

Against the Grain.

A response to - Some Thoughts about Richard Serra & Martin Puryear.
(Part 2: Puryear).

John Yau. Hyperallergic online Arts Journal. New York. November 16, 2014.

I first encountered the work of Martin Puryear when he represented America at the 2019 Venice Art Biennale. Approaching the domed neoclassical American pavilion through the Jasmin-scented and leaf-covered Giardini, the first glimpse of Puryear's work was a monumental wooden curved lattice structure taller than the single storied building's arch and pediment facade, converging on a mysterious black snakelike form that seemed completely abstract. Titled 'Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)' and intentionally echoing the domed building that was inspired by Thomas Jefferson's neo-classical palatial home 'Monticello', Charlottesville, Virginia, this took up almost the entire forecourt area. With a steady movement of visitors entering the door to the left and with my empathy levels already quite low that morning, this seemed almost like the elephant in the room so to speak, so I ventured inside to see the rest of the exhibition first. But my empathy was quickly restored and I revisited the entire exhibition a number of times which resonated with me long afterwards.

Writing for Hyperallergic,¹ (voted among the 15 best art websites for current art world news and reviews by Timeout), John Yau has written two essays back to back on the work of Richard Serra (part 1), and Martin Puryear (Part 2). While both artists are almost polar opposites, Yau treats each artist separately and then uses these radically opposing practices to helpfully situate them to the reader. The first claim that the author makes is that Puryear, unlike Serra, refused to align with the artistic practices and aesthetic of his day during the minimalist explosion in the 60's and 70's. Instead, Yau describes Puryear as being exceptional by having workmanlike reticence, rejecting minimalist values in favour of skilfully making his own work, Quoting an article in New York Times Magazine, Puryear described his response to Minimalism:

"I never did Minimalist art. I never did, but I got real close....
I looked at it, I tasted it and I spat it out. I said, this is not for me. I'm a worker. I'm not somebody who's happy to

¹ <https://hyperallergic.com/162494/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-2-puryear/>

let my work be made for me and I'll pass on it, yes or no, after it's done. I could never do that."²

Yau goes on to say that Puryear negotiated this aesthetic landscape deftly, and was aware of the Black Arts movement where the personal individual experiences of 'I' (the artist or poet) spoke for a collective 'we' (black African Americans).³ According to Yau, Puryear eschewed being typecast into being a political artist which he supports by quoting Robert Storr, in his 1991 essay, *Martin Puryear: The Hand's Proportion*:

"Of major sculptors active today, Puryear is, in fact, exceptional in the extremes to which he goes to remove the personal narrative from the aura of his pieces. Nevertheless, he succeeds in charging them with an intense and palpable necessity born of his absolute authority over and assiduous involvement in their execution. The desire for anonymity is akin to that of the traditional craftsman whose private identity is subsumed in the realised identity of his creations rather than being consumed in the pyrotechnic drama of the artistic ego."⁴

Yau contextualises the significance of this stance against an historical backdrop of the Black Arts movement that began in 1965 with LeRoi Jones in Harlem, after the assassination of Malcolm X. He also references this being a time of cultural and social change, with war, assassinations, feminism, and race riots, along with the artistic genres of pop-art, land art, colour field painting, painterly realism and minimalism.

Philosophically, he situates Puryear against the pop-art of Andy Warhol, who he quotes "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." And also with the work of Frank Stella who said "What you see is what you see."⁵ In contrast, Yau discusses Puryear's poetic use of craft and skill to instil the unspoken history and cultural meta-narratives of those whose voices have been silenced by history. Referencing works such as 'Self' (1978), which Neal Benezra describes as "'The Thing Shines, Not the Maker'⁶ and 'Ladder For Booker T. Washington'. This later work refers to a bi-racial and complex character in American history, who founded a school for African Americans after the American Civil War but who also assisted in the massacre of native American 1st nation people. Yau uses this to say that while remaining anonymous in his work, Puryear addresses a 'We' in his work as being a broad ethnicity through African American history, and these narratives can often be conflicting and unresolved.⁷

Also in contrast to the fixed monumental minimalist formalism of his time that often responded site-specifically and was synonymous with permanence, ownership and power, Yau sites Puryear's work as nomadic, transportable, often incorporating wheels and ideas of movability. He also says that while appearing to borrow from

² Michael Brenson's article, "Maverick Sculptor Makes Good" *New York Times Magazine*, November 1, 1987

³ <https://hyperallergic.com/162494/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-2-puryear/>

⁴ <https://hyperallergic.com/162494/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-2-puryear/>

⁵ <https://hyperallergic.com/162494/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-2-puryear/>

⁶ <https://hyperallergic.com/162494/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-2-puryear/>

⁷ <https://hyperallergic.com/162494/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-2-puryear/>

minimalist forms, Puryear employs the irony of these being hand made and also uses visual illusion to describe forced perspectives or simple mass and volumes with a hidden secret interior to be discovered by the viewer. Here, he contextualises Puryear's use of illusion against what Rosalind Krauss called Serra's highest achievement, "strip[ping] the work of art of all possible illusionism."⁸

To situate Puryear against early postmodern theory, In her 1979 essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field,'⁹ Krauss provided a theoretical framework for formalist minimalism to reject representation and skill as fallacies. She also reduces sculpture to being merely "commemorative representation", where historicity is used as a normalising tool by the viewer. But Puryear's work is situated in the opposite direction to these ideas and in summing up, Yau describes Puryear's work as a challenge to the status quo of the stability of sculpture, of ownership and of colonialism. Using craft and skill as a form of cultural memory to address themes of immigration, displacement, and the cultural trauma of our shared histories. In this sense, Yau correctly describes Puryear's historicity as being agonistic and unresolved.

Speaking of cultural trauma and returning to Venice in 2019 to compare Puryear with the work of another important contemporary artist, Edmund Du Waal showed two large offsite installations 'Library of Exile' and 'Psalm'. These were based around ideas of creating a library of banned books whose authors were exiled for various political or cultural reasons, as well as loosely recalling broken and repaired domestic or ceremonial porcelain vessels in the Japanese style of 'Kintsugi' and gold leaf. These installations explored historical themes of war, damage and finding agency through the act of repair. (Agency is a key word here which I will return to). In an interview with social activist and artist Theaster Gates, de Waal says "You can't erase damage, but you can show the fault line."¹⁰ Both artists shared an interest in "where an artist chooses to have agency" (EdW), and of the architecture of knowledge, memory and libraries.

Themes of oppression, history, knowledge and memory were continued in another conversation between Puryear and Gates at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016.¹¹ Puryear applauds Gates' transformation of disadvantaged black communities in Chicago by his numerous cultural projects regenerating old properties into cultural spaces as an extension of his studio practice. He also mentions communities he spent time with in Sierra Leone, Africa, with the US Peace Corps in the 60's. In Free-Town or Liberia, Puryear lived for two formative years in communities where historically repatriated slaves settled. Erased of their native language and culture, the Mende People speak an invented language of 'Krio'. Seeing the effect of cultural displacement, here and also in Sao Paulo, Brazil, (where he was awarded the Sao Paulo Biennale 1st prize), Puryear saw 'Race' as a euphemism for where we fit in society. Puryear also talks about designing a monument of one of Chicago's founding African American forefathers - Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, and the challenge of

⁸ <https://hyperallergic.com/162490/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-1-serra/>

⁹ Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8 (1979): 31-44. Accessed April 11, 2021. doi:10.2307/778224.

¹⁰ https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2021/01/19/video-interview-artist-artist-edmund-de-waal-and-theaster-gates/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Social

¹¹ Artist Conversation: Martin Puryear and Theaster Gates•Feb 16, 2016 The Art Institute of Chicago

“how to represent truth without making a portrait”¹² While using abstracted forms, Puryear carefully returns to certain forms of representationalism in his work, which is echoed by other leading contemporary artists including Damien Hirst, Andy Goldsworthy and Marc Quinn.

Having been considered a throwback in some circles in the 60’s and 70’s, Puryear’s work seems to have come full circle and is possibly aligned with contemporary arts practice today more than ever. Since these interviews, racial clashes in Charlottesville, Virginia, and Puryear’s exhibition in Venice, racial tension and ideas of historical reparations have become a growing global cultural phenomena, accelerated by the Black Lives Matter campaign following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Across the world many sculptures of colonialist slave owning historical figures have been toppled in acts of public agency, protest and solidarity. Here we have two broad socio-political themes emerging: Colonialism and black identity politics.

Returning to the idea of agency mentioned earlier, the performative aspect of Puryear’s work not only recalls Ernst Gombrich’s idea of the ‘beholders share’¹³ and the performativity of contemporary feminist theorist Karen Barad,¹⁴ but also the agency of Hannah Arendt’s ideas around citizenship. Arendt says that the value of citizenship rest in its ability to create new forms of collective identity that can be acknowledged and transformed in a democratic, discursive way.¹⁵

While Puryear creates a new collective identity in his audience through a legacy of shared participatory experience seeing art as a verb as much as a noun, Arendt says that identity must come before political agency. That we must find our voice before being able to speak. The democratic idea of citizenship resting within the public sphere, and having agency beyond our own personal interests or histories returns us to our collective responsibilities as fellow citizens. Arendt says our active engagement gives us not only a sense of freedom but also a sense of political agency, as Thomas Jefferson said, to be “participants in government.”

Poignantly, in the central atrium space of the domed American pavilion, Puryear has placed a human proportioned fluted column in keeping with the neoclassical architecture. Precisely and brutally embedded into the top of this marble column is a large iron spike and shackle, recalling slave ownership. The piece is titled ‘ A Column for Sally Hemings’, who was a black African American slave ‘owned’ by US President Thomas Jefferson and who bore five children to him. I still have chills thinking about the significance of this particular work and the bravery of the curators to allow Puryear to explore this dark aspect of American identity.

The elephant is still very much in the room.

¹² Artist Conversation: Martin Puryear and Theaster Gates•Feb 16, 2016 The Art Institute of Chicago

¹³ Ernst Gombrich. "Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation ." Nonfiction Classics for Students. . *Encyclopedia.com*. (April 9, 2021).

¹⁴ Karen Barad. Post Humanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter: Source: Signs. Vol. 28, No. 3, Gender and Science: New Issues. Spring 2003. Pp. 801-831. University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵ d'Entrevés, Maurizio Passerin, "Hannah Arendt", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/arendt/>>.

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