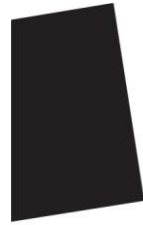


Jedediah Caesar: COMMA 23

Essay by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer



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Things forever collect in the margins and corners. Incessant accumulation seems to be a constant, especially if you are a good capitalist consumer. Clutter builds and spreads over every surface, monotonous and inexorable. It threatens to ruin spatial organisation and obscure mental clarity — so we cling to vestiges of order. Constant maintenance is required; the waste bin fills up so fast. We could gather up all the refuse and consolidate its diffuse unwieldiness into a few dense blocks: we could mould a scarecrow, an apotropaic talisman to ward off the mess monster of excess and decomposition that wants to bury us in a glut of things and material wreckage. We could and we would be modeling ourselves after Jedediah Caesar.

Caesar's practice imposes order and structure by processing odds and ends, detritus and fragments through acts of densification and in-fill. His cast resin sculptures aggregate disparate items into solid, composite masses. Throwing pieces of wood, foam, pine cones, metal, cardboard, cloth, plastics, dust, and other commonly discarded materials together into a framing container — like a cardboard box or, in the case of his new commission for Bloomberg SPACE, a round wicker basket — he then pours in liquid resin which solidifies and traps the heterogeneous mess into a single unified conglomerate whole. The hardened resin casts both index the bounding shape of the container and display the spectrum of objects floating in their petrified space. Suspended animation locks scattered things in a solid space of translucent, coloured, or opaque hardness.

The blocks are typically sliced through with the force and precision of industrial machines into uniformly divided geometries and flat slab-like cross-sections. Everyday items and materials embedded in the resin are defamiliarised by the powerful cutting process that slides cleanly through everything with equal ease: recognisable objects-in-the-round become flat shapes of colour and patterned swathes of texture as solid volumes get chopped into two-dimensional, cross-wise planes. The cut units' modularity registers a nod to Minimalism's mathematical variations on the (Euclidean and city) grid while it also produces a repetitive stackable uniformity similar to monetary objects of exchange like the many small, slip-cast coins Caesar has produced in various international currencies (Euro, Pesos, Yen, etc.) and dispersed throughout the exhibition as constant reminders of the hyperbolically economic context of Bloomberg SPACE. Relating to a



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manual scale, the movable (pocket-able) clay coins represent fluidity and circulation where the larger resin discs are packed into a stable pyramid configuration.

A particular logic determines the kind of material guts and sculptural skeleton for each resin cast. For example, when Caesar first used this process in 2003, he gathered scraps in his studio cumulatively left over from all his past projects: the gesture of densification was a way to sum up a mounting personal history in the studio, an emblem of concentrated retrospection and closure as well as resourcefulness within a private economy of recycling. It advanced space efficiency and aestheticised unsightly remains. From the beginning, Caesar's resin sculptures have worked to monumentalise and decorate the decisively unmonumental — the inglorious, the marginal, the banal, the negligible. The materials for one 'domestic' piece came exclusively from the artist's home. He reframes the residual accretion of material waste and excess that is life's daily byproduct.

For his newest resin cast, Caesar placed a handful of studio cast-offs inside the cylindrical wicker basket and filled it with a resin mixture including colour pigment, sawdust, and dirt particles harvested from the filter of his vacuum. Dust recurs as a key player — a ubiquitous and evocative material sign of inactivity, motionlessness, age, neglect, obsolescence, history's drag, and matter's perpetual disintegration. Caesar vacuums and sweeps; he commits to a cleaning up project that resonates with Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*: "The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" If Jed does, he'll trash-compact it into building blocks for a new (more animated? more chaotic? more hardened?) society. There is a fundamental ordering impulse, an underlying tidiness at work in his repeated process of collecting debris, grouping and consolidating it into dense blocks, bricks, and tiles in the manner of the ever-industrious Wall-e.

Despite their chaotic innards seen in cross-section, Caesar's resin casts are anti-entropic: they freeze a moment of staged disorder in permanent stillness and rationalised geometry, halting the perpetual tendency of all closed systems towards increased disorder. It is a gesture of spatial and temporal suspension, a permanent preservation (and petrification) of choreographed chaos and mess that emphatically resists entropy's inexorable devolution and decomposition. The all-over, scattered chaos of things embedded in the resin gets locked into a fixed pattern with its own flat graphic cut-up or collage logic. The relative positions of suspended matter can be tracked from slice to slice as though from frame to frame in a short animation — an inchoate filmic narrative runs through each set.

Like amber, the resin substrate permanently preserves and protects the stray materials it envelops in a kind of time capsule that renders them inaccessible and static. The thickening and densification of space represents a slowing of time through material accretion and protracted perceptual inspection of visual and textural detail. Work — as verb and noun — takes shape here as a gradual piling up that indexes the steady passage of quotidian time and allegorises the flow of historical time. Stuff amasses like the rubble mounting in front of Walter Benjamin's angel of



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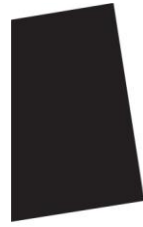
history: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” The buildup grows as history pushes monotonously forward so that the work itself starts to become an obstacle, a roadblock like Caesar’s huge snaking mound blocking up Bloomberg SPACE’s C-shaped balcony gallery. The compact, discrete gestures of blockage established in the artist’s roughly-body-scale resin sculptures expand to an architectural scale and reference landscape, stopping up ambulatory flow within the building’s walkway with an earth-like barricade.

Mapping the dimensions of the balcony onto an empty dirt lot, Caesar dug out a trench roughly equivalent to the volume of the walkway form and poured in a casting mixture of white cement, fiberglass, and pigment. The concave imprint cast in the earth was then inverted and fitted like puzzle pieces into the balcony as a hollow shell inset. In both his smaller resin casts and this larger site-specific occupation of the balcony, Caesar controls and orders chaos by bounding natural and irregular forms inside measured rectilinear structures and architectures.

Incongruously filling the balcony walkway with a snaking mound of simulated earth is an aggressive way to occupy, claim, defunctionalise, and dirty the clean corporate space. The mound reads like a displacement of the building’s subterranean foundation into its interior — a glimpse of future ruin? A return to nature, over-run with piles of soil? There used to be a political dimension to the occupation of space... Like the resin, Caesar’s balcony installation barricades the area it fills. It is a blunt, brute, and unavoidable presence in contradistinction to its environment. It stops up the works like a clogged artery, or actually more like a constipating volume that transforms the balcony into a bent colon full of excrement, a suddenly activated organ that recasts the entire building’s architecture in anatomical terms of skeleton, circulatory system, and digestive tract. Art can be a culture’s rubble and dirt, full of trash and abject refuse.

Though its shell is rough and rock-like, the balcony construction is decidedly inorganic, a stylised synthetic simulation of nature, but not natural itself. As opposed to Land Art gestures of the late 1960s and 70s that worked directly with transposing actual landscape onto and into the urban architecture of a gallery space (like the immense volumes of dirt filling Walter de Maria’s Earth Rooms), Caesar’s balcony in-fill piece is an artificial mimetic skin, a façade with the hollowness of a stage prop. The artist wants to achieve an unsettling look in his objects that is at once very organic and very false. It is exactly that unstable contradiction that generates his art’s specificity and compelling peculiarity. The hard candy and earth colors and graphic compositions of his sliced resin casts, for instance, can, somehow, be simultaneously evocative of garish 1980s abstractions, Pollock’s all-over expressionism, or Constructivist collage *as well as* buried fossils or geological stratification. The solid cross-sections can look terrestrial like granite, terrazzo, and agate or gustatory like mortadella, sausage, and other sliced cold cuts. The wicker basket casts look like dull violet geodes.

Caesar’s sculptures have an ancient, unearthed aspect, like strange artifacts dislodged from history. He alternately amasses and digs, accumulates and excavates. He makes contemporary



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fossils in resin, sedimentary deposits, casts of excavated ditches, burial mounds and impossible tunnels. In his process and product, the archaeological crosses over into the architectural and the anatomical through real and metaphorical acts of cross-section, quarrying, and mining. Caesar works to create a visceral sense of density and out-of-control accumulation that speaks of the passage of historical time. Density and thickness offer much desired resistance and blockage — something to push on and knock your head against — but they also provide the promise of depth — something to dig really really deep into. The image of digging is also the pursuit of knowledge.

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer is a writer and independent curator based in Los Angeles.