



“[It’s] a balance between incredible idealization and humanity.”

This Amarna-period Egyptian fragment of a queen’s face is a balance between incredible idealization and humanity. The loss, the parts that are not there—you feel guilty saying this—give it even more power, even though it shows a mouth, not the eyes. One would think the eyes would be the more powerful fragment.

There’s a beautiful ridge line around the lips that makes the mouth seem kind of otherworldly and not human. It also works to make the lips look fleshy. She was obviously a gorgeous woman, but there are little puckers coming through the stylization—a couple of wrinkles in the neck, for example, which are just beautifully incised.

There’s a strong sense of integrity I get thinking about the making of this—there is no unimportant part. Even though we only have a fragment, there’s a feeling that the whole piece must have been like a jewel. It’s yellow jasper, which is harder than steel. The artist was obviously using another stone to carve it—that’s all that would have been available. Even with every advantage that the twenty-first century offers me, I would have a hard time equaling this in terms of pure technical achievement.

This woman was a royal personage; this wasn’t just anybody. Egypt had a brief period when they flipped from polytheism to monotheism, and then they flipped back again. Amarna people and their followers destroyed each other’s works. When politics and religion, etc., change, why does change always have to be ushered in with the destruction of what we artists do? I pour my life into the making of my pieces. This thought is hard for me to take emotionally.

The minute I’m hit with an object like this one, I feel like I understand what they were going for in Egypt; it doesn’t seem all that distant to me. There’s something to admire. It’s human, like us.

BARRY X BALL, *SLEEPING HERMAPHRODITE*, 2008–10 ←

FRAGMENT OF A QUEEN’S FACE, CA. 1353–1336 BC →

This fragment is from a statue of a royal woman whose identity is not known with certainty. The statue was composed of different materials, including yellow jasper for the face and limbs and possibly Egyptian alabaster to represent a white linen garment. Queen Tiye—the mother of Akhenaten—might be shown here, as a beauty of strikingly sensuous character, but Queens Nefertiti and Kiya are also possible subjects.

