

RAPT ATTENTION

A Conversation with Lily Cox-Richard

Lily Cox-Richard is a sculptor currently based in Houston, Texas, whose work is commanding growing attention. Having earned her MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2008, she has had recent exhibitions at Hirschl & Adler in New York, Vox Populi in Philadelphia, the Poor Farm in Manawa, Wisconsin, and Kompact Living Space in Berlin.

Cox-Richard's diverse projects have included indoor and outdoor installations (*Spark Gap*, 2008 and *Fruiting Bodies*, 2011) and interventions (*Strike*, 2012), individual sculptures presented as part of a conceptual group (*Rapt*, 2009), and self-published books (*Lightning Wireless*, 2008 and *thicket*, 2013). Her media have ranged from carved plaster, to cast resin, fiberglass and found objects. Uniting these disparate projects is the artist's exacting representational skill, careful attention to craft, and investment in an object's phenomenological presence.

Our conversation began by considering her recent project *The Stand (Possessing Powers)* (2013)—on view last year at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York May 10 to September 14—that attracted critical interest.¹ The group of carved plaster sculptures carefully recreate only the bases and vertical props (tree stumps, drapery, stone) of American neoclassical sculptor Hiram Powers' idealized female nudes (such as his *Greek Slave* of 1844). With the standing body absent, the viewer is directed to contemplate what was usually understood to be a mostly functional device in the original marble sculpture. The artist has neatly reframed these secondary supports revealing their iconographic contribution to the cultural assumptions regarding gender, race and class in Powers' 19th-century compositions.

BY KRISTINA OLSON

Kristina Olson – You've said that, "My sculpture grapples with charging empty spaces, revealing invisible systems, and reaffirming exhausted objects." Maybe you can begin by explaining those ideas in relation to The Stand (Possessing Powers) project.

Lily Cox-Richard – I've become really curious about objects that seem familiar, but when pressed, are difficult to place specifically in terms of their history or importance. For example, lightning rods, or in the case of The Stand (Possessing Powers), a certain kind of sculpture that has the ability to blend almost seamlessly into a kind of architectural ornamentation. Sometimes this vagueness imbues the object with a kind of evasive power, but other times it seems to leave the object mute, receding into the general landscape.

K.O. – Okay, but what prompted your interest in Powers' figures? It seems so anachronistic for you as a twenty-first century artist schooled in contemporary practice to turn your attention to these academic artifacts of long-ago.

L.C.-R. – Yes, exactly. I think my initial disinterest is what prompted my interest. When I was working on Rapt (2009), I had an impulse to learn stone carving. I wasn't really planning on making those pieces in marble, but I wanted to know how my understanding of them would change if I tried. The Rapt forms were inspired by these shrouded obelisk 19th-century grave markers, and I had some questions that I couldn't find answers to in my research, and I thought, maybe if I understand something about the way they were made, maybe if I have a corporeal understanding through carving them in stone, then I will find these answers. So I spent the summer living and working in a quarry near Salzburg. I took an afternoon off to walk around town, much of which was built using stone from the same quarry in which I was working. I found myself looking at stone in a

completely new way. Not only did I know which tools made which marks, and have a new appreciation for the challenges involved, but I started noticing the different strategies sculptors used to shore up figures, like having fabric drape from an outstretched arm to the base. I remember seeing a sculpture of Hercules, and his club was really strangely stylized and beautiful, and I thought, wow, what a great form, too bad it's connected to that not-so-great figure of Hercules!

I'm sure that primed me to see Powers' *The Last of the Tribes* (1876-77) for the first time. After the quarry, I returned to Houston, where I was a fellow in the Core Program, so my studio was across the street from the Museum of Fine Arts. I was wandering around the museum, and came across that sculpture. I had walked by it fifty times without ever noticing it, and suddenly it had me. It's a marble figure of a bare-breasted Native American girl "fleeing civilization" and, as she runs, her skirt brushes across the clean hewn edge of a tree stump. She only has one foot on the ground, so the stump/skirt connection is what is keeping her from breaking off at the ankle, and the stump is really big, as tall as her thigh, and in the foreground of the figure, not subtly tucked behind her leg. I thought, okay, not only is this the weirdest possible solution for stabilizing the figure, but also it is by far the most interesting part of the sculpture.

So this introduced a bunch of other questions: Why hadn't I noticed this sculpture before? Why was it so hard to take it seriously as important American sculpture, and why was it so uncomfortable when I tried?

K.O. – Important question. Were you consciously thinking of the appropriation of a male master artist's work by some of the early feminists? Sherrie Levine's re-photographed photos by Edward Weston, Walker Evans, et al., done around 1980, come to mind.



Lily Cox-Richard. Photo: Sharad Patel.

L.C.-R. – No, not really. I don't think appropriation can work the same way if the work being appropriated wasn't concerned with issues of originality and authenticity in the first place. The kind of appropriation that you're bringing up is so much about intervening in the canon, specifically a modernist canon. Powers was once known as the father of American sculpture, but Neoclassicism was so antithetical to the avant garde, he doesn't really have a place in the history of Modernism. Just by taking Powers seriously as a sculptor, multiple canons are in play, and they destabilize each other. Also, I'm not sure what's left at stake in appropriating a body of sculpture that has practically been rendered invisible by ubiquity and disinterest. But maybe there's humor in that, too.

When I do think of it in terms of appropriation, I'm not quite sure what it is that I'm appropriating — it's more of an appropriation of a certain idea of sculptural practice, an outdated route to mastery and legacy, than appropriating the work itself. Maybe this project shares more with Cindy Sherman's untitled film stills, also done around 1980. There's something messier in the remaking that feels more like an unmaking. I think of it more as "taking them on," rather than "laying claim" to them. The sculptural process—the actual making—becomes performative, whether or not it is seen as a reenactment, I am deciding to do them differently, and it is through that process that I make the sculptures mine.

K.O. – By removing the curved female figure, you've really foregrounded the phallic character of the remaining vertical stands as well as given these devices a weirdly-compelling presence.

L.C.-R. – One of the interesting things that happened while

working on *The Stand*, is that by not making the figure, I had to puzzle out the connection between that figure and the support. These connections are really odd. I began to understand Powers as a fellow sculptor grappling with complicated issues of history, identity, sensuality and spirituality. That said, I'm not trying to recuperate his sculptures so that we can celebrate him or his work. Rather, my goal is to make new work that creates an even thicker visibility and presence.

I'd also really like to complicate the way we describe sculptural forms with gendered language. In *The Stand: California*, the contact point between the quartz crystal and where the figure would have been becomes the moment in my sculpture where rock goes soft. Without having a clearly delineated body as reference, scale is unhinged: the crystal becomes a whole village or a skyscraper. My hope is that the initial phallic reading will be interrupted by the specificity of the forms: the crystalline structure gives like flesh, and its architecture begins to pucker.

K.O. – You worked with another phallic form in *Rapt* (2009). In this small group of waist-high sculptures made of carefully-crafted white aqua resin, you've presented the shrouds draped over the obelisks of 19th-century grave markers. The obelisk itself is missing, leaving the empty shroud standing improbably upright, supported by nearly invisible floral foam. You've said that these sculptures are ghosts of the original monuments and they do look like Halloween sheet costumes (without the eye holes). Talk about the similar strategy of playing with absence and presence in *Rapt* and *The Stand*.



Lily Cox-Richard, *Fruiting Bodies*, 2011, cast aqua resin, installation for The Great Poor Farm Experiment, Manawa, Wisconsin. Photo: Sharad Patel.

L.C.-R. – Both the obelisks and Powers’ allegorical figures functioned as symbols that held power in specific ways in the time that they were created. I was thinking about what happens to the sculpture when its symbols become signs for something else.

In both of these projects, I choose not to make the symbols that assume the most authority. So, there is a lot of specificity in my sculptures, but it can’t be retraced to systems like phrenology, Victorian codes, or cemetery symbolism. Maybe that’s why what’s left has a weirdly-compelling presence. Formally, it insists on being described in different terms. My sculptures seem to inherit the results of a bunch of formal and conceptual decisions made around that main symbol that is now absent, you can no longer rely on it for meaning. It’s as if the sculpture is haunted by the symbols.

K.O. – *Was Rapt the beginning of your fascination with the 19th century? Why do you return to that period?*

L.C.-R. – It began earlier, when I made *At Stake and Rider* in 2007. While working on this project I was doing research on the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), and how strategic these major World’s Fairs were in defining and promoting American national identity in the 19th century. *At Stake and Rider* takes the form of a stake-and-rider split rail fence. This kind of fence originated in colonial America and traveled west with the frontier, but I was familiar with it as the kind of fence that traced the civil war battle fields in Manassas, Virginia near where I grew up. It was innovative because it didn’t require nails or digging holes, and could be moved as borders and needs shifted. To me this seemed like a very American kind of innovation, because it also uses more wood and takes up more space than any other fence I’ve seen. So, while it is innovative in its minimal use of expensive/scarce materials, it does so by brazenly

exploiting whatever happens to be more readily available. I guess my interest in the 19th century stems from trying to better understand contemporary American culture, by opening up these origin myths to redraw lineages and trajectories—or at least imagine alternatives.

K.O. – *The play with solid and void is really compelling here as is the material play of turning soft drapery into stiff, unyielding matter. That dichotomy reminded me of Rachel Whiteread who also works with mundane objects, casting the voids around them and leaving a mere impression of that form which is now destroyed.*

L.C.-R. – Thank you. Yes, there is something about leaving a trace of a form that is no longer there, but what’s left has such undeniable physicality.

K.O. – *For your installation at Michelle Grabner’s Poor Farm, Fruiting Bodies (2011), you again drew attention to graves. You installed hundreds of cast mushrooms in rings around the unmarked graves of the Waupaca County cemetery in Wisconsin. As with your other work, the mushrooms here created a presence for the absent dead buried below and the depicted flesh of the fungus is an eerie reminder of the decomposition taking place in a graveyard. How did you settle on the organic form of a mushroom for this project?*

L.C.-R. – When I heard that the Poor Farm had a cemetery out back, I knew I wanted to do a project there. When I went for a site visit, it became clear to me that I couldn’t do anything along the lines of *Rapt*, because that was the wrong kind of monument for a cemetery that was clearly not about monuments. There were several rectangular depressions in the grass, where coffins had collapsed, but these graves were unmarked. It turns out that there may be as many as 100 unmarked graves in that cemetery. I became more interested in trying to somehow



Lily Cox-Richard, *installation view of The Stand (Possessing Powers)*, 2013, plaster. Photo: Sharad Patel.

commemorate the Poor Farm as an institution, one that turned out to be very flawed, but was a major improvement in social welfare in its time. Instead of making a monument that points up, away from the burial site, I wanted to make a monument that pointed down—like you said, drawing attention to the decomposition, but not depleting its wonder. Mushrooms seem like a good form for rot and magic. The amazing thing about mushroom circles (fairy rings) is that they look like perfectly arranged individual mushrooms, but are one organism. The mycelium root system radiates outward at a steady rate, and then at some point, sends up its fruiting bodies, or mushrooms. This system—the inherent interdependence of what seems like individuals—seemed metonymically right for this site.

K.O. – *It seems that death is a strong theme in your work. You’ve even done several projects—Strike (2012), Quickie Walkout (Lightning Strike) (2012), and Spark Gap (2008)—addressing the dire effects of lightning strikes. How do you see this theme in your work? Is it related to those “exhausted objects” you spoke of earlier?*

L.C.-R. – Ha! It does seem that way, doesn’t it? My interest is more in the charge than the destruction. While working on *Spark Gap*, I was collecting old lightning rods from architectural salvage places and auctions. I wasn’t using them in that sculpture, but they show up later in *Strike*. The lightning rods are really beautiful and strange, and I loved having them in the corner of my studio because I thought that after standing on a roof for 100 years or so, they might retain some kind of material wisdom of knowing lightning, and in turn charge the space of my studio. These objects are exhausted in that they may be outmoded or unrecognizable, but they still hold power. Most people who visited my studio didn’t know what they were, and in this case, that seemed to open them up to having mystical properties, like dowsing rods.

Quickie Walkout (Lightning Strike) goes back to that Hercules club I was telling you about—as if Hercules finally walked out in protest, and the club remains as a witness instead of a weapon. The title is borrowed from #98 in Gene Sharp’s *198 Methods of Non-violent Action*, and seemed most fitting for Hercules.

K.O. – *Can you end by talking about your evident pleasure in crafting these time-consuming objects? You seem hard-wired to give yourself these labor-intensive, repetitive tasks.*

L.C.-R. – I don’t want my sculptures to be unnecessarily about labor. *The Stand* is very much about sculpture, so process and making became really important. However, with another project like *Fruiting Bodies*, if I had been in a position to have someone else cast all those mushrooms, I would have been happy to hand that off. But really, I figure out the work by making it. *The Stand* is a dense project, and I can be pretty slow to process things, so I needed that time to work out how the sculptures can be. Sometimes I think that with these time-consuming tasks, both the research and the making, they are really just an excuse to get deep into something and spend a lot of time there. Even with all of the studying and measuring of Powers’ sculptures, I didn’t know how my sculptures would work out until I was really far along with each one. I needed all that making time (thinking time) to figure out how to deal with the contact points (where the figure would have been). Conceptually, in this project, I think that ‘detail’ (how and how much) is more important to the content of the work than ‘craft’ is, but in this case, the way to detail is through craft. ■

NOTES

1. See Nichols Hartigan and Joan Kee, “Lily Cox-Richard: On the Powers of Taking a Stand,” *Art Journal* 72 (Winter 2013): 78–83.

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