

Re-Cast: POSTMODERN CLASSICAL

Sponsor: The Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA)

The artists: Ron Baron, Muriel Castanis, Audrey Flack,
Gabriel Koren, Yayoi Kusama, Allan McCollum, Melissa McGill,
Dennis Potami and Judith Shea

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Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA) I wish to thank the President of The City College of New York and all those who contributed in organizing the art exhibition: *Re-Cast: Postmodern Classical*.

It is only fitting that thousands of New Yorkers who visit the Onassis Foundation will be able to enjoy important works of contemporary art that draw their inspiration from the classical tradition, even as they reinterpret it. This experience is immeasurably enhanced by the opportunity to view the magnificent Parthenon Marble Cast Collection of the CCNY displayed at the Atrium of the Olympic Tower.

The dialogue of modern art with classical antiquity has been neither simple nor self-evident. The present exhibition shows us that for more than three thousand years this dialogue has been a creative intellectual process.

We, at the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA), are pleased that the cooperation with The City College of New York, which started with the restoration and display of the Parthenon Marbles Cast Collection, continues with the present exhibition.

Stelio A. Papadimitriou, Esq., President, Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation

It is a pleasure and a privilege for The City College of New York to organize *Re-Cast: Postmodern Classical* with the generous support of the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA). Our on-going partnership with the foundation demonstrates the breadth of opportunity that great institutions can bring to each other to enrich and educate, and I would like to thank President Papadimitriou and Ambassador Loucas Tsilas for their dedication to this partnership.

Every society grapples with its past — with its roots, its rebellions, its reinventions. This exciting exhibition and the symposium that accompanies it, *A Postmodern Look at Classical Casts*, celebrate the rich vein of possibility that the visual/artistic legacy of ancient Greece provides for artists working today.

I would like to express particular admiration for the curators of the exhibition, the students in the master's program in Museum Studies at The City College, under the direction of Professor Harriet F. Senie. In the post-September 11th world, we are all struggling with what has changed and what remains. This exhibition affirms the best of what we know to be true about history and civilization — things remain, even as they are questioned, seen freshly, argued with, reassembled and reinterpreted. It is a valuable lesson.

Gregory H. Williams, President, The City College of New York

This exhibition is part of an on-going program devoted to Greek art and the classical tradition at The City College of New York sponsored by the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA). Initially, the Foundation sponsored the restoration of the college's Parthenon marble cast collection and its installation, on long term loan in the lobby of Olympic Tower.

The foundation also sponsored a symposium on the study of casts in a postmodern context held on March 1, 2002 at the foundation, featuring museum professionals, art historians and directors of studio practice, and artists in the exhibition. In addition, the foundation supported two graduate seminars at CCNY: one focused on the presentation of Greek art in a contemporary context through museum education and one devoted to contemporary sculpture and the classical tradition that resulted in this exhibition. This seminar had the benefit of several guest speakers: Joan Mertens, Maryna Papa-Sokal, Katherine Schwab, Sally Webster, and Shelby White. All provided useful and provocative perspectives.

I am grateful to Pamela Gillespie, Assistant Dean, Chief Librarian, and Curator of Artistic Properties at CCNY for her on-going assistance in realizing this exhibition. A special thanks to our catalog designer Michael Lawrence and exhibition designer Sean Mooney who made tight deadlines with grace.

The exhibition benefited from curatorial suggestions from Alyson Baker, Cathy Behrend, Tom Finkelppearl, and Wendy Watson. My thanks to the artists who agreed to participate and the students who worked on all aspects of the exhibition: Josh Altman (who served as chief curator), Lourenço Egreja, Junko Fujimoto, Jeremy George, Jinsu Park, Magali Kivatinetz, Rachel Lapidus, Jinsu Park, Rebekka Rudin, Nicole Sade, and Fuyu Shiraishi. This was truly a collaborative effort.

Dr. Harriet F. Senie, Director of Museum Studies, The City College of New York

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Re-Cast: Postmodern Classical

Searching for the classical tradition seems nothing short of an alchemical process, an elusive game of hide and seek. What precisely was classical art? Which tradition are we defining? Historically speaking, classical art refers to the period roughly dating from 480 to 323 BCE, during which the Greeks built the Parthenon and created sculptures constituting a canon that until recently held art history in its thrall. Known for centuries only through cast and other reproductions,¹ the classical tradition today evokes images of pristine, white perfection set in stone.

The works in this exhibition, often ironic and humorous, approach the classical tradition with a critical edge absent from artistic expressions in centuries past. Some of the artists work with actual casts, challenging the status once held by the original. They all, in one way or another, recast our inherited image of the definitive tradition of western art. And, like all evocations, they affirm the powerful presence and influence of the paradigm they challenge.

But, like all revisionist approaches, they also prompt us to rethink the source. In reality, classical Greek art was no one thing, but rather a cultural expression rich in color as well as depictions of intense emotion, sexuality and violence. Contemporary artists are also reminding us of that other Greek art, one until recently left out of our history books.²

Re-casting the classical body (Flack, Koren, Kusama) The classical tradition, however defined, centers on the human body. Audrey Flack's *American Athena*, a colorful, ornamented mixed media statue of the goddess of war, wisdom, and high places, re-nationalized with U.S. emblems, challenges the idealized aesthetic conventions of classical art. Gabriel Koren's *African-American Apollo I* morphs a classical kouros figure into a contemporary African American wearing headphones and a subway token, with references to recent black history discretely collaged on his torso, thus depicting a body that has traditionally been excluded from the received classical canon.³ Yayoi Kusama transforms a classical Venus by providing a backdrop and covering the entire surface of sculpture and panel with a pattern of swirling dot-like shapes. Our perception of this famous image thus becomes inseparable from its colorful screen, analogous to the constant framing and re-framing to which it has been subjected throughout history.⁴

The absence of the body (Castanis, Potami, McGill) Another way to approach the classical tradition is to consider what would remain if we remove its main focus, the body. Muriel Castanis's figures consist of drapery around a hollow core, simultaneously suggesting the former presence and current absence of the body, the absence of individual identity. Her titles suggest that classical sculpture was and is gorgeous and sexy (although it is not typically discussed that way), and that contemporary standards of feminine beauty and appeal have hardly changed over time, remaining generic rather than specific. Dennis Potami eliminates the body altogether by recasting the *Laocoön* without the figures, leaving only the snakes. The viewer, trying to re-imagine the famous sculpture of heroic suffering, may be reminded of the fall of man as well as "the glory that was Greece." Melissa McGill, like Potami, reconfigures an icon of the (neo) classical tradition in terms of absence. Her blown glass sculpture takes the form of the spaces between Canova's sculpture of *The Three Graces*.

Domesticating the classical tradition (Baron, McCollum, Shea) Like much venerated history, the classical tradition has an aura of perfection and remoteness. Judith Shea's torso of *Apollo* displayed next to a black cloth coat suggests that the ideal male nude of Greek art was extrapolated from a daily existence. Ron Baron's *Doin' the Dishes: Stack 43* reminds us that the majestic vessels of ancient art, now seen only as precious objects in museums, also served a mundane purpose. Allan McCollum's *Dog from Pompei*, taken from a mold made from the famous 'chained dog' plaster cast in the collection of the Vesuvius Museum, focuses on the lowly house pet that perished in agony in the ashes of Vesuvius. Like Potami, he introduces an image of suffering that challenges the stoic idealism usually associated with the classical tradition.

In the following pages individual works are analyzed by graduate students who participated in the seminar on contemporary sculpture and the classical tradition. Continuing to attract students as well as artists of different generations with various interests, the classical tradition is reaffirmed, perhaps most strongly, in its ability to absorb a critique that continues to renew, revitalize and expand it.

1. For the formation of the canon of classical art and its dissemination see Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Some of the vagaries and variations in interpreting and presenting the canon of classical art are discussed in Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham, eds. *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). See also, Martin Postle, "Naked Authority? Reproducing Antique Statuary in the English Academy, from Lely to Haydon," in Anthony Hughes and Erich Ranft, eds. *Sculpture and Its Reproductions* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp. 79-99. **2.** Two general texts that present this broader view of Greek art are Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classical Art From Greece to Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Robin Osborne, *Archaic and Classical Greek Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also Beth Cohen, ed. *Not the Classical Ideal: Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). **3.** See Claude Berard, "The Image of the Other and the Foreign Hero," in Cohen, *Not the Classical Ideal*, pp. 395-412. **4.** For other artistic variations of this famous image see Suzanne Ramjak, *A Disarming Beauty: the Venus de Milo in Twentieth Century Art* (St. Petersburg: Salvador Dali Museum, 2001).

Ron Baron's Doin' the Dishes: Stack 43: The Archaeology of Everyday Life

Ron Baron was a potter before he became an artist. While studying for an MFA at the University of California, Davis, he was introduced to the idea of assemblage sculpture. "One day I looked at a stack of dishes piled high on a shelf and realized that if I arranged them in different diameters, I could create unique shapes."¹ Then the dishes became classical vessels, echoing the shapes of the ceramic vessels he used to make as a potter. Baron also used to play a drum and rhythm continues to be very important in his work, particularly the visual rhythm apparent in the repetition of stacking objects.

Baron has always been fascinated with the discovery of other civilizations, especially the way archaeologists can determine so much about a culture through its artifacts. Considering pottery as the most ancient art form studied, he has for many years thought of mundane objects as artifacts that reflected their civilization. He began collecting those he thought particularly revealing (often china, suitcases, and books) and turned them into sculpture with geological and archaeological strata.

Baron finds his objects at yard sales, garage sales, and thrift shops. Sometimes he uses things that people give him. He is interested in the history of objects, where they were made, how they were used. Their commercial value is insignificant. In fact, he prefers to stay away from expensive things. He is not interested in issues of junk or aspects of ecology. Rather, he chooses an object for its personal content and its significance as an archaeological artifact from our civilization.

When Baron has a theme in mind, he usually starts to look for objects which would embody this theme. Often, however, he finds the objects first and then gets an idea. That was the case with *Built with Pride* (1997), a collage using work shirt name tags. He saw a lot of name tags at a flea market and felt it was very poignant sociologically. In Baron's eyes, each tag stood for a history of an individual; his sculpture celebrates their lives.

Previously Baron used plaster replicas of classical sculpture (generic images of women, Julius Caesar, Plato) in his sculpture, combining them with found objects. He wanted the classical object to become part of a strata of objects, creating a blend between classical objects and everyday collected objects. This would elevate everyday collected objects to a higher level and give them the same sort of significance as classical objects. It would also make us realize that classical vessels were once used in daily life.

Doin' the Dishes: Stack 43 (2001), his 43rd stacked dish sculpture, consists of dishes found in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York. Baron then pinpointed these places on a map because of his geological and archaeological interests. His sculptures are like strata of civilization. They make us think about what is important in our everyday lives and the larger history of civilization. Although Baron does not create his sculptures out of ecological concerns, when we see his sculptures we can not help thinking about all the objects that we have thrown away, and perhaps reconsider the apparent timelessness of the classical tradition in the context of our own disposable culture.

1. All quotes and information for this essay came from two interviews with the artist, December 17, 2001 and January 3, 2002.



Ron Baron
Doin' the Dishes: Stack 43 (2001)
25 x 13 x 13"
collected dishes, crockery
courtesy artist

Gorgeous and Sexy Too: Muriel Castanis's Time Travellers

The sculptures of Muriel Castanis can be quite deceptive. From a distance they appear to be solid statues of traditionally draped figures. Upon closer inspection, however, viewers encounter a void at the core. Castanis has always been interested in absence and the search for identity. She explains:

Beautiful sculptures that were made in ancient times had a bearing on the people of their time, but we are not of their time, we are of our time. We know how they looked, but we do not know them. That is why I left the inside of my sculptures vacant in search for identity of the spirit of the piece.¹

She leaves us with the mystery. Castanis's *Gorgeous* and *Sexy Too* deliberately evoke classical statues. Headless, armless and empty inside, they nevertheless suggest traces of breasts, hips and legs revealed in contrapposto stance. But unlike apparently demure classical figures of the past, they each suggest a woman who is bold and self-confident, who flaunts her sex appeal. Castanis observes: "She is tall, beautiful and curved. How could we miss her? Put her in a toga, and she will swing!" Today's idealized body has not changed much since that of classical Greece. Castanis's sculptures remind us of this. Her titles bring the classical tradition into contemporary focus.

Castanis uses a self-made mechanical styrofoam model draped with epoxy-soaked cloth, tucked and folded with pins. The process is spontaneous, with gravity sometimes playing a role. She has only twenty minutes before the epoxy sets. Then the model is removed, leaving the suggestion of a human gesture, a body that once existed.

She uses cloth instead of materials like stone or marble because it emphasizes lightness or emptiness and adds an element of illusion. As a woman dealing with fabric in her everyday life, wearing clothes, hanging curtains and covering tables and chairs, she knows more about fabric than any other material. Her involvement in the feminist movement prompted her to change the medium of her work to something that was not identified with a tradition of large scale sculpture created by men. Using fabric distinguished her as a woman artist in a male-dominated art world.

Castanis's works convey an unchanged classical tradition in terms of aesthetic standard and subject matter. According to the artist:

Classical art didn't influence me; it molded me! It added another dimension to life, a touch of the grand. It was certainly idealistic and most important, a temporary reprieve from reality while still inspiring thoughtful reflection.²

Thus Castanis travels between two periods, the ancient and the present. Her sculptures are like spirits that fly back and forth across centuries of time like weightless time travelers, conveying an essential spirituality. Their ancient bodies, appropriated and re-appropriated by so many different cultures over time, have now been infused with a contemporary identity.

¹. All quotes unless otherwise noted are taken from interviews with the artist in December 2001. ². Quoted in David Robertson, *Context and Collaboration for Contemporary Art: The Sculptural Program for 580 California Street*, Trout Gallery, Dickinson College, (Carlisle, PA: Trout Gallery, Dickinson College, 1986), p.16.



Muriel Castanis
Gorgeous (1993); 69.5 x 22 x 27"
cloth and epoxy
courtesy artist



Muriel Castanis
Sexy Too (1993); 68 x 22 x 22"
cloth and epoxy
courtesy artist

Audrey Flack's New Millennium Neo-Classicism

Although Audrey Flack was the first American photo realist painter in the MOMA Collection in 1966, she shifted from painting to sculpture in 1983. Dissatisfied with the art world at the time, she was drawn to the solidity and the long lasting characteristics of sculpture. She picked up a piece of clay, modeled it into an angel, and carried it around with her. She also envisioned it as being huge, already thinking of public sculpture without knowing it.

At the same time, Flack became interested in the work of American artists such as Hiram Powers, Malvina Hoffman, Bessie Potter Vonnoh, Vinnie Ream Hoxie, Anna Hyatt Huntington and, most importantly, William Rush. She was especially taken with the homemade look of this self-taught artist's work, the sense of allegory, the expressions of his figures, and the eccentricity of his carving. Flack was also intrigued by the work of nineteenth-century British sculptors such as Alfred Gilbert, creator of *Eros* in Piccadilly Circus in London, as well as the canons of proportion of Phidias and Praxiteles. All along, she collected Spanish Colonial santos.

Flack's work is considered postmodern by many but she rejects the irony and the cynicism usually associated with it. Instead she prefers to call her style New Millennium Neo-Classicism because it is about allegory, narrative, emotion, politics, personal meaning and nostalgia. She would like to produce sculptures in great numbers, inexpensive and affordable large editions that people could carry around.

According to Laurie S. Hurwitz, Flack has created a virtual temple dedicated to the archetypal female in which she blends different philosophies and legends from the Greek, Indian, Chinese, African, American, and pre-historic worlds.¹ Using real models, Flack's strong, sensual, and sexual images of women also convey traditionally masculine attributes of power and independence.

American Athena of 1989 is a 37-inch high, patinated and gilded bronze sculpture which stands on a small pedestal. Inspired by Stirling Calder and Charles Grafly, it projects an air of self-sufficiency and supremacy. Crowned by stars and an eagle with open wings, the icon of U.S. culture, it transcends boundaries of time and nationality, becoming a new kind of protector of New York and the U.S. in the same way that Athena protected Athens and Greece.

This sculpture evolved from another idea for a figure that Flack thought of as *Emissary*, a messenger from the past. She was tall, calm and walked gracefully. To capture the moment of the walk was important, as the heel of one foot comes down and the toes follow and the heel of the other foot comes up and the toes press down. Flack saw the walk as "deliberate, calm, upright, and gentle, yet committed and strong."² For Flack it was somewhere in this process that the Greek origins emerged. At the same time, the headdress changed with the introduction of the American eagle, absorbing the basic tenets of the age in which the artist lives, creating an assemblage in which the body is more contemporary, as opposed to the tradition of thicker-waisted, heavysset women of the past. Flack envisioned *American Athena* as large, in a public setting such as Washington or Athens.

1. Laurie S. Hurwitz, "A Bevy of Goddesses," *American Artist*, September 1991. 2. Conversation with the artist, December 2001.



Audrey Flack
American Athena (1989); 37.75 x 13.5 x 16"
patinated and gilded bronze
courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York

Gabriel Koren's Mission

Gabriel Koren brings an interesting perspective to the classical tradition. Born and raised in Budapest, Hungary, she grew up playing in parks and on streets with sculptures of Hungarian thinkers, writers and historical figures. She also grew up looking at images of African people in books and magazines brought home by her father, a musician who traveled around the world. At school she received a multicultural education, learning about the history of different continents, including African civilization and African-American history.

Koren came to the United States to continue to learn about different cultures. For ten years she attended history lectures, church meetings, jazz concerts and political debates in order to delve further into African-American ideology and art. Dismayed by the absence of sculptures of famous African-American heroes such as Marcus Garvey, Harriet Tubman, Paul Robeson or John Coltrane, she proceeded to create sculptures of people from the African diaspora. Koren was commissioned by New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs' Percent for Art program to create the first public sculpture of Malcolm X for Audubon Terrace in upper Manhattan. Her life-sized bronze sculpture received the Art Commission's Award for excellence in 1996.

Classical art is at the core of Koren's figurative works. She explains: "The classical tradition is the place where I came from, my roots."¹ *African-American Apollo I* is a life-size painted plaster interpretation of early Greek Apollo figures, a contemporary version of the Greek god of beauty, sunlight, music, poetry and art. For Koren, *African-American Apollo I* expresses history in visual form, demonstrating that we all carry history on our skins. "The Apollo body is covered with tattoos of African-American history, with pictures from slavery until today to show how humanity evolves preserving history and tradition." Apollo's headphones symbolize communication; he is connected with his environment and the universe at large.

Koren believes that beauty without content is empty. In this sculpture she has reinterpreted, redefined and borrowed from African and classical ideals the power and balance of the human being. She is committed to making the contributions of African-American culture more visible.

Using his headphones, Apollo is a part of the world while his body is isolated in its own space, raising the question of whether we are sociable people or lonely creatures living in our own private worlds. This sculpture is about finding ourselves in a new, mutable and open approach to our roots and history. Koren recasts art history from a new perspective, redefining both notions of beauty and communication, merging high art and popular imagery in a single figure that, by its very existence, expands the classical tradition to include a body not generally recognized as an integral part of it.

1. All quotes are from a telephone interview with the artist in December 2001.



Gabriel Koren
African-American Apollo I (1987); 76 x 27 x 27"
painted plaster
courtesy artist

Obliterating Venus: Yayoi Kusama's Personal Appropriation

Yayoi Kusama is an "obsessional" artist.¹ Now 73, she has lived in a Tokyo psychiatric hospital for the past twenty years. Associated with many "isms" and movements, among them pop, op, Fluxus, abstract expressionism and minimalism, Kusama defies categorization. She fled Japan and arrived in New York in 1958 at the age of 29. At various times surrounded by a circle of artists including Joseph Cornell, Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, Kusama adamantly insists that she received little if any influence or mentoring from the art world. "Warhol's repetitions came from me — But my repetitions came from my childhood."² Kusama's work is the conscious expression of internal experience. Since the age of ten she has suffered recurring visions of polka-dots, infinity nets (their rough inverse), and flowers. In the 1960s she and her assistants covered naked bodies with dots and nets in happenings she called *Body Festivals* and *Anatomic Explosions*.

Since the 1960s Kusama has produced work at a rapid and consistent rate, a result of the compulsive nature of her illness. She has also owned and operated a fashion boutique, produced, directed and starred in numerous videos and films, written six novels, and operated The Church of Self-Obliteration from her Soho loft.³ She represented Japan at the 1993 Venice Biennale. A resurgence of interest in Kusama's work is evidenced in recent exhibitions at The Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh (1996), and "Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968" organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Japan Foundation in collaboration with The Museum of Modern Art in 1998.

It is the overwhelming nature of Kusama's illness that pushed the artist from traditional two- and three-dimensional forms into full room installations incorporating mirrors, sound, and performance. "By translating hallucinations and fear into paintings, I have been trying to cure my disease."⁴ The end effect is an infinite dimension of decoration that acts as a cohesive element in a volatile and unstable psychic world.

Kusama's fetishistic treatment of objects is enhanced by the introduction of issues of "self" and "other," repetition and serialization of object and images, obscuring the mythic qualities embedded in the classical tradition. In her attempt to "self-obliterate," she has established her own distinctly haunting artistic identity.

The Venus de Milo, a stable and recognizable icon in the canon of western art history, is a relatively new subject for Kusama, perhaps a response to the ephemeral nature of her early works and a desire for an image of stability. Venus remains detached and unemotional, free of any immediate relationship with the present. Kusama's Venus is both immediately recognizable and forever strange. While the artist has traditionally inserted herself into the center of the action, she has in this case chosen to appropriate an image from our cultural landscape, focusing her quest for obliteration onto art history itself.

¹ Kusama has been clinically diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder, a psychiatric condition characterized in part by recurring visions and hallucinations. See Grady Turner, "Yayoi Kusama," *Bomb*, Winter 1999. ² Monty DiPietro, "Yayoi Kusama," *Assembly Language: Tokyo Avant-garde Culture and Japanese Contemporary Art* (1999) <http://www.assemblylanguage.com> ³ For example, Kusama officiated at the 1968 wedding of two gay men in her so-called Church of Self-Obliteration. Operated out her Soho loft, the church also baptized participants in polka dots painted by the artist. ⁴ Grady Turner, "Yayoi Kusama," *Bomb*, Winter 1999.



Yayoi Kusama
Nets and Venus (1997); 23.625 x 11 x 11.75"
painted plaster
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery

Infinity Nets (1997); 28.625 x 23.675"
acrylic on canvas
courtesy Robert Miller Gallery

Allan McCollum's *The Dog from Pompei*: A Mundane Link to the Classical Past

Allan McCollum's *The Dog from Pompei* cast series, begun in 1990, was made from a mold of the plaster cast of the chained dog in the collection of the Museo Vesuviano in Italy. The original natural mold of the dog, smothered in volcanic ash during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE, was destroyed in the process of producing the cast. McCollum chose 'Pompei' — not 'Pompeii', the old spelling — for the title because he obtained the cast dog in present-day Pompei.¹

The history of American art museums before 1900 is almost entirely a history of collections of casts and reproductions.² But as the American economy grew, museums began to replace casts with originals from Europe and attributed to them an aura of cultural value and power. What makes this cast unusual is that there was no original sculpture of the dog, only the mold of an actual dog. Thus this cast, based on its relationship to a once live model, is closer to life than most. McCollum's casts suggest that the authenticity of the past can be captured without any loss by duplicating it. McCollum's casts also convey an essential quality of the modern condition in an epoch of mass production. He observes:

*We live in a world filled with substitutions for things that are absent since every copy, in a certain sense, only exists because the original is gone. So copies are always about something that's absent, and in that way, they carry a sense of mourning, death or loss. This is one way to look at our environment — maybe a particularly psychoanalytic way.*³

In addition to challenging the authenticity of the original, McCollum's cast dogs challenge mythology as the only source of classical works. McCollum's *The Dog from Pompei* provides a direct link to the classical past without reference to a grand mythology of gods or goddesses. Rather, we have the repeated image of a miserable dead dog of the real past. McCollum explains: "I determined that I wanted to make an object that offered a connectedness to the deep past. I also determined that it had to be something that wasn't connected to any specific culture."⁴

McCollum's *The Dog from Pompei* evokes the deep past of reality, a reality far from the ideal world of heroic grandeur. Through the painful posture of the animal we see not only the death of the dog, we face the subject of real life and real death, the eternal subject of human history. These cast dogs, directly linked to classical history, are accessible to anyone, regardless of age, gender, or nationality. After all, the subject is not one of the great treasures of privileged, erudite classes, but an ordinary part of everyday life. McCollum's natural mythology, derived from life experience, brings us face to face with our mortality.

Through *The Dog from Pompei*, Allan McCollum provides an alternative link to the past. And instead of the imputed authenticity of the original, the cast multiples convey an essential condition of life and of our time. Surprisingly, these casts may prompt the same depth of emotion as original classical works, however we define them.

¹. Thomas Lawson, *Allan McCollum*, (Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996), p.13. ². Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p.39. ³. Lawson, p.3. ⁴. Lawson, p.13.



Allan McCollum
The Dog from Pompeii (1991); 21 x 21"
polymer modified hydrocal cast
courtesy artist

Concentrating on Air: Melissa McGill's Instances (The Three Graces)

After finishing art school, Melissa McGill spent two years traveling extensively through Europe and looking at classical and neo-classical art. Responding to the extraordinary abilities of certain artists to translate fleeting actions and emotions into solid materials, she began to concentrate on the intangible aspects of art, the open spaces incorporated into some well-known works of the past.

Striving to invert the classical tradition, she considers the folds in classical drapery to be a universal image, but not one that is fully examined by most artists.¹ For one of her pieces, entitled *The Shadow of Ecstasy* (2001), she projected a photograph of Bernini's *Saint Theresa in Ecstasy* (1645–52) onto a wall, drew its outlines, and then mapped them in shiny black rubber that appears to flow with its own energy. She explains this work in terms of "refolding the classics."

The Three Graces, immortalized by Botticelli and others, were minor Greek goddesses, the daughters of Zeus and Hera. Attendants of Aphrodite, Aglaea, Euphrosyne, and Thalia were renowned as symbols of youth and beauty.² McGill points out that their names have been variously translated as "sound, light, brilliance, joy, and bloom," all intangibles. According to McGill, Greek mythology does not describe the three sisters in any physical detail. It was partly this lack of information that drew her to them.

In the early 1800s, Antonio Canova followed the classical tradition and depicted *The Three Graces* in marble. The three nude sisters, their hair elegantly coiffed, their arms warmly wrapped around each other and their sexuality strategically hidden by a single continuous length of drapery, stand with their upper bodies close together. Below their waists, the distances between their figures grow.

In *Instances (The Three Graces)* McGill chose to explore "the negative space between Canova's figures." Using her own body and that of a friend, she approximated the measurements of Canova's empty spaces. She used black blown glass, suspended in mid-air on rods, to shape the air between the figures and to express the idea that their beauty can not be defined by or contained in stone.

In defining the intangible, McGill has created what she calls a "liquid-looking, sensual" piece about the absence of ideal bodies, the perfect foil against which viewers may contemplate their own twenty-first century definitions of beauty, sensuality, and perfection. Her use of rounded, shiny, and highly reflective black glass allows the viewer to envision the three figures inversely, in bodily form, as curvaceous, lively, and engaging creatures.

The absence of bodies allows us to experience McGill's piece as both a derivation of Canova's work and as an independent reflection on the classical image of these three linked figures. McGill invites us, as viewers, to visualize the three goddesses both on our own terms and on hers. She intends for us to pay particular attention to the reflection of light from the black glass she has shaped. Discussing art and time, McGill observed that "everything changes all the time." This includes the nature of human reflection on our self-image, as well as its projection on the classical tradition.

¹ All quotes are taken from two interviews with the artist in December 2001 and January 2002. ² See, for example, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Dictionary of Women in Religious Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 155.



Melissa McGill
Instances (The Three Graces) (1996); various dimensions
blown glass, metal rods on pedestal
courtesy CRG Gallery



Antonio Canova
The Three Graces (1814–17)
68 x 38.27 x 22.5"; marble
London, Victoria and Albert Museum
photo courtesy Victoria and Albert
Museum/Art Resource, NY

In the Middle of Things: Dennis Potami and the Classical Tradition

When I first saw Dennis Potami's *Untitled (Laocoön Project)* there was a gratifying instability about the sculpture, as it was unfinished. Not all the figural elements had been removed and the snakes were anchored by fragments. At this point the balance was unclear, the fractional struggle resided at a conceptual level, "ephemeral, transformative, ethereal."¹ Its state of incompleteness mirrored what we have of the classical tradition — fragments, the middle of things, ends, legs, torsos.

Potami is interested in points of contact — where the bodies of snake and man meet, where myth meets (re)interpretation, where the classical tradition meets postmodernism, where his own body meets the form (he cast himself in the form of Laocoön to set the scale). The layering of *Laocoön* the myth, artist cast as Laocoön, and then the removal of the body is perhaps the conceptual core of the piece. Potami calls this "casting himself into the myth and taking himself out."

It's difficult to come to this piece clean, to forget the story as told by Virgil. We expect something in the line of grief, perfection, balance, catharsis, pathos, but without the bodies we've lost our grounding. This sculpture is about our (re)education, finding the ethereal, (not the) mutable, sinuous rapture, "the mechanics of the physical, and how the snakes fit."

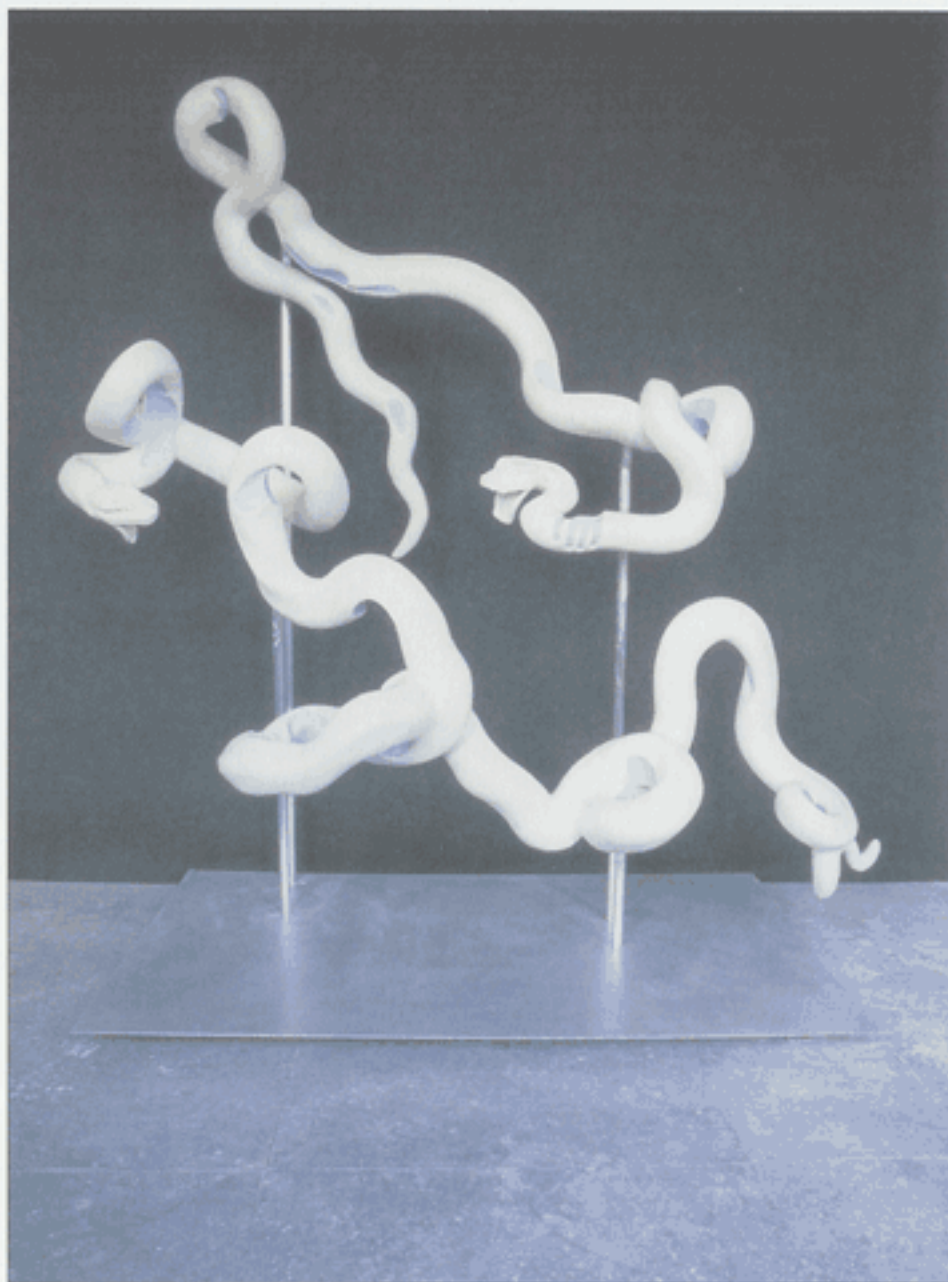
Inevitably we come to ask what Potami asks: "What is the narrative of the two snakes?... Without the bodies what are the snakes?" At some point myth diminishes, connections vanish, the tension is between snakes and surrounding space, and what we fill in is the contemporary myth, a (re)contemplation of snakes in myth and religion, the understanding of a cast self, existing in fields of space and vanishing.

Studying the classical tradition one begins to feel that an infinite dialogue began at some unidentifiable point in time and continues to spin outward, encompassing (re)vision, (re)casting and restoration. The narrative continuity of the tradition lies on our interpretation of revision. The notion of the copy is the classical tradition.

Potami's sculpture is a unique and radical transition. It adds an entirely new layer to the narrative of the *Laocoön*, one that comes at a period in history when the enterprise of (re)interpretation is the locus of authority, when the evolution of ideas is peculiarly unsettled and changing, when history is more open to interpretation than ever before. Whether this indicates a new acceptance of mutability or a simple misunderstanding of the past, the frequency with which we are (re)seeing things is increasing. Potami likes that place where different readings occur. Without the bodies the *Laocoön* grouping is decisively not about *Laocoön*, but absence is an overwhelming presence. Irony defines the middle ground.

What the snakes add is another layer of dialogue, increasing "the psychological presence, the understanding of the body," partly through the absence of the known. The work represents a modification of classical integrities. In Potami's words, "we are cast into a thing that has no conclusion;" this is not dissimilar from the evolution of the classical tradition.

1. All quotes are taken from an interview with the artist in December 2001.



Dennis Potami
Untitled (Laocoön Project) (2001); 81 x 75 x 36"
plaster, rubber
courtesy artist



Hagesandros, Polydoros,
and Athanadoros of Rhodes
Laocoön and His Sons
(date uncertain, possibly
1st century CE); 8ft; marble
Rome, Vatican Museums,
photo courtesy Vatican Museums

Judith Shea's *Apollo* as Everyman

Judith Shea's *Apollo* is less a representation of the classical, heroic god than it is a contemporary vision of everyman, the man on the street or the man on the train, and this makes it public and approachable. Consider the left arm broken at the elbow's crux, where it may have turned level or slightly upward to hold a folded coat, perhaps the overcoat folded perfectly in half, hanging behind the figure. Shea calls this "a shadow, a whisper, a ghost"¹ of the bronze, and upon careful inspection you will see that the coat is cut to fit the bronze. She also says "the overcoat is as much the *Apollo* as the *Apollo* itself."

This *Apollo* reminds us of a history that exists today largely as fragments, of insight culled from the deep that is susceptible to change and interpretation. The torso and neck are rent, and the gash feeds a sense of incompleteness. The legs end at the knees, and movement is but a slight possibility. Muscular definition is largely absent; only a faint navel grooves the stomach. There are dimples and bruises and spots that imply burial and discovery, as if this too was found packed in a millennium's layering of dirt. With the addition of the overcoat the classical tradition it evokes becomes even more mysterious in its merging of the implicit everyday existence of flaws and fashion with the imagined god who wears them with grace.

Viewed head on, *Apollo* hides its three-dimensionality; we might almost call it frail, certainly flat. The piece fills out substantially and grows heavy when viewed from the side, becoming vigorous and tough. The piece gains volume but grows more empty. As it gathers dimension it gathers narrative force, fleshed out by the historical dialogue and the created dialogue, the part of *Apollo* that is inherited myth and the part created by us. In the end it might just be that the path leads backward into the mundane presence of our own lives, where, as Shea puts it, "objects of daily life — some of which are treasures and some of which are junk — all get buried together."

Paula Marincola argues that Shea's model of art is "an inclusive, referential, quasi-figurative, tradition-conscious one," and furthermore that this might be "characterized as matriarchal."² Certainly, between the fact of bronze and the yield of cloth and the play of voids and distance — juxtapositions that challenge our desire for direct interpretation of pairings and dichotomies — we experience the piece both intuitively and intellectually, in the manner of balance, as Marincola suggests. Shea's *Apollo* insists on a subjective emphasis on spirit, or spiritual possibility — those shadow/ghosts — as the balance of bronze and cloth prompts the "instinct that it is going to be something." Like the classical tradition itself, it exists in a state of eternal becoming.

¹ All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are taken from an interview with the artist, January 2002. ² Paula Marincola, "Judith Shea's Contemporary Kore," *Artforum*, Summer 1990, p. 135.



Judith Shea
Apollo (1989); 69 x 22 x 17"
bronze, cloth coat, cast stone base
courtesy artist

Check List

1. RON BARON

Doin' the Dishes: Anniversary Cup (2002); 25.25 x 15.5 x 13"; collected dishes, crockery; courtesy artist; photo courtesy artist

2. MURIEL CASTANIS

Gorgeous (1993); 69.5 x 22 x 27"; cloth and epoxy; courtesy artist; photo courtesy O.K. Harris Works of Art

Sexy Too (1993); 68 x 22 x 22"; cloth and epoxy; courtesy artist; photo courtesy O.K. Harris Works of Art

3. AUDREY FLACK

American Athena (1989); 37.75 x 13.5 x 16"; patinated and gilded bronze; courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York; photo courtesy Louis K. Meisel Gallery (photo: Steven Lopez)

4. GABRIEL KOREN

African-American Apollo I (1987); 76 x 27 x 27"; painted plaster; courtesy artist; photo courtesy artist

5. YAYOI KUSAMA

Nets and Venus (1997); 23.625 x 11 x 11.75"; painted plaster; courtesy Robert Miller Gallery; photo courtesy Robert Miller Gallery

Infinity Nets (1997); 28.625 x 23.875"; acrylic on canvas; courtesy Robert Miller Gallery; photo courtesy Robert Miller Gallery

6. ALLAN McCOLLUM

The Dog from Pompei (1991); four casts 21 x 21" each; polymer modified hydrocal casts; courtesy artist; photo courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery

7. MELISSA MCGILL

Instances (The Three Graces) (1996); various dimensions; blown glass, metal rods on pedestal; courtesy CRG Gallery; photo courtesy artist

8. DENNIS POTAMI

Untitled (Laocoön Project) (2001); 81 x 75 x 36"; plaster, rubber; courtesy artist; photo courtesy artist

9. JUDITH SHEA

Apollo (1989); 69 x 22 x 17"; bronze, cloth coat, cast stone base; courtesy artist; photo courtesy artist

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