

notes on looking

Contemporary Art from Los Angeles

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Sean Townley 'The Mocking Hand' at Night Gallery



Sean Townley
The Mocking Hand
Installation view

Image courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles

Walking into the gallery there is a curious flatness to the scene. Because everything is cast in the same colors, including the walls, nothing seems to approach visually. There are subtle shifts of tone, and a slight emphasis on the color black, but for the most part all is “greige.” The effect is like the light outside the gallery, in the city of Los Angeles, which lately has reverted from a period of unbelievable clarity (due to winter rains) to its more familiar hazy presence, against which one’s eyes must struggle to locate details and to find resolution. It is difficult to place oneself, in this horizonless light.

Looking like a cultural remnant, evoking pre-history *and* science fiction, *Untitled (Inverted Receiver)* stands just inside the open door, its sand covered triangular shapes twist in a warped geometry (as “...an angle which was acute, but behaves as if it were obtuse”¹), rising to a high and narrow point, then turning corners at the floor to make an open basin. Is this a baptismal font? It is filled with black liquid appearing material – looking into it I want to smell tar. Can it be designed for telling fortunes? The sandy surface has a golden sheen, and this gives it warmth. Alien looking as it is, I know it must be rooted in something human.



Sean Townley
Untitled (Inverted Receiver), 2013
Wood, fiberglass, epoxy sand and plastic
Image courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles



Sean Townley
New Foundations (study of a replica), 2013
Plastic and steel
Image courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles

Anecdotally I know that Sean Townley derives much of his imagery from Classical and Mythological statuary, or rather, that he grabs images online that other people post to *aim* at the idea of such statuary. Three pairs of boots cast in black urethane plastic are representations of an image scanned by the Smithsonian from every statue of Thomas Jefferson, as though to make an aggregate of

every impression extant of our third president. The small, low-resolution image that Townley found online has little to do with any actual representation of Jefferson's boots, it has much to do with clarifying a complete disconnect from reality. It's as though the output of digital scanning technology that scholars use to recreate a thing exactly, to, say, provide for wider distribution, becomes the thing we appreciate: the process of reproduction. My interest in the thing represented is lost in my fascination with the impression, i.e., *my* impression of Jefferson (derived as it is from stories on the Web) – as a hero, as a villain, as a symbol. Once history engages in simulacrum it loses veracity, as though made up facts belong to this made up thing.



Sean Townley

New Foundations (study of a replica), 2013 plastic and steel
Image courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles



Sean Townley

Votive #4 (Getty Aphrodite), 2013, concrete, fiberglass and steel
Image courtesy the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles

Votive #4 (Getty Aphrodite) is also sculpture based. Its existence was drawn from an earthquake massing study the Getty made of an Aphrodite statue, one the museum was forced to repatriate. Or this is one of my understandings of its origins. I also think I've been told that in the case of this repatriated Aphrodite, the Getty was researching possible orientations of a missing arm and, unfortunately, what they found was not some gaily waving goddess arm, but looked more like Venus doing a Heil Hitler. I don't know which story, if either, is true, and I am not sure that my certain knowledge matters. I think the specious legitimacy that attaches itself to images found on the Internet is more the point. I think that if you make an exact replica of an object, and place an image of this object, or of the process online, then whatever meaning it gathers is fair game. Somehow such images are set free.

It happens that this hefty goddess, stepping slightly forward with her chunky legs on her cut steel base, is graceful; she tapers slightly at her ankle, and her hips (although they sport an arm) look able to sway beguilingly were she to move.

The strange arm that gave the scholars so much trouble sticks near her waist, it is pudgy and only partly formed. Its very

imperfections cause me to relate it to something human. Like the evanescence of *Inverted Receiver* it speaks of life.

Aphrodite's upper thighs and her lower belly are dotted with black plugs of the same material that makes Jefferson's boots. This black urethane unifies all the sculptures in this front room – it fills the well of *Untitled (Inverted Receiver)*, cracked bits appear also beneath the boots like black stars or reflections in tar, and a mysterious and unreferenced sculpture, a skull cap, or brain pan sits alone in a corner of the space – it is filled with this liquid appearing urethane, too.

Angled across the high-ceiling space of the gallery is a long, narrow and slightly darkened room. This interior gallery has high walls, blocking slightly the daylight of the main space, with a narrow entry at each end; the feeling inside intimate and psychologically it relates to the chamber in the former Night Gallery that one approached through a narrow slit.



Sean Townley
The Mocking Hand
Installation view

Image courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles

Townley's vault-like *Untitled* rests in this room, the sculpture resembles a large box made of travertine, on its lid sits (or out from it rises) a bronze head. But really this is just the top portion of a skull, and there are thick, Classical curls, for this is a young man's skull. The model for this handsome artifact is a statue, an Apoxyomenos to be precise, that was "recently scanned by Croatian scholars."² In the way that rumor has of becoming part of every story, while I was looking at the gallery a friend whispered that she had been told the statue was drawn from the Adriatic sea by pirates... (Who knows where to locate romance in art, and more specifically, in this exhibition of work of Sean Townley? For I believe this artist resists romance in favor of science, and perhaps he should, because then he leaves romance up to us to find.) This skull has been split, scored as by a knife or a laser, as has the travertine surface on which it is placed. Peering down, and through these cuts, I see reflected back in my eye brass: shiny, golden, brass.



Sean Townley
 Untitled, 2013 (detail)
 Image courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles

Also present in this quiet chamber, one finds *Cradle for a Sleeping Muse*, a brass cage-like object that hangs above one's head on a demising wall. If this slender basket is a cradle, then its muse must be slight; or it could be, given the way the piece wraps the gallery wall in a kind of caress, that the Muse which is Sleeping is Night Gallery itself, or herself.

Finally, I consider the press release, which contains a quote from the English Romantic poet, Shelley:

*"A purpleal halo reveals two vast and trunkless legs, and
 tresses curling like tendrils of the parasite around a marble column.*

*Stamped with the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed,
 these lifeless things wrap thy form in a mantle of gray.*

*Once a Roman's chamber, nothing besides remains, boundless and
 bare, the light of the dying day speeded by sweet pipings.*

*The Devil, she safely can aver, has neither hoof, nor tail, nor sting,
 but a mind, a state not more unreal than the peace he could not feel,
 or the care he could not banish,*

Nought may endure but Mutability."

My knowledge of Shelley extends only so far as a rough recall of *Ozymandias*, which I detect in the "trunkless legs" but not in the

closing thought that “nought may endure...” The source for this entire quote is given as “Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Complete Poetical Works (abridged)” and wondering about the lack of specificity (and curious at what I thought were anomalies in the text) drove me to Google individual phrases. Having done so, I suspect that the artist has used an amalgamation from several poems, gathered to inform one’s consideration of his exhibition. For in this exhibition I keep stumbling over the transmission of information in sculpture – where I expect to find representation. The Romantic mess of Shelley’s purple prose in the press release warns me of what is coming, indeed it is true that nought may endure but Mutability – only change is forever, even in the text – which may be altered to suit, or simply by selective scanning. In *The Mocking Hand* I find that this mutability and a potential for re-translation extends also to the material of the object.

Sean Townley, *The Mocking Hand* is on view at Night Gallery through February 24, 2013. <http://www.nightgallery.ca/>

¹ H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Chthulhu*, 1926

² email exchange with Sean Townley, Feb 6, 2013

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