

Lily Cox-Richard: Re-casting the Blanton's Battle casts

The artist's sculptural response to 19th-century copies of classical sculptures ingeniously questions the canon



Lily Cox-Richard, installation view of "She-Wolf" and "Ramp," 2019, scagliola (plaster, rabbit skin glue, and pigment); fiber-reinforced concrete, urethane foam, pigment, and aggregate including glass, shell, brick, and concrete fragments cast from models of Battle Cast hair. Photo by Colin Doyle.

By **Erin Keever** August 8, 2019

People have mixed feelings about the Blanton Museum's William J. Battle Collection of Plaster Casts. They are not original artworks, rather [a large group of 19th-century copies of classical sculptures](#) bought by University of Texas classics professor Battle between 1894 and 1923, with the intent "to expose students to the artistic and literary accomplishments of the ancient world."

During their time at UT, the casts have gone in and out of favor, but in the 1970s reclaimed their role as a pedagogical tool, and now fulfil one of the Blanton's roles as a teaching institution.

Despite the circuitous route they've taken, changing campus buildings and museum galleries many times, the casts landed in the Blanton's Osborne Seminar Room, near the first floor's print study room. They were moved there as part of the museum's 2017 re-installation of its permanent collection, presumably so students could have access to print and cast collections in close proximity. Only a small percentage of the entire cast collection — around a dozen full-size figures in addition to a selection of busts, some examples of relief carving, and the "[Dying Gaul](#)" (just outside the room) — are currently on view.

When Richmond, Virginia-based artist, [Lily Cox-Richard](#), began having conversations about a project in the Blanton's Contemporary Project space, it made sense for her to somehow incorporate the collection into her work. Cox-Richard is interested in cultural and material histories, paying special attention to questions of value, labor and stewardship. A prior project called "[The Stand \(Possessing Powers\)](#)," highlighted Neoclassical sculpture of artist, Hiram Powers exploring sculptural traditions and the conventional timeline, or canon, of art history.



Lily Cox-Richard, intervention in the Osborne Seminar Room, synthetic tulle netting and "Apollo Belvedere," 19th-century reproduction, plaster cast from Roman adaptation or copy of a Greek bronze original by Leochares (circa 330 BCE), The William J. Battle Collection of Plaster Casts. Photo by Manny Alcalá.

It's no secret that most of art history was written by white men and seen through a lens of perceived Western cultural superiority. But now academics across college campuses are re-examining long perpetuated narratives including the myth of classical sculpture — that is, its whiteness.

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Originally many Greco-Roman figures were polychromatic, i.e. painted in many colors. When the first recreations of such works were made, connoisseurs were aghast: “how gauche,” “how gaudy,” they exclaimed. In 2014 an exhibition [“Transformations: Classical Sculpture in Colour,”](#) appeared at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen. Organizers used sophisticated x-ray technology to ascertain information about the pigments used and then made full color reconstructions of classical statues, exhibiting them alongside the originals. Digital imaging has aided envisioning polychromy as well.

In the Blanton exhibition [“Lily Cox-Richard: She-Wolf + Lower Figs,”](#) one of many ideas questioned by the artist is exactly who has an interest in maintaining the view of white marble as more beautiful and why are we so reluctant to let go of it?

A pure white marble aesthetic was part of 18th-century art historian Johann Winckelmann’s explanation of the Greek ideal. Over the centuries other scholars reinforced the idea and those that didn’t, contributed merely through their avoidance of the topic.

When the development of the human figure in antiquity is explained, discussions often steer clear of which pigments were applied to which surfaces, in favor of a focus on anatomical proportion and the mastery of movement, particularly, the invention of contrapposto. Without an “authoritative” and comprehensive catalog of images carefully studied and altered to reflect each work’s original appearance, instructors find addressing polychromy (especially in formal analysis) difficult and may simply throw up their hands in defeat. And when countless professors have used the plaster casts as examples of the Greco-Roman search for perfection, how do they account for them being made from white plaster?



Lily Cox-Richard, installation view of “Figs” and “Weave,” 2019, synthetic tulle netting, storage pallets, and Goddesses from the East Pediment of the Parthenon: Dione and Aphrodite, 19th-century reproduction, plaster cast from original by Phidias (ca. 438–432 BCE), The William J. Battle Collection of Plaster Casts; scagliola (plaster, rabbit skin glue, and pigment). Photo by Colin Doyle.

Cox-Richard's exhibition offers art historians an important opportunity to open up discussions about context: cultural values, the canon, and the systems and hierarchies in place. Cox-Richard's project lines are "fuzzy" as assistant curatorial of modern and contemporary art, Claire Howard, put it: "Lily wanted not just to respond to work in our collection by bringing it into her space, but she needed to intervene into (the artwork's) space at the same time."

The show is comprised of five parts. Cox-Richard complicates Phidias' High Classical sculpture "Goddesses from the East Pediment of the Parthenon" — known for dynamic drapery that clings and swirls around the figures' idealized bodies — by presenting them on the same pallet on which they usually sit, bringing our attention to an art storage aesthetic and the context of museum practices. Then she adds physical and conceptual layers, by draping them in tulle in shades of lavender, tangerine, lime green and turquoise. The "[Apollo Belvedere](#)," still on view downstairs, is also draped in brightly colored netting and offers another context in which to consider ideas about display, as well as acting as a launching point or bridge to the gallery exhibition.

But the exhibition really centers around two entirely new works (a first for this space), displayed one on top of the other: "She-Wolf" and "Ramp." The familiar "[She-Wolf](#)," or "[La Lupa](#)," is a symbol of Rome but it has a complicated history. First thought to be Ancient Roman, then Etruscan, now to a few scholars She-Wolf is believed to be medieval in origin or perhaps a medieval copy of an ancient original. Combine that complication with the two bouncing babies that were added to the bronze by Renaissance artist Antonio Pollaiuolo depicting Romulus and Remus that are just a tad incongruous stylistically. The [original She-Wolf](#) with her infants are housed in the Palazzo dei Conservatori on the ancient Capitoline Hill in Rome although there have been numerous replicas made and displayed around the world. Loaded with meaning about motherhood, She-Wolf has been ripped and repackaged for products and advertisements alike.

When Cox-Richard toured the Blanton's basement storage and discovered the "She-Wolf" cast, she knew she had to work with it. She and museum staff worked with Eric McMaster in UT's Department of Art and Art History's Digital Fabrication Lab to create 3-D scans and of various physical features from the casts, such as the hair, from numerous masterworks such as the "Apollo Belvedere," "The Apoxyomenos" and "[The Doryphoros](#)" and incorporated those into both "She-Wolf" and another work called "Weave." Scans were combined with open access digital scans online at times, making hybrid type figures in which, real, fake, new and old are difficult to parse, which is part of the point.

Teaching herself the technique of scagliola — a decorative application plaster achieving a marbled effect used since antiquity and later in the Renaissance — Cox-Richard created a colorful and multi-patterned "She-Wolf" unlike its inspiration. Because the pigment is integrated into the plaster it cannot be washed off or cleaned as so many sculptures excavated from antiquity were. Not only is Cox-Richard using art historical techniques like scagliola, but she's also creating a dialogue between old and new 3-D technologies, the digital printing process and conventional casting.

The "She-Wolf's" positioning is undeniably significant. Tail down in what's been described as a defensive stance, she confronts the viewer from atop the work called "Ramp," which appears to be a buckled sidewalk with areas of colorful aggregate peeking through at its edges.

The sidewalk's linear nature could emulate the canon of art history as it moves so directly from point A to point B. Of "Ramp's" uneven qualities, Howard says, "The ground swells pushing up underneath, unearthing art historical perspectives and artwork that have been marginalized in the canon of art history." 

Even the show's title plays with our expectations of value and elevation of certain art. Cox-Richard found some of these casts labeled in museum storage as "Lower Figs." She must have found this funny as it belies their prestige and the play on words. And that is close to perfection.

"Lily Cox-Richard: She-Wolf + Lower Figs" is on view at the [Blanton Museum of Art through December 29, 2019](#). The artist [gives a talk Oct. 18](#).