

Classic Beauty: 21st-Century Artists on Ancient [Greek] Form

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Providence
College Galleries'
Reilly Gallery and
Hunt-Cavanagh Gallery

Exhibition Essay

Classic Beauty: 21st-Century Artists on Ancient [Greek] Form examines how ancient, antique and classical forms remain crucial to contemporary artists' creative lexicon. Establishing the visual traditions of Ancient Greece—Archaic, Geometric, Hellenistic and Classical styles—as ever-evolving and fluid, this group exhibition presents artists who use art history, archaeology, materiality and wide-ranging research methods to repurpose particularly iconic elements of visual culture. With a broad range of artworks across a variety of mediums—including architectural objects, collage, ceramics, drawing, painting, sculpture and installation—each artist demonstrates the continued relevance and complexity of the legacy of the so-called birthplace of Western Civilization.

The exhibition also examines how artists appropriate and manipulate antiquity. Multi-layered projects trace the ways Ancient Greece visually descends through Gothic, Renaissance, Neo-Classical, Art Deco and other Euro-centric artistic periods, while also emphasizing the influence of non-Western cultures of the ancient Near East, Northern Africa and East Asia. With reference to contemporary phenomena, the artworks on view simultaneously homage and challenge the truthfulness of the visual legacy of Ancient Greece, especially as it is expressed in modern Western democratic societies.

In the Reilly Gallery, the group of artworks on view showcases artists' interests in the visual and conceptual characteristics of the archaeological object. Like artifacts excavated and accessioned into a museum collection, the objects are composed to look as if they were made a millennium ago. In

fact, it's the opposite—most were created within the last few years.

Molly Kaderka's *The Weight of Awe*, a drawing depicting pairs of hands out in the cosmos holding up the weight of the ideological world, signifies the overwhelming weight of the the classical past. Its legacy is evident in our senses of narrative and storytelling, spirituality and philosophy, government and political theory, aesthetics and space, science and mathematics, and in nearly every realm of learning and doing. But Kaderka's work also reveals a perpetual need to balance understandings and perspectives of Ancient Greece. We, as creative and scholarly producers, stewards and critical thinkers working in this inclusively and globally minded moment, must do the work of writing and revising new and more accurate histories and responses. We must acknowledge that the Ancient Greeks and the Western democracies and cultures they helped to inspire did not spring from nothing. We must publicly recognize the influences of myriad cultures and regionalities—Western and non-Western alike—and their contributions on the ancient, antique and classical values that our societies continue to treasure.

Daniel G. Baird's sculpture, *Untitled*, presents a cast form of two wall fragments of a cave standing on a tripod consisting of a classically inspired fluted column. The tunnel of the cave shows traces of digging marks in the material. The surfaces, one naturally occurring and the other made by human hands, reference a kind of original architecture made at different moments in time. Baird's work, in tandem with Kaderka's drawing, aligns overlapping notions of nature, the primitive mind, mythology and age-spanning technologies with the ancient Greeks' understanding of caves and chambers as positioned within the cosmos, holy sites where the powers of the Earth, human spirituality and oracles meet.

Ruby Sky Stiler's monumentally scaled *Seated Woman*, in combination with her more modestly sized *no title (wall relief, right arm overhead)*, is a mash-up of ancient and modern sculpture, referencing the fluid nature of old and new. While the pieces look massively heavy and archaic, they actually consist of lightweight foam and fiberglass collaged with paper that she "ages" with a faux patina. In the context of the Geometric periods of the ancient Greeks and their Egyptian predecessors and East Asian contemporaries, the simplified female figure is an iconographic ground-zero. In the modern era and the present day, her body is a contradictory site of proportional beauty and rigid crudeness, strength and fragility, refuge and violence, life and death ...

Lucy Kim's representations of her trainer Stephen Marino and geneticist Eric S. Lander, two men who in different ways mold and tweak the body for a living, manipulate the male figure into wall-based sculptures reminiscent of friezes. The part of a classical entablature between the architrave and the cornice, a friezes was usually decorated with three-dimensional reliefs. In a gesture to the repetition of the idealized male forms of these ancient friezes, Kim took a silicone mold of each of the Marino and Lander's faces and torsos, which she then

copied into a plaster cast and flattened. Painted in shades of blue and grey, the bodily casts are configured as if shaved off the marble façade of an ancient edifice. Like the depictions of ancient warriors, rulers and other historic figures thousands of years ago, Kim's artworks seek to consider what makes and, in the artist's case, breaks the male form.

Shari Mendelson's iridescent vessels recall the ancient glass objects and hybrid forms that inspired the ancient Greeks, Etruscans and Romans. Yet the ornamentation and color palettes of Mendelson's artworks, which show the influence of Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires on Greco-Roman pottery, are created out of the most contemporary of materials—plastic bottles. With each work, Mendelson draws parallels between the everyday objects of the ancient world and our modern consumerist societies.

Matthew Craven's photographic collages and drawings also deal with inspiration and influence, both real and imagined. The pair of indexical compositions shown in *Containment I* and *Containment II* present very few references to ancient Greek vessel forms. However, with those scarce references presented in context with vases and goblets originating from various ancient and early modern cultures, the artist demonstrates the real and perceived connections between iconic forms from around the world. Craven's *Triiiplets*, which situates three Greek figureheads atop colorful decorative patterns that metamorphosis from one culturally emblematic style to another, build on this loose but fascinating connection between the disparate craft traditions of ancient cultures from all seven continents.

Throughout time, few materials have been more extraordinarily or vernacularly prized than plaster. It is the primary medium of the most ancient modeling and building techniques. For their finest work the Egyptians used a calcined gypsum plaster nearly identical with plaster of Paris. And very early in the history of Greek architecture (e.g., at Mycenae), plaster of a fine white lime stucco was used. Lakela Brown's tablet-like piece, *Jewelry, Chicken head, and Hands Composition with Gold*, sculpts with plaster to immortalize, among other things like chicken heads and body parts, another set of iconic elements—gold and bamboo earrings. Echoing the aesthetics of some of art history's most studied artifacts, Brown presents this plaster relief in a way that preserves and glorifies the most important relics, those which she personally reveres, and which are frequently attributed to African-American culture.

In the Hunt-Cavanagh Gallery presentation, three artists tie their work to successive eras. Ancient Greek aesthetics transform by way of methods and concepts developed in early modern Europe. Vivian Greven's paintings on bust-shaped MDF panels riff off the highly stylized figures and color palettes of the great Renaissance and High Mannerist artists who revered Classical antiquity. But there's a twist. Greven's compositions play with line, shape and surface to alternately highlight and obscure the aesthetic accomplishments of her art historical predecessors. Moreover, the body of work Greven

presents in *Classic Beauty* infuses contemporary symbology like emojis and digitally inspired rendering techniques with subtle references to human intimacy and communication.

Kirsten Lamb's series of "embroidery paintings," called *After French Wallpaper*, excerpt bits and pieces of complicatedly beautiful patterns and ornamental designs of the French neo-Classical era. Like the French wallpaper that inspired them, Lamb's paintings experiment with color and composition in ways that abstract and alter the meaning of ancient symbolism. Not quite unrecognizable through the tiny, tiled squares mapped out by embroidery patterning software and filled in with acrylic and gouache paints, each artwork portrays neo-Classical takes on decorative elements meant to tell the stories of ancient Athens, Pompeii, Rome and beyond. The artworks exemplify Lamb's longtime interest in craft and design, especially as creative endeavors which continuously transform by way of societies' collective tastes and cultural activities.

David Ross Harper's *Prone* is a museological installation of his own two- and three-dimensional studies on Greco-Roman forms and mythological themes. The entire scheme consists of a large vitrine, two industrial shelves and a series of textiles and sculptural objects. Inside the vitrine is a broken replica of a statue of Hermes, who is known as the trickster, messenger and, perhaps most importantly, the transgressor of boundaries. Hermes is the perfect symbolic stand-in for the museum. Originally developed in Western Europe to house the cabinets of curiosities filled with ancient relics, especially those of the ancient Greek world, the museum, including Providence College Galleries among its ranks, continues to author boundaries between the history of the artifact and its audience. Harper and every other *Classic Beauty* artist carry on as the messengers.

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