimately fell hard in love with Rosso. When I assisted with the CIMA show, it included sculptures, drawings, and photographs, but I was mostly involved with the sculptures. Danila Marsure, who is also the keeper of the Medardo Rosso archives, helped me get access to examples of most of his pieces in public and private collections in Italy. I ultimately intend for my sculptures to form a kind of Medardo Rosso catalogue raisonné.

My sculptures are made reductively, carved out of stone, while Rosso's were made additively, modeled or cast from plaster, wax, and bronze. On my first visit to the Nasher, I saw the Rossos in the galleries, and Jed took out two or three more from storage. I thought it would be a great idea to show what I do alongside the museum's pieces. The Nasher generally tries to display sculptures from the permanent collection that relate to those of the artist (like me) having an exhibition there. I'm the guy who works with historical sculptures, so Jed put a lot of thought into what he would show alongside my works—Brancusi's *Kiss*, which features two figures; two Giacomettis standing next to each other; figurative pieces by Matisse and Rodin; modern technology via the Constructivists; and stone works by Tony Smith and Richard Long.

In my recent museum exhibitions, my works are often shown in studied relation to the collections. I would draw a distinction between plopping down contemporary work in historical settings like Versailles and exhibiting contemporary work directly linked to or inspired by the place or the works in it. I'm less interested in creating frisson or conflict by juxtaposing modern forms and a traditional building than I am in understanding everything about the place where I'm exhibiting and the works in it and trying to respond directly to that context. The Nasher show is my first opportunity to posit my work in direct dialogue with Modernist sculptures. The multi-year realization of the exhibition afforded me the possibility of creating new works, the Medardo Rosso Project sculptures, inspired by those in the Nasher collection. I'm grateful for Jed Morse's and Jeremy Strick's patient generosity. It is rare that an artist like me, who requires many years to finish sculptures, is given sufficient lead time to do things right.

Doorwoman, 2013–19. Sculpture: translucent pink Iranian onyx, pedestal: white Vietnamese marble, chrome-plated steel and aluminum, and stainless steel, 171.8 x 84 x 84 cm. overall. After Medardo Rosso (1858–1928), *La Portinaia*, 1883–84, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan. Photo: © Barry X Ball, Courtesy Barry X Ball Studio

PL: Are the Rossos bringing you full circle, back to abstraction?
BXB: My goal was to take models on the verge of recognizability and push them nearly to the point of pure abstraction, particularly by employing translucent stones. The Rosso Project sculptures exemplify why I built my studio: to be able to work back and forth between forms and materials. In *Baby at the Soup Kitchen*, for example, there's only a slightly recognizable infant's face in the midst of a gnarly stone mound, which looks very similar to a scholar's rock. I like the concept of working with the natural material and only minimally altering it. Scholars' rocks were sometimes subtly enhanced from what nature gave, making them slightly more perfect or giving them another reading.

In *Baby at the Soup Kitchen*, I also extended the form so that the entire back surface is formed by the undulating brilliant red crust of the boulder from which it was milled. I couldn't have done what I did with that piece if I was ordering it up from a far-flung fabricator. Only because I saw that beautiful natural surface of the stone at my studio was I able to incorporate it. Over several years, I had become increasingly uncomfortable using the outside-fabricator system for making my sculptures. The distance made it difficult to have a direct connection to the process. My desire to correct that was the generative reason for my comprehensive studio complex. I am still using external fabricators for

certain pieces, but even when I'm having a piece milled in Italy, I travel back and forth often to observe and control its progress. When I use my Brooklyn robot guy, it's a little easier—I can be there in 10 minutes by car to examine the work in progress. Eventually I will have robots here on site to complement my fantastic team of artists. I finally have my dream studio, and it holds fabulous possibilities.

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