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So To Speak

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So to Speak

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Heather Grace Boyle

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2004

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Abstract

Ideas drive my practice. By selecting materials that most elegantly (neatly and effectively) convey my ideas and the processes needed to see those ideas through, I make objects that are metaphorical, poetic, and still. Though thematically variegated, content that reappears in my work includes the implications of the passage of time, both absence and presence, loss, and struggle. The mediums I use are different. Carving stone and assemblage are opposing methods, one reductive, one additive, both time intensive. Modeling clay for me is the perfect foil to the aforementioned modes of making. I move fluidly with clay. It is more spontaneous and an ideal material for capturing gestures representative of human emotion that I imbue in my figures and figural fragments. I also make assemblages by sculpting objects, then pairing them with repurposed counterparts. The resulting pieces are imaginative and multi layered. They are meant to encourage further questioning.

Introduction

My carvings and assemblages, primarily using marble, clay, and wood, include classical, modern, and contemporary influences. To me, the combination of these materials and movements exemplifies concepts of opposites and struggles. The materials also lend themselves to processes that enable mindful meditation upon stillness. The poetic and symbolic qualities of the objects I make and choose support these ideas. I also ruminate on the reality of time I've personally lost due to chronic illness. My awareness of each day of life that passes is heightened because of this loss. These are sobering thoughts, but I temper the somberness with intuition and humor in the work. I endeavor to foster further questioning of my work through magical absurdity, wittiness, and ambiguous meanings.



Figure 1.
Michelangelo, *The Atlas*, circa 1530-34.
marble, 9ft

Carving

Stone carving is a method of sculpting that I employ regularly in my practice. It is an ancient means of creation. Though marble is a beautiful, even elite material, the act of stone carving is not so glamorous. Michelangelo said, "If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful at all."¹ It is monotonous and frequently boring, almost ridiculously so, and one that tallies up the hours. It is also

¹"Michelangelo." Date accessed February 24, 2023. <https://Michelangelo.org>

hard on the body. Physical exertion is part of the process, as are bruises, scrapes, and hitting my hand with my mallet if I miss the end of the chisel. I don't grate my knuckles on the stone or miss hitting the chisel much any more, but it took years upon years to become proficient. I have a significant time investment in building these skills.

Marble, a metamorphic rock, is limestone that has been transformed by heat, pressure, and time into a lattice of interlocking calcite crystals². It is, by its very nature, transformative. It is fitting that I carve to reveal a form from the stone, disguising the natural state of marble by making it look like something else. I follow in a long line of sculptors who have done the same. Unlike Michelangelo's slave statues (figure 1), whose popularity is due in part to their unfinished nature³, my carvings are completely sculpted into other forms.

The weight of the history of stone sculpting is hard to contend with. Trying to divest new work of stone sculpture's visual history is limited as I work to push against the parameters of the historical implications of stone carving.

As with any material, some characteristics are inescapable and germane to the material that make it technically challenging with which to work; "...likewise,



Figure 2. Milena Naef, *Fleeting Parts*, 2016. Cristallina marble, MDF, plaster, dimensions variable

²Hobart M King. "Marble." Date accessed February 24, 2023. <https://geology.com/rocks/marble.shtml>

³"Michelangelo's Prisoners or Slaves." Date accessed February 24, 2023. <https://www.accademia.org/explore-museum/artworks/michelangelos-prisoners-slaves/>

stone carving demands a cognitive sense of proportion, balance and scale, the ability to interpret possibilities and limitations of a particular stone and technical tool skills.”⁴ Although stone sculpture is an old tradition, there are artists using marble in interestingly novel ways. Milena Naef uses stone in a more performance based way. In her “Fleeting parts” series (figure 2), she carves holes into slabs of marble that are fitted to parts of her body⁵.

Sometimes when I carve, I am deeply reflecting on my life. Other times, I fall into a zone of intense focus with really no thoughts other than what part of the stone I’m going to remove next and how to do so. This is where planning comes in.

The nature of working with marble requires a good



Figure 4. *Sehnsucht II*, 2021. ceramic, acrylic case, paint, 40 x 12 x 12 in

deal of planning. Blocks

are relatively expensive to buy, ship, and move. Marble is also unpredictable. Forethought becomes necessary so I waste as little material as possible.

Modeling

As much as I lean into marble carving, modeling clay affords me a freedom and is a counterpart to the structure and anxiety of stone carving. Like marble, clay has been



Figure 3. Antony Gormley, *Pile 1*. 2017. clay, 37.4 x 73.5 x 69.7 cm

⁴Joanne M Anderson. “All about the art and science of Stone Carving.” *Masonry Magazine*, March 29, 2018.

<https://www.masonrymagazine.com/blog/2018/03/29/all-about-the-art-and-science-of-stone-carving/>

⁵Ariela Gittlen. “7 Artists Smashing Our Expectations of What Marble Can Be.” *Artsy*, July 25, 2018.

used in art for a long time. In a conversation with James Putnam, Antony Gormley calls clay an “inherently democratic” material because of its availability and abundance⁶. Throughout history, clay has been lower on the fine art materials hierarchy until the last hundred years⁷. Gormley’s clay works are described as follows: “the dead weight of individual lumps of clay is used as a means of construction to consider a relationship between parts and whole. The body here is seen as a transposition of matter from the earth below to above the ground, exposed in space.”⁸



Figure 5. *Fulcrum*, (detail), 2022. Ceramic, recycled Carrara marble slab, milk crates, paint wood, 55 x 44 x 13 in



Figure 6. Auguste Rodin, *Triton and Nereid*, c. 1893 Terracotta, Height 16 1/4 in.

(Figure 3)

While Gormley constructs with clay, My works *Sehnsucht II* and *Fulcrum*, (figures 4, 5), demonstrate other ways of working with this medium. In the piece *Sehnsucht II*, I modeled a human head very quickly. The spontaneity with which I worked is apparent in the swipes in the clay

⁶Petra Lange-Berndt. 2015. *Materiality*. London, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery, the MIT Press.

⁷Petra Lange-Berndt, . 2015. *Materiality*. London, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery, the MIT Press.

⁸Martin Caiger-Smith, 2019. *Antony Gormley*. London: Royal Academy of Arts.

made by my hands, traces of my fingerprints, and the loose gesture of the piece. The expression on the face captures a feeling of intense yearning using few details. It is placed on the floor, inside the bottom of a clear pedestal. Empty space is as much a part of this piece as the physical components. The clay component in the assemblage *Fulcrum* demonstrates a greater time investment. More attention was given to modeling the hands, making the clay element more refined.

The emphasis on gesture in my clay sculptures is akin to Rodin's sculptures. Also working with figural fragments, Rodin was able to capture so much feeling and movement through a seemingly unbound handling of clay. A description of the piece *Triton and Nereid* (figure 6), states, "The fragment, which subsumes the notion of fragmentation, emerges as Rodin's one great stylistic trait, enabling access to the nucleus of his artistic enterprise. It features the talent of making, quest of conception, and theme of the narrative experience, each as a potential partial element within a completely defined but not fully described whole of sculpture."⁹ In using figural fragments, I too capture strong emotive qualities by distilling the parts down to the essential details.

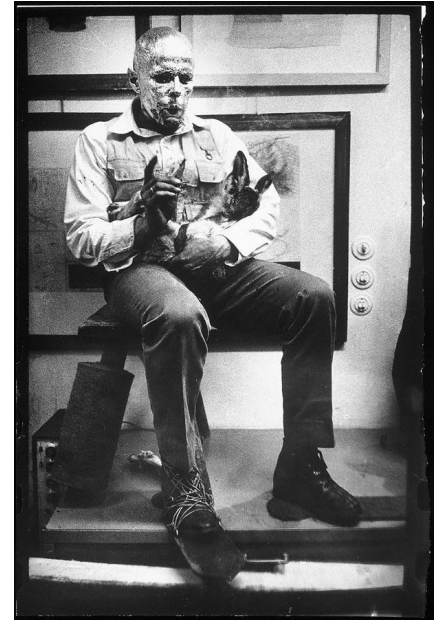


Figure 7. Joseph Beuys, *How To Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965. Assemblage, Performance.

⁹Crone, Rainer. 1997. Rodin: *Eros and Creativity*. New York: Prestel.



Figure 8. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (elemental sculpture)*, ca. 1953. Bricks, Steel spike, Mortar, Metal Rod, Concrete

Assemblage

Though my process often heavily involves planning, at the other end is a deeply intuitive mode of operating. I work from opposite directions to realize an idea, especially in my assemblages. Joseph Beuys utilized both process and intuition in his practice; he “posited that the activity of sculpting was an expression of our transformative power to change materials from a condition of chaotic fluidity to ordered form, mirroring processes that permeate nature and are an expression of its living energy.”¹⁰ I relate this to the way I transform the materials I

use.

Process was thematically prominent in his works as was an intense reliance on his use of intuition. “‘Even a dead animal’, Beuys mused in a statement on his Action, ‘preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality.’”¹¹ *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (Figure 7) stimulates imagination in the audience. In this performance, Beuys covered his head with honey

¹⁰Allan Antliff. 2014. *Joseph Beuys*. London: Phaidon Press.

¹¹Allan Antliff. 2014. *Joseph Beuys*. London: Phaidon Press.



Figure 9. *Abacus*, 2023.
Found and Recycled wood,
glass beads, Gold leaf,
69 x 16 x 44 in.

and gold leaf. He affixed felt to his left foot and an iron sole to his right foot. For three hours, he whispered audibly to the carcass of a hare, while being photographed and filmed, thus, “transcending the rational ‘in favor of mystery or questioning.’” The resulting content stems from uncertainty.¹²

I manifest my intuitive sense of object making and my love for objects in assemblages. The repurposed objects that catch my attention and pique my curiosity typically imply

some level of wear. When I consider my practice, my choices, and the art that is created, my thoughts turn to Robert Rauschenberg who championed materiality and process in his work. He was a predecessor of the *Arte Povera* movement, a term coined by the Italian critic Germano Celant in 1967. It was “a movement in which artists used conventionally non-artistic, or ‘poor’ materials and emphasized process.”¹³ *Rauschenberg’s*



Figure 10. 34, 2022.
Church Pew, Bianco P marble,
41 x 88 x 16 in.

¹²Allan Antliff. 2014. *Joseph Beuys*. London: Phaidon Press.

¹³Jacqueline Samy. “Rock paper scissors: materiality, process, society.” Date accessed November 22, 2022.

http://shuffle.rauschenbergfoundation.org/exhibitions/nasher/essays/Samy_rock-paper-scissors



Figure 11. Maurizio Cattelan, *L.O.V.E.*, 2010. Carrara marble, 36 ft.

Untitled (Elemental sculpture) (figure 8) is one of nineteen small works utilizing stone, bricks, concrete, and other urban construction materials that he “scavenged from various construction sites around his Fulton Street studio.”¹⁴

My sculpture *Abacus*, (figure 9) which is shaped like a pedal harp, calls to mind some of the tenets of *Arte Povera*. It is constructed from old discarded wooden bed posts that I found in a dumpster, castoff pieces of wood that I collected,

and a cross section of a tree trunk that fell down in a hurricane. It diverges from the *Arte Povera* principles in that I added glass beads that look like soap bubbles as the counting elements of my abacus, making the piece magical, like something out of a dream.

Another one of my assemblages, *34*, takes a more humorous turn. I carved a piece of Bianco P marble into the form of a Whoopee Cushion, one-third scale, which I placed on a church pew.

(figure 10). The carving shows little evidence of



Figure 12. *Then and Now and Then*, 2022. Statuario marble, chains, clock weights, overall dimensions variable.

¹⁴Jacqueline Samy. “Rock paper scissors: materiality, process, society.” Date accessed November 22, 2022.

http://shuffle.rauschenbergfoundation.org/exhibitions/nasher/essays/Samy_rock-paper-scissors

“stoneness”, with only the inescapable deposit of minerals appearing here and there. The resulting absurdity inherent in this assemblage is meant to contrast the seriousness of marble with the humorous idea of farting in church. It is also suggestive of a performance, in which the audience imagines the inappropriate sound of farting in such a serious environment. Another suggestion of performance is how the audience might imagine what it feels like to sit on a Whoopee Cushion carved from a rock. This has sexual connotations because of the thought of the rigidity of the stone pressing against the soft flesh of a buttocks.

While marble is a medium used frequently in classical sculpture, this assemblage splits from historically revered sculptural forms. Maurizio Cattelan’s *L.O.V.E.* (figure 11), is a monumental scale marble hand with the fingers cut off, middle finger extended. Like Cattelan’s irreverent sculptures, *34* is mischievous. Cattelan uses playfulness to broach sensitive topics. His bold visual statements can sometimes lend themselves to the absurd.¹⁵ In *34*, not only have I carved a kitsch object in stone, but I am also expanding on the traditional use of marble in a religious context. Additionally, I’m exercising my inclination to use scale differences to a ridiculous and humorous end.

Time, Absence, and Loss

Themes in my work vary, but time is a subject that has a heavy presence in my practice. Feelings of being pinned between having lost time to chronic illness in my

¹⁵Gareth Harris. “Maurizio Cattelan: ‘Life Is Often Tragic and Comedic at the Same Time’.” *The Art Newspaper*. November 30, 2021, <https://theartnewspaper.com/2021/11/30/maurizio-cattelan-interview-mi-ami-beach>

younger years and navigating a deep emotional response to middle age have catalyzed my recent works. *Then and Now and Then* (figure 12) communicates to me about these feelings. This sculpture



Figure 13. Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1997. Wall clocks, Clock diameter 13 1/2 in

is a carved marble cuckoo clock with exaggerated lengths of heavy rusted chains. The non-functionality of *Then and Now and Then* is enhanced by the scale distortion of the attached chains, which terminate in the weights that typically would drive a cuckoo clock and the idea that time has been frozen, or turned to stone. In this piece, I contemplate being bound to the metaphorical weight of time. Another consideration suggesting the inability to know what time it is, specifically in life, is the omission of hands on the clock face and smeared graphite numerals.

Losses, including loss of time, is also prevalent in the art of Félix González-Torres. Upon learning of his lover’s AIDS diagnosis that would eventually be life-ending, González-Torres created



Figure 14, Horizon, 2022. Grandfather clock, 14 x 72 x 9in.

¹⁶Alex Greenberger. “How Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s unabashedly political art lent minimalism a new context”. *Art in America*, May 6, 2021. <https://www.artnews.com/feature/who-was-felix-gonzalez-torres-why-was-he-important-1234592006/>

“Untitled” (*Perfect Lovers*) (figure 13).¹⁶

This work, which he says was the most difficult for him to make, is a meditation on time.¹⁷ An impending loss as the batteries powering the synchronized clocks fail at different rates forms the content of the work. They can be reset at any time, suggesting seasons, cycles of death and life.

Horizon (figure 14), addresses the topics of death of time and one’s own time expiring. By making the decision to hang the hand-me-down grandfather clock



Figure 15. Doris Salcedo, *La Casa Viuda VI*, 1995. Wooden doors, steel chair, bone. Three parts: 74 7/8 x 39 x 18 1/2in; 62 7/8 x 47 x 22in; 62 1/2 x 38 x 18 1/2in

horizontally on the wall, I created an assisted readymade. Like Marcel Duchamp’s assisted readymade *Bicycle Wheel*, it is an idea driven, conceptual piece. The title *Horizon* implies the rising and setting of the sun, which symbolically points to death and rebirth. I have also necessarily taken away the function of the clock. Allan McCollum in his work and essay both titled *Perfect Vehicles* states, “In extinguishing absolutely the possibility of any recourse of utility, I mean to accelerate the symbolic potential of *Vehicles* toward total meaning, total value. I aim to fashion the most perfect art object possible.”¹⁸ *Horizon* is an economical piece, allowing no superfluity, only the singular

¹⁷Alex Greenberger. “How Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s unabashedly political art lent minimalism a new context”. *Art in America*, May 6, 2021.

<https://www.artnews.com/feature/who-was-felix-gonzalez-torres-why-was-he-important-1234592006/>

¹⁸Antony Hudek. *The Object*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, Cambridge: The MIT press, 2014.



Figure 16. *So To Speak*, 2021. West Rutland Grey marble, Antique writing desk, 56 x 27 x 26in

object. This is part of its power.

“Losses, disappearances and absences are invoked constantly in Gonzales-Torres’s art. ‘His is an art of blank spaces and things left unsaid,’ curator Amanda Cruz once wrote.”¹⁹ Likewise, many of my assemblages and sculptures are open ended. The pieces in Doris Salcedo’s *La Casa Viuda* (*Widowed House*) series (figure

15), share elements similar to my work. She

frequently uses furniture pieces without the presence of human figures. *So to Speak* (figure 16) consists of an empty antique writing desk and a carved marble cloud-like form. Combining only two elements lends ambiguity and mystery to the piece, meant to prompt further thought. Aesthetic parallels between Salcedo’s work and mine are apparent; we both use commonplace objects in empty spaces to indicate isolation and absence. “Salcedo concretizes absence, oppression, and the gap between the disempowered and powerful”²⁰, and I employ less specificity. Despite having differing content, they lead to similar emotions because of the commonality of emptiness.

¹⁹Alex Greenberger. “How Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s unabashedly political art lent minimalism a new context”. *Art in America*, May 6, 2021.

<https://www.artnews.com/feature/who-was-felix-gonzalez-torres-why-was-he-important-1234592006/>

²⁰“Doris Salcedo.” Date accessed February 24, 2023. <https://art21.org/artist/doris-salcedo/>

Conclusion

Forcing opposites together plays a critical role in my practice. It is essential to creating exciting and curious relationships in my work. Like bookends, Classical and Contemporary are opposing influences I draw from. When working with clay versus marble, I use totally different processes. Modeling clay is intuitive for me, carving marble requires intensive planning, as does the way I construct with wood. Combining elements in my assemblages is also intuitive. Other examples of opposites in my practice include the use of low and high materials and objects, found versus made objects, permanence in mediums versus mediums that are more susceptible to the effects of time.

I am an object maker. With my inspiration largely sourced internally from my perspective on existence, I use divergent means of making to see my ideas to fruition. My work is a hybridization of opposing materials, methods, art movement influences and emotions. The resulting art falls somewhere between melancholy and humor, touched with a little bit of magic. My intention is not to replicate what already exists, but rather pull from my imagination to create work to be thought about, felt, questioned, and ultimately transport the viewer to other realms of experience.

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Artist Statement

Sifting through experiences of my engagement with the world, I find the subject matter I am most drawn to are the nuances of both presence and absence, loss, the passage of time, and the humor and melancholy that often intersect each other in life. Though my favorite material to use remains stone, chiefly marble, I utilize a broad array of materials in my sculpture practice. I blend commonplace and elite materials. Also, I use imagery combinations that incorporate the mundane and extraordinary. These assemblages depict quiet, enigmatic worlds, where sadness and humor parallel each other. Inherently layered, each piece provides room for exploration. I aim to push the viewer to wonder with every decision I make.

Echoing the efficiency of some of my assemblages, much of my figural work lacks detail. Generally, I make figural fragments that are unresolved, estimations of the human figure, to be completed in the viewers' imaginations. Aesthetic economy, unexpected scale variations and an investigation of objects in space are tools I employ to achieve my end: a work of art that asks the audience to feel, to think, to question.

Vita

H. Grace Boyle was born, raised, and educated in New Orleans. She graduated with a BA in chemistry from the University of New Orleans in 2004. After a hiatus, she returned to UNO to earn her Master of Fine Arts degree in Studio Art. Her concentration is in sculpture.