

CAST CONTEMPORARIES



I notice that in the most cutting-edge art schools today – the ones that also happen to have large holdings of plaster-casts of the works of antiquity, medieval art and renaissance masterpieces – there is usually at least one tutor or person in authority who is keen to protest an “interest” in the works of past time as represented in these copies. But the political situation instituted during the contemporary clampdown of the last century means that these people have to conceal their obvious enthusiasm for these works behind a critical mask. These plasters are, they insist, of “historical interest” – or they have an “identity”, or they represent a “casting aesthetic all their own,” and so on. In this way these responsible people make a claim for the plaster-cast’s being tolerated within the contemporary art school setting, where powerful and visceral antipathies to the grand manner of Occidental art persist. The lovers of the plaster-cast recognise the danger which daily threatens the plaster cast and so encourage the cast collections (a) to be studiously museologised under the rubric of art-conservation, and (b) to be employed within the context of contemporary artistic idioms. In this way the casts are removed from their rough life of pedagogical function (in which they once thrived) while being purloined by talentless and lazy art-students as “found objects” arranged without leave within “installations” which pretend to base their meanings upon “issues.” I was assured, once, by one such guardian, that were the casts not seen to be exploited in this contrary way then they should be “out, out, out!” He made a throat-cutting gesture as he said this to me. So it happens that students tie red neckerchiefs around the necks of these hapless idols, or arrange them in cute groupings, or knit socks for them to wear, or even publish sophisticated words about them printed in exquisite pamphlets with quotations from the most august classical authors – and yet the dismay of the plaster-cast is palpable throughout, for the cast wants to be employed for one thing alone, which thing is never done today – and that is to be drawn to within an inch of the student’s very life, in a manner nearly inconceivable today, which is to say according to Victorian standards or, as they say in France, up to the Beaux-Arts mark.

The art of sculpture, which is the noblest of the visual arts, is not taught today for two basic reasons. The first is that there are no tutors to teach the technical and aesthetic skills necessary to be grasped if even the slightest bust is to be attempted, but the second reason is interesting and obscure. This is founded upon a primordial anxiety about sculpture that resides in nearly every human breast and which gains its first, catastrophic mythological representation in the Book of Exodus. This is the episode in which Moses, descending from the Mountain of Sinai, discovers the Hebrews to have been making sculpture in his absence, in the form of a “Molten Calf”. His rage is legendary, and the reprisals he takes brutal beyond comprehension; he orders his enforcers, the Levites, to execute three thousand men, women and children for breaching the primal Commandment of the fire-god Jehovah, whose avatar, indeed, is Moses himself; “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them...” (Exodus, Chapt.XX verses 4-5). Often mistaken as a “Golden” Calf, this offending work of art is in fact an object that is not hewn, or constructed, but cast, presumably into an earthen mould, in which technique the ancient Hebrews were apparently skilled. The Calf gains its pejorative associations not primarily from its subject but from the method of its making. In recent times, when casts have been ritually defaced either virtually, in artistic acts of “minimal interventionism”, or actually, in gleeful vandalism, pornographisation or even actual destruction, we can observe a continued exercise of the fundamental instinct to do away with the three-dimensional, reproduced image; an instinct I call the “Mosaic impulse.” It motivates Departmental Heads to this day, as it does many a scientist, and did multitudes of Christian Copts, the Hun and Vandal, hosts of Scottish Calvinists, CIA-sponsored abstract expressionists and every Talibaner faced with a rock-cut Buddha. As Heraclitus said, in his most profound surviving fragment, simply – “Nature loves to hide...” The artist prosecutes Nature with an eye of unbounded objectivity, in a spirit of extreme dis-interest, over a length of time. From this cross-examination he produces a re-presentation of that Nature, to the intense, Mosaic fury of Nature Himself – who loves to hide. Then, if he is a sculptor, by means of the techniques of casting he proceeds to *breed* that re-presentation. This, as far as Father Nature is concerned, is an impudence too far. The artist must be done away with, or the art itself. This has been the project of the Twentieth Century, triumphantly achieved, it seems, if one cares to inspect any art school of renown today. Apparently paradoxically, but in reality necessarily, the invention of the camera assisted in this eradication of art. For Nature, the photograph is tantamount to a life-casting (life-casts abound in modern art-schools) and is near enough to a “found object” to cause no offence to the God of Nature, who “is that he is.” That the photograph, or the film, is not offensive to the modern fundamentalist Islam is a weighty indication that it is not, and cannot be, a work of art. What art-photographer ever commissioned a photographer to photograph his photograph? My photography bill is considerable.

The greatness of that short-lived little societal and ethical phenomenon called the West, consisted in its capacity to confound, over a period of about 1500 years in total, the natural law proscribing the artistic representation of the forms and effects of the phenomenal realm. Before its delicate reign, there had always been some scratchings of more or less inarticulate forms and figures, always made in so abstracted a way as to affright Nature to no significant degree – that is, with a “fig-leaf” of crudity maintained over the possibility of any artistic virtuosity. It is called, usually in qualified terms, “primitive” art – and it gets this title because it safely proceeds no further than a “first principle” state. It is a *sign* for a natural form, but it is never likely to be *taken* for one. No birds will fly into that wall to attempt to peck at those grapes, no man of rude and strong will can ever mistake yonder figures on the braes of Easter Island for an army ranked behind a rival male. That art was sufficiently weak in re-presentation to have been tolerable all along, although it must be wondered why so many of the early artists in humanity’s dawn had to hide in caves when they wished to paint. When it came to Greece, however, in the inaugural gesture of the sculptor Kritios in first re-presenting that relaxed stance where one leg supports and the other “plays” (the *contrapposto*) – in that single gesture the instinct to push the heresy of re-presentation further than Nature might happily permit, commenced. A simple dropping of the pelvis and a bending of one leg, forming an asymmetry in deep repose, and an action in perfect stillness, was what made the Occident begin; for all the poetry and all the philosophy already going strong, yet there had to be achieved the visual art equivalent of those leaps towards Enlightenment, without which no self-knowledge could possibly be concluded. Kritios took that leap, in about 480 BC – terribly late in time. With it he inaugurated the idea of the transgressional artist, which has had a certain hardihood much declined in recent years, as art schools have become bastions of smoke-free obedience, political correctness, and Health, and a fully dreadful Safety. The clampdown upon what Winckelmann called the “imitation of antiquity” is the presiding piety of these institutions, which guarantees all the other, dismal proscriptions that they impose and see are observed. (continued on back cover)

CAST CONTEMPORARIES

Edinburgh College of Art

Curated by Chris Dorsett

in collaboration with Margaret Stewart (ECA Cast Collection)

Christine Borland - Tim Croft - Douglas Cruikshank & Scott Licznerski - Chris Dorsett - Graeme Durant - FACTICE (Corinne Felgate & Ludovica Gioscia) - John Farrugia - Gareth Fisher - Clare Flatley - Paul Harvey - Beverley Hood - Kenny Hunter - Murdo Macdonald - Norman McBeath - Maria Mitsoula - Steven Morant - Dylan Shields - Joan Smith - Andrew Sneddon - Chris Speed, Jane Macdonald, Jules Rawlinson & Margaret Stewart - Charles Stiven - Alexander Stoddart - Ruxandra-Iulia Stoica & Graciela Ainsworth

<http://castcontemporaries.weebly.com/index.html>

cover photo: Chris Dorsett

Cast Contemporaries

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Photo: Chris Dorsett

an exhibition at Edinburgh College of Art



Photo: Murdo Macdonald

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ECA Archives

Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the catalogue of the Cast Contemporaries exhibition which comes at the end of an extraordinary period of conservation, cataloguing and reinterpretation for Edinburgh College of Art's unique collection of casts. Like many visitors to Lauriston Place my first encounter with the College was marked by an intense engagement with the profoundly beautiful environment of the Cast Court and throughout my first year here I have continued to be moved by the ways in which its surfaces, spaces and objects have enhanced and animated the intellectual, creative and social life of the College. I thank our funders, the members of the Cast team, the curators Margaret Stewart and Chris Dorsett alongside the artists who have contributed to the project, for ensuring that the Collection receives the attention it deserves, and articulating its continuing relevance as an inspiration for the College, the University of Edinburgh, the city and all those for whom casts exert a deep fascination.

Professor Christopher Breward,
Principal,
Edinburgh College of Art,
Vice Principal,
University of Edinburgh



Julian Rosefeldt, *Asylum*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 2004
Courtesy of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

Contemporaneity: having been there

Chris Dorsett

The online archive of the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art includes a video 'walk-through' of Julian Rosefeldt's installation *Asylum*.¹ This artist's cinematic vision is experienced on foot and BALTIC's visitors were required to move between nine free-hanging screens positioned at different angles throughout a large darkened gallery. Films of flower sellers, hospital catering staff and street prostitutes were projected into this space from every direction. *Asylum* is about immigrants in Berlin today and Rosefeldt is an artist who knows what it means to be 'contemporary' in this kind of affluent Western city, a condition that combines social critique with the production values of a media technologist.

On one screen we see men of African origin standing amidst a collection of Graeco-Roman sculptures. The ethereal glow of what I take to be museum-quality plaster reproductions is striking. Given BALTIC's engagement with the art of our time, interpretations abound. For example, there is a hint of Plato's metaphysics in the gleaming white figures, perhaps perfection lingers in the after-glow. Perhaps not. The unnatural luminosity could also suggest toxic radiation and Rosefeldt's scenario is, more straightforwardly, political. Thus his immigrants inhabit our museum world as dislocated exiles and their proximity to the antique, the public goal of many 18th and 19th century museum builders, does not inspire, it feels dangerous. History has betrayed the confidence of Neoclassicism. Rosefeldt makes us think of racism, perhaps even fascism, and his environment is not, when viewed from the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, built in the likeness of ancient Greece.

A nervousness about inherited likeness marks our sense of contemporaneity. The power of the present erases the past and mechanical reproduction overlays that which is reproduced. Perhaps our present time cannot emulate

Neoclassicism in the same way that BALTIC's grainy video cannot replicate the installation that visitors to *Asylum* actually encountered. Indeed, the appeal of the video is probably its documentary realisation of Roland Barthes' notion of *having-been-there*, a transformation exerted on first-hand experience by mechanical reproduction.² Thus the 'walk-through' is valued as evidence, a condition that supersedes the prior state of *being-there* (e.g. at BALTIC).

Certainly, ours is an age dominated by the logic of semiotics, by the distinction between a sign and its referent, a difference that feels almost celebratory in the dislocation of the video from the installation. However there is a degree of material intimacy in the casting process that confuses the distinctions between semiotic categories. To make a plaster cast from a plaster mould involves, in the terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce, both indexical and iconic signs (both indications of physical contact and a recognition that one thing can be like another). The sculptures in Rosefeldt's film are the product of a mould, a mirroring of a negative in a positive form. This process creates an ongoing physical presence that is concrete enough to revive the lost authority of *being-there*. After all, the immigrants are dislocated because they actually stand amidst alien objects in an alien land. To employ a metaphor, a house has not just been built to look like a house, it also turns out to function as one as well (however uncomfortably). As a result, we are less likely to treat a collection of plaster casts as documentation even though we know they are not the originals. Clearly, casts are not good at *having-been-there*.

Casting is therefore a matter of intimate surface contact and as a result it may be difficult to think of the process as a mediating activity in the sense common to, say, photographic theory. Nevertheless, moulds made from existing cast collections in European museums (routine practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries) display the kinds of degeneration you would expect when copies are made from copies. With cast sculpture degradation can be traced in the softening of detail and in an increase of seam lines caused by moulding surfaces already marked with seams of their own. Here aesthetic value sharpens the signs of reproduction as it does those of creative origination. Traces of artisanal skill speak of the sculptor's studio with the same force as an artist's thumb-print.

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Photo: Chris Dorsett)



Thus the signs of mediation are not simply documentary, rather they encourage us to see an artwork 'presented as a cast' (a phrase used in Oxford's newly refurbished Ashmolean Museum when examples from its extensive collection of plaster reproductions are displayed alongside original Graeco-Roman sculptures).



Studio of Alexander Stoddart and detail of his sculpture *Dike, Goddess of Justice*, in Paisley Museum (Photo: Chris Dorsett)

Once again there is a distinction to make here between a sign and its referent. The qualities of set plaster bear little resemblance to those of the freshly mixed liquid handled by a sculptor or studio technician. The sensuous weight of a bucket of plaster at the point it is ready to pour (just a little thicker than single cream) is very unlike the hardened matter that emerges when the mould is removed. When I recently visited the studio of the artist Alexander Stoddart I was reminded that mixing plaster is everything and everywhere in the creation of large civic sculptures. Stoddart models clay figures which he then casts into plaster for the foundry where the final bronze is produced. In this sequence plaster plays the pivotal role in transforming the artist's work into a permanent statue placed on a city street. The dusty residue left by plaster covers every surface in the various environments the sculpture passes through on its journey to completion. At each stage, this superb casting material has little personality of its own, it simply takes on the characteristics of any surface it comes into contact with. Such an idea has radical implications for our present-day dislike of inherited likeness, it suggests prosthetic efficacy, not semiotic dislocation.



Plaster casts in a contemporary art school (Photo: Chris Dorsett)

Being There

At Northumbria University a row of forgotten plaster casts stands behind the partition screen that divides a storeroom from the undergraduate students' workspaces. Here we find a *Strangford Apollo* and a *Venus de' Medici*. Both are examples of important Graeco-Roman sculptures once reproduced in countless numbers for the edification of young artists. Ironically, this collection was acquired soon after Newcastle Polytechnic gained university status in 1992. Thus nothing here is rooted in the Neoclassical tradition and whatever pedagogic aspiration provoked the purchase (anxiety about a missing heritage? Witness to an alternative history?), the casts were quickly overlooked, mostly secreted behind studio screens, where, like older cast collections, they have been vandalized. Now legs and arms are shattered leaving steel armatures exposed. The heavy sculptures rock precariously on their bases. It is tempting to interpret cast smashing as an aggressive elimination of the past but the fact that the damage remains out of sight, beyond the attention of our day-to-day academic life, is a stronger indication of the degree to which this pedagogic tradition is now comprehensively lost.

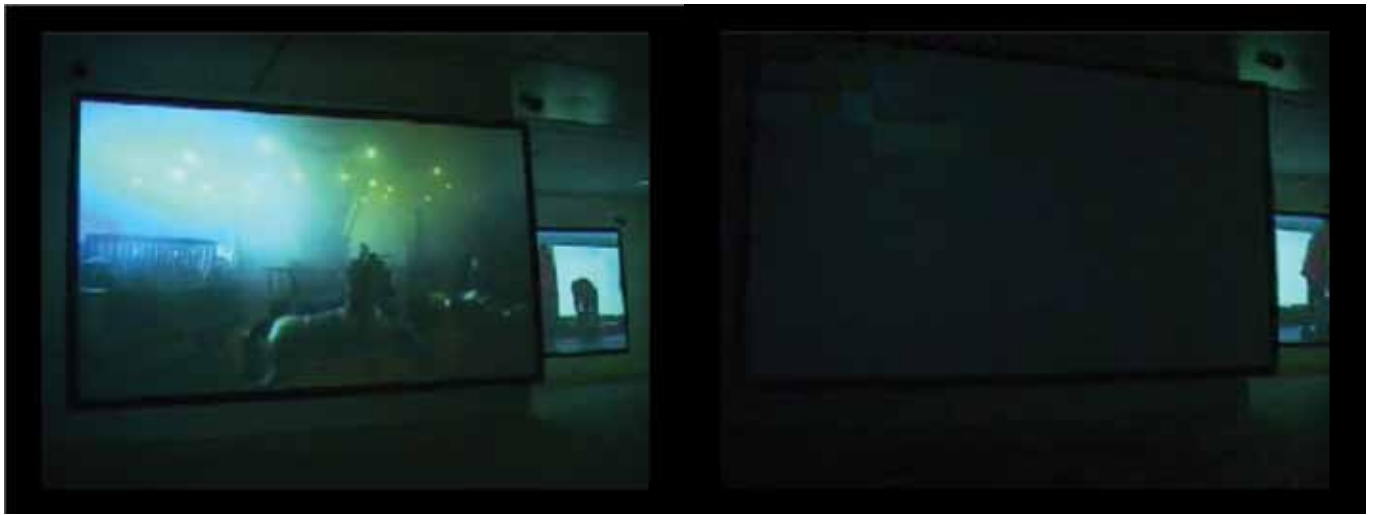
It seems we use one pair of eyes to be contemporary practitioners and, when we peer behind the studio screens, another pair to gaze upon our predecessors in the Western tradition. At the *Cast Collection Conference* at Edinburgh College of Art (2011), the influential art historian Stephen Bann elaborated this perplexing observation in relation to the historical parallels between casting processes and photography.³ It is not just that different eyes are required to study Greek sculptures, or Renaissance façades, or 19th century *écorché* figures; it is also that photographic reproduction and screen-based simulations have eclipsed the fidelity of casting, destroyed the 'ontological communion' (Bann's term) by which we could once stand meaningfully amidst Graeco-Roman sculptures in academies and museums across Europe.⁴ Rosefeldt's immigrants exemplify our alienation

from this tradition. The value once attached to *being-there* has been overlaid by the indexical effectiveness of photochemical emulsions or the processing speed of the digital technologies that transform images into pure information. In the end, it is not surprising that art school practitioners now prefer conceptualism to 'real presences' (to borrow George Steiner's phrase).

Stoddart tells me that artists from art schools do not visit him. To enter his studio is to gain access to a world rendered inconceivable by Rosalind Krauss' essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1986). 'Surprising things have come to be called sculpture' Krauss notes as she walks across open country towards the earthwork *Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoys* by Mary Miss.⁵ Around the time this essay was written sculptors ceased to need Modernism, let alone Neoclassicism. During the 1960s and 1970s we watched Mary Miss excavate subterranean passages, Richard Long walk across deserts, Gordon Matta-Clark cut buildings in half. And yet, as Krauss makes clear, these artists knew very well that sculpture was a 'historically bounded category', a type of object exemplified by the statues that mark where civic or military power exerts its authority over everyday metropolitan life.⁶

Unlike the monumental traditions that repeated and replicated the patterns laid down in Graeco-Roman sculpture, Krauss' expanded field unfolds according to the logic of opposites: that is, if sculptors create imposing figures, elevated on hefty plinths in city centres, they can also invent constructions that are not statues, have no elevation and are remote to any kind of civic space. Here a house is no longer built to look like a house and no form is cast in the likeness of its mould. Across this network of creative innovation the emulative function of replication and repetition is negated, likeness is stalled. As a result, the casting process no longer prompts our interpretative interests. Nevertheless, we still need to know that there are statues about (somewhere) because Krauss' spatial logic, her ever-expanding field of sculptures (and our license to keep stretching this term), requires one corner of the network to include statues. Normally, the Kraussian grid would be used to calculate new fields of experimentation, new kinds of 'not-sculpture'. Perversely, it can also be used to anticipate movement in the opposite direction. Situated at one end of the grid, sculpture of the kind made by Stoddart now survives as a form of dissent rather than a bounded segment of past history. If a contemporary artist can imagine site constructions that are not statues, have no elevation and are remote to any kind of civic space, then Stoddart can imagine the opposite: imposing figures that elevate a city centre. To think like this lies within the remit of the expanded field.

To argue for the disruptive presence of statues does not necessarily involve a plea for a nostalgic resuscitation of Neoclassicism, or a repairing of the mould from which the art academy was formed. Rather this thought follows the oppositional logic generated by Krauss' project. When asking artists to submit ideas for *Cast Contemporaries*, I felt sure they would respond to the fact that casts are 'somewhere' in many art school buildings (physically, intellectually). I knew they would do this because generations of art students have purposely ignored our cast collections. In Kraussian terms this is exactly the point. We do not suddenly turn our attention to Graeco-Roman sculptures and Neoclassical teaching methods but we do keep looking for alternatives to what is happening elsewhere in the expanded field. It is at this point that statues are felt to be 'somewhere' on the map.



Julian Rosefeldt, *Asylum*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, 2004
Courtesy of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

Being Somewhere

Real presence, not attention-seeking interpretations, once brought gravity to the Neoclassical environment. When Stoddart talks about sculpture, he makes me think of a sort of ‘un-life’, an inert absolute or impossible ideal, anchored architecturally to the uncertain turmoil of daily life. The power of a sacred monument and the significance of an ancestral hero were both, in this sense, voiceless voices (this image is from Jacques Rancière).⁷ And so statues can be profoundly present even when sculptural meaning goes unnoticed. Thus *Cast Contemporaries* could be said to identify a politics of non-attention which, in turn, critiques our reliance on the currency of interpretation. It could represent an ambition to be, as Stoddart puts it, ‘contra-temporalist’ and my essay asks its readers to appreciate the scope that non-attention has in puncturing the over-institutionalized contemporaneity of present-day art.

In the BALTIC’s video walk-through the darkened gallery and the archivist’s hand-held camera result in a low-grade experience that contrasts starkly with Rosefeldt’s dazzling cinematic installation. Whilst this short video has none of the production values of the artist’s film-making, it is surprising how well the impromptu recording captures the moment when one of the projections cuts out in order to rewind. Amidst the flickering screens, one image suddenly disappears in the cavernous space. At this point hesitation prompts a level of disorientation more familiar in cinemas than galleries. When a film ends and the lights go up to reveal the environment in which you have been sitting, there is a momentary puncturing of spectral engagement. Viewing *Asylum* involved a similar jolt into bewilderment. Once one screen had gone blank others rapidly followed suit leaving absolutely nothing to respond to until your interpretive faculties were able to engage with the gallery interior. I know this only because I was there. The security of spectatorship was not reinstated immediately and the viewer was left with a sense of ruptured consciousness. The content of the installation disappeared and the resulting blankness detached me

from my capacity to comprehend. I was, at this point, beyond the reach of contemporary art but also aware of a type of experience excluded from BALTIC's sense of the contemporaneous. On reflection I think of this blankness as uncharted semiotic territory. It strikes me as significant that the emptiness between two interpretive moments offers us, even though it remains uninterpretable, a sense of ontological disruption that confirms the experience of actually *being-there*. This is the difference between viewing reproduced images and being in the presence of replicated objects, and it is an effect that the casting process can reproduce time and time again.



Christine Borland, *Cast from Nature*, work in progress and completed installation, 2010
Commissioned by Glasgow Sculpture Studios (Photo: Ruth Clark)

Before Me

I am writing this essay as I install the *Cast Contemporaries* exhibition. Before me is a cast of a reclining man that has just been delivered from a storage facility in Glasgow. His pose is reminiscent of Michelangelo's *Pieta*, a resemblance noted by the sculptor Christine Borland, BALTIC Professor of Fine Art. Certainly the pose presents a profound invitation to contemplate mortality, but the effect is simultaneously shocking – the body I am looking at has been flayed from its head to its groin. Borland used this figure as the starting point for *Cast from Nature*, an installation piece exhibited at the Camden Arts Centre in 2011. Whilst the cast inspires thoughts of great sculpture, the object before me also has the corroborative indexicality of a medical specimen. Such combinations of art and science, particularly confluences of anatomical knowledge and aesthetic value, characterised the educational ambitions of the Neoclassical academy. The idea seems to have been that the beauty of sculpture rendered the shocking spectacle of a dissected body worthy of study.

Here Borland has an interesting history to explore. In the Neoclassical fashion, a teaching cast was made from an anatomized man (possibly by John Goodsir in the 1840s) which was later recast to produce the fibreglass version

which the artist came across in the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. For a contemporary artist, it is difficult not to be curious about the one person lost in this process - the man whose life story was eclipsed by the post-mortem transformation of his cadaver. Surely this is the point of aligning present-day art practices with the medical humanities. A reduction of the distance between the arts and the sciences not only mirrors the epistemological goals of the Neoclassical academy, it also creates different empathies and understandings. In Borland's case, this is in good part because a sculptor can use cast-making to promote the ontological communion that is, according to Bann, missing from lens-based reproductions. Here the disconcerting sight of the anonymous flayed man has little to do with documentary evidence but has everything to do with an original presence that is before me (here, now) precisely because, as the Ashmolean's curators have recognized, it is present as a cast – in this sense we still have the man's body.

Indeed, the spectacle of Borland recasting the cast of the flayed man, which was streamed live in the gallery at Glasgow Sculpture Studios, neatly 'recasts' Barthes' discussion of *being-there* and *having-been-there*. The presence of real-time studio work (slow and uneventful) places the viewer in a prosthetic relationship with the casting process, even though the vehicle of this experience is a screen-based medium. The installation *Cast from Nature* uses two replications that resulted from the work undertaken in Glasgow. One cast, displayed on a metal stand, reproduces the reclining figure that had lain forgotten in the storerooms of the Royal College of Surgeons. However, the second cast is placed upside down on another stand mirroring the pose of the first. Here the lost figure is differently animated, it is as if the man is flying. As Anna Jesson has written in the arts magazine *Peel*, the effect demonstrates Borland's ability to shift an inert object from the 'clinical and overlooked to the personal and elevated'.⁸ In a single thought, Jesson (an artist and writer at the beginning of her career) captures how contemporary art replaces one history with another. Standing in the midst of the *Cast Contemporaries* exhibition, I am also aware how this shift can be reversed, how the contra-temporality of this creature of the store room is understood though its long absence from public display. It is certainly time to turn new eyes on the overlooked presence of the casts that linger 'somewhere' in our art school buildings.

1. <http://archive.balticmill.com/index.php?access=&itemid=30529&fromtermid=21222&position=43&numresults=44&start=&tab=> Accessed 8 July 2012.
2. Barthes, R. (1977) 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in S. Heath (ed.) *Image, Music, Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, pp 32–51, London: Fontana. For a discussion that links Barthes concept of *having-been-there* to the relationship between a positive impression and a negative mould see: Platt, V. (2006) 'Making an Impression: Replication and the Ontology of the Graeco-Roman Seal Stone', *Art History*, Vol. 29. No. 2, April 2006, pp. 233 - 257.
3. The Cast Collection Conference, 9th -11th September 2011. See <http://www.eca.ac.uk/casts/Cast%20Collection%20International%20Conference%202011.pdf> Accessed 8 July 2012.
4. See http://whitecube.com/artists/antony_gormley/text/antony_gormley_the_raising_of_lazarus/ Accessed 8 July 2012.
5. Krauss, R. E. (1978) 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1985, pp. 276-290, 277.
6. Krauss, 279.
7. See Rancière's exploration of the silent 'language of stone' in Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Rancière, J. (2011) *Mute Speech: Literature, critical theory, and politics*, New York: Columbia University Press.
8. Jesson, A. (2012) 'Christine Borland', *Peel: Visual Arts Magazine*. Issue 3, 2012, pp. 11 - 12.

Athena in 'The Boeotia of the North'

Bill Hare

*Frown not on England: England owns him not:
Athena, no! thy plunderer was a Scot.
Ask'st thou the difference? From fair Phyles' towers
Survey Boeotia;-Caledonia's ours.
And well I know within that bastard land
Hath Wisdom's goddess never held command;*

The Curse of Minerva
Lord Byron, Athens, 1811

Shamanism could be described as the deepest root of the idea of spiritual life, deeper even than the mythological level of the later stages of Greek culture for example. But even the Greeks retained their link with shamanistic or magical behaviour. The mythological view of the world, the designation of particular places as sacred, and the building of temples on the Acropolis all belongs to a later stage.

Joseph Beuys

(Quoted by Caroline Tisdall, Anthony d'Offay exhibition publication, 1980)

There is nothing as invisible as a monument. They are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment.

The Posthumous Papers of a Living Author
Robert Musil

Many would agree with Freud that, despite all its alluring attractions, civilisation is a mixed blessing in which there are always both winners and losers, gains and losses. According to Freud in his *Civilisation and its Discontents*, the psychological origins of civilisation grew out the dominating desire of our super ego to repress and control the unruly id in all of us. Furthermore, in geographical terms, this has meant that for civilisation to thrive and flourish peripheral backward regions – Byron's 'bastard lands' – Boeotia in ancient Greece, or the Scottish Highlands in modern Britain for example, have always had to be contained and controlled by the progressive forces of the metropolitan civilising centre. This historical process for instance, can clearly be seen to have taken place in Scotland immediately after the calamitous failure of the last Jacobite uprising in the middle of the 18th century. Following Culloden and the subsequent ruthless repression of the northern Celtic hordes – the emerging enlightened Scots would embrace and be embraced by the comfort blanket of economic and cultural security offered by their southern neighbours. These Northern Britons – as they now liked to think of themselves – could safely shed their previous rude habits and cover their hairy Hibernian bodies with the sartorial trappings of civilisation – thus turning their former brutishness into Britishness.



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Yet as the great Victorian sage, Thomas Carlyle laboriously argued in *Sartor Resatus* such cross-over dressing can have a disturbing effect on the subject's sense of identity. Especially if you are a 'historical people', as David Hume described the Scots, and you are also fearful and reluctant to jettison your past in case you might lose your distinctive national and cultural identity. This mixing up of past and present can for instance, be discerned in two illuminating post-Culloden portraits of the Scottish cultural elite. For example Pompeo Batoni – court painter to the British Grand Tourists in Rome – presents in his portrait of Colonel William Gordon of Fyvie a figure symbolically layered with sartorial allegiances. Striking a swaggering, swashbuckling pose Gordon, standing in the ruins of the Coliseum and being offered the orb of victory from a statue of Roma herself, confidently takes on the mantle of the

new imperial hero. Yet as can be seen from his curiously eclectic costume – a combination of toga-like tartan plaid laid over the crimson gold-braided jacket of his British officer's uniform – Gordon's real triumph is the manner in which he has been able to negotiate and combine an array of conflicting loyalties and identities from – ancient Celt, through modern Briton, to European man of taste. If Colonel Gordon wished to display his credentials as loyal Hanoverian at the centre of the civilised world; by contrast, his fellow Scot, Norman Macleod, 22nd Clan Chief of the Macleods of Skye, preferred Allan Ramsay to set his portrait in his ancestral domain on the outer periphery of Western civilisation. Like Gordon, Macleod also reneged on his former Jacobite feudal sympathies and shrewdly threw in his lot with the modern forces of British military might. Thus, although at the time when the portrait was painted in the later 1740s the wearing of Highland dress was proscribed, because Macleod, after much dithering, supplied his clansmen to the British army's victory at Culloden, he could safely have his image swathed in a cascade of tartan wrapping. To off-set this outburst of Caledonian commitment however, Macleod cunningly strikes a classical pose in order to demonstrate his cultural credentials to his London audience – where the portrait was painted and first seen – even if it does produce the rather incongruous sight of the *Apollo Belvedere* striding through the bracken in tartan trews.

This choice of the *Apollo Belvedere* by a Scottish painter and noble sitter is significant for two reasons – one concerning the subject, the other the status of this particular Graeco-Roman statue. Firstly, the *Apollo Belvedere* is a representation of the Pythian Apollo. In this particular guise, Apollo – 'Lord of the Silver Bow' as Homer called him – is about to release his arrow and slay the monstrous she-dragon, Python at Delphi, which would then become Apollo's scared sanctuary. For the ancient Greeks this myth symbolised the triumph of divine, and subsequently human reason, over the dark chthonic forces of Nature, which not only lurked in the bowels of the Earth, but also within the savage regions of human society and the human mind. With such a momentous event we return to the violent origins of Western civilisation through the crushing of the Barbaric Other by the ordering forces of civilisation: or, within Freudian terms, the intellectual Super Ego of Dr Jekyll taking over control from the instinctive Id of Mr Hyde. Secondly, turning to the cultural status of the *Apollo Belvedere*, this statue – from the time of its discovery during the Renaissance to the Enlightenment period – rapidly became the artistic and fashionable icon of classical ideal beauty. This judgement was internationally agreed, especially after the publication of the writings on ancient Greek art by the German scholar J. J. Winckelmann in the middle of the eighteenth century, where he eulogised on the beautiful male nude figure which for him embodied the perfect balance between 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur'. Winckelmann's ideas and writings emanating from Rome soon dominated the aesthetic taste of the Grand Tourists – many of whom were Scots. This Hellenisation of the Northern imagination and cultural aspirations quickly spread throughout Enlightenment Europe and subsequently became the holy writ for all ambitious art academies.

The neo-classical art academy was undoubtedly the Enlightenment's most notable and influential contribution to the history of Western art and became the powerhouse of artistic teaching and practice throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Needless to say no civilised country or city could be taken seriously without such an important national or civic institution for itself. Not surprisingly peripheral and stateless Scotland was severely disadvantaged with its own ambitions for such cultural recognition and was comparatively late in acquiring its own Royal Scottish Academy in 1826. The preparatory groundwork for this keenly sought symbol of cultural recognition was however laid much earlier. Various smaller independent art training establishments – such as the St Luke's, the Foulis' and the Trustees' academies operated in Edinburgh and Glasgow throughout the eighteenth century. A mixture of industrial design and fine art courses were provided, and for the latter, a few sculptural casts

after the antique were supplied. Yet with the rapid spread of Scotland's own particular brand of philhellenism, the amassing of casts – taken from numerous works within celebrated European and British collections – soon grew into an addictive obsession for the Scottish art establishment. This was especially the case with Edinburgh, as it was obliged to turn to culture, rather than politics, to assert its position as a European capital of distinction.

If individual Scots-seeking to flaunt their fashionable taste and classical education- could dress themselves up as Graeco-Roman gods and ancient heroes for their *a la Grec* portraits; why not also apply the same stylistic fancy dress to civic buildings – or even a whole city such as Edinburgh – by turning away from the dark Gothic savagery of 'Auld Reekie' to the enlightened classical civility of the 'Athens of the North'? Furthermore, by the early nineteenth century Scotland could also claim that its capital's academy had now acquired 'one of the largest and best collections of casts from the antique in the United Kingdom'. Throughout the century the Royal Scottish Academy continued to acquire more and more pieces for its cast collection. This collecting mania continued to such an extent that the especially designed Statue Gallery in William Playfair's Neo-Greek Temple at the foot of the Mound eventually could no longer cope with the sheer volume of plaster models which now outnumbered the students they were intended to instruct. Needless to say, as contemporary Victorian photographs show, overcrowding became a pressing problem.

The solution to the consequences of this particular example of Scottish compulsive behaviour was to remove the teaching of art students from the Royal Scottish Academy and transfer that role over to a new educational body who would be provided with a specially designed building to house Scotland's treasured cast collection. Even though this was carried out during the first decade of the twentieth century – by which time for instance, Picasso had already painted *Les Femmes d'Alger* – the newly commissioned Edinburgh College of Art was still committed to an academic neo-classical programme of art education with its cast collection being integral to the architectural and pedagogical ethos of its domain. Furthermore, if a century earlier the Scottish capital had failed miserably to create on its own acropolis a replica temple to its adopted protective deity; then it was now up to the new Edinburgh College of Art to provide a fitting interior sanctuary for Athena, her Olympian family and her ancient Athenian subjects. Although this relationship between Athena and the new Edinburgh College of Art seemed to be a perfect union, unfortunately it was still born right from the outset. This can be witnessed in the commissioned photographs of Edinburgh's newly opened Art College which shows Athena's designate domain as a moribund mausoleum populated by petrified presences who might have dared to look at the image of the Gorgon's severed head on the Goddess's aegis and been cast into illustrious corpses.

It is difficult to assess how much, or more appropriately, how little, the Athenian casts were actually used for teaching purposes in the life studios of Edinburgh College of Art. There is certainly little evidence however, from the work of students and ex-students that they gained much guidance or creative inspiration from that particular source during their art education, or later artistic development. There are in fact good reasons to explain this apparent lack of interest in the casts as an art teaching aid. Just after the opening of the Edinburgh College of Art the First World War broke out. During its four year conflict European civilisation waged a relentless and horrific assault on the human body. It is therefore little surprising then that after 1918 the European classical ideal of the body beautiful carried little conviction – until the Nazis took it up again and used it for their own perverted propagandist purposes. During the inter-war years the cast collection at Edinburgh was mainly ignored; only to be used occasionally as props for the College's annual Dionysian *Revels*. In fact the whole tenor of the teaching at Edinburgh College of Art had moved away from an Athenian approach – with its emphasis on rules and rationality

– to one much more in the emotional and subjective spirit of Dionysus. Within the Edinburgh School the making of art was now seen as more to do with personal taste than objective reason; less concerned with sense and more involved with sensibility. As a consequence the decorative landscape and the delicate still life supplanted the classical conquering hero, the fallen warrior and the reclining goddess.



ECA Archives



Eduardo Paolozzi, *Icarus*, 1957
(Courtesy of Scottish National Gallery)

After the twentieth century's second cataclysmic disaster however there was one major Scottish artist – with a brief connection to Edinburgh College of Art in his early career – who returned, both to the figure and ancient themes, for the subject matter of his art. Eduardo Paolozzi's savagely brutal and severely brutalised sculptures of the post-war period was his own cathartic response to living in a traumatised age which was trying to come to terms with the aftermath of the Holocaust, and also attempting to learn how to cope with the imminent possibility of the total nuclear annihilation of human civilisation. Being under such an apocalyptic threat Paolozzi felt it necessary to turn to ancient art and myth for his creative inspiration. Unfortunately, because of its undesirable association with the fascist and Stalinist preference for classicism, Paolozzi was obliged to turn his back on the sophisticated achievements of the academic tradition and return to an earlier and less historically contaminated type of sculpture. To achieve this Paolozzi had to formulate his own sculptural method. This was based on his adaptation of the primitive practice of *bricolage*. In this way found ready-made objects – culled from the detritus of modern consumer society – were collaged together and cast into new forms to become the raw matter for the construction of his inchoate statues. Although bearing ancient Greek names – such as *Jason*, *Icarus* and *Elektra* – these monstrous deformed creations of Paolozzi would certainly horrify Athena, for they represented the very forces of darkness which her father, Zeus, and the rest of the Olympian gods, had struggled to contain and defeat during the primordial stages of Creation. In Freudian terms these hybrid mutants and cyborgs – part human, part beast,



Photocopied images of Joseph Beuys performing *Celtic Kinloch Rannoch – Scottish Symphony* and the *Strategy: Get Arts* banner on the Edinburgh College of Art building (1970)
 Courtesy of the Demarco Foundation

part robot – were a frightening manifestation of what he called ‘the return of the repressed’. For Athena they must have been a disturbing omen, heralding the approaching barbarians soon to be heard hammering at the gates of her citadel.

Athena’s forebodings soon proved correct. In 1970 a small group of Teutonic terrorists from Dusseldorf Kunst Akademie, – led by their charismatic Celtic chief, Joseph Beuys – captured and set up camp in Athena’s northern statuary during their exhibition for Edinburgh Festival of that year. Under the enigmatic and palindromic banner of *Strategy: Get Arts* these Gothic invaders performed a range of esoteric rituals – from Klaus Rinke’s deluge of the building’s main portal, through Stefan Wewerke’s scattering of broken chairs across the grand staircase, to Guther Uecker’s constantly banging studio door which must have given Athena a splitting headache. It was Beuys however, who left the most indelible mark and lasting impression during this occupation of the Edinburgh College of Art building. Unlike Athena, who always remained close to the Scottish capital, Beuys was captivated by his pilgrimage to Caledonia’s rugged northern landscape which he called ‘the last great wilderness of Europe’. After his preparatory reconnoitre to the ‘land of Macbeth and Ossian’ on Rannoch Moor, he returned to Edinburgh College of Art to carry out his *Celtic Kinloch Rannoch – Scottish Symphony*. This four hour, twice daily ‘action’, as Beuys termed it, was loosely structured and improvised round a complex set of interconnecting holistic rituals – involving music, film, blackboard instruction, a silent grand piano, base materials and a shamanistic performance which exorcised the spirit of the place and returned it to the ‘world of the Celts’. Immediately after these acts of desecration ceased and order was restored, the horrified Edinburgh College of Art’s authorities took steps to placate the outraged anger of Athena for this violation of her domain, by removing all traces of this alien intrusion – including painting over the piece of vandalism *Blue/yellow/white/red* perpetrated by Blinky Palermo on the classical architectural frieze around the main staircase (see page 23).

Unfortunately, as far as Athena was concerned this soon proved an empty gesture as her custodians reneged on their earlier iconoclasm and had Palermo's wall painting 'reinstated as a work of art'. Furthermore, the profound influence of Joseph Beuys' artistic thought ('thinking forms'), cultural debate ('spoken forms') and creative practice ('social sculpture') on the student body at Edinburgh College of Art and other Scottish art colleges, has only increased from decade to decade since *Strategy: Get Art*. Yet Athena has not been ignored completely. Thanks to the efforts of a small band of dedicated disciples the surviving collection of cast sculptures - after decades of neglect and mistreatment-have recently been conscientiously restored to a respectable condition again. Yet whether this will make them more 'visible' to staff and students within Edinburgh College of Art is still to be seen. This may prove to be a difficult challenge. As Robert Musil pointed out in his essay *Monuments*, 'Anything that endures over time sacrifices its ability to make an impression. Anything that constitutes the walls of our life, the backdrop of our consciousness forfeits its capacity to play a role in that consciousness'. Maybe however, *Cast Contemporaries* will, prove Musil wrong in the end.

Athena, for all her vaunted wisdom, must wonder how and why she ever allowed herself to have anything to do with this Northern 'bastard land'. As with the similar fate of Medea at the hands of a fickle lover, Athena must now feel like a scorned spouse abandoned in an alien country. To add to her sense of bitter loss Athena will sadly look back to much happier times when she was worshipped and adored by her Hibernian lover. Then her raw and ardent admirer, aspiring to be worthy of such paradigms of perfection, was completely enthralled to her every wish: everything he touched in stone or plaster was an open declaration of ever-lasting devotion to her very name. Yet ironically just at the point when this self-styled modern Athenian declared his commitment to their eternal union by building a temple to house her divine presence, the rift between them appeared, and his former passion began rapidly to wane and wither away. From then on this cold-hearted Scot turned his back on her and all that reminded him of his former feelings.

So much for love in a cold climate – from Athena's chilly perspective, the Athens of the North must now seem more like the arctic Reykjavik of the South. And finally, to add future injury to past insult, her arch enemy, Sparta has built an horticultural outpost poised for attack, less than thirty miles west of her less than secure *Castellum est urbs*.



Courtesy of the Demarco Foundation



Royal Scottish Academy (formerly the Royal Institution), Edinburgh (Photo: John K. McGregor)

The Cast Collection at Edinburgh College of Art

Margaret Stewart

The plaster cast collection arrived at Edinburgh College of Art between 1910 and 1913 after its former home in the Royal Institution building on Princes Street, Edinburgh was altered for its new function as the headquarters of the Royal Scottish Academy. This grandiloquent neo-Greek 'temple' of the arts was built in 1822 and enlarged in 1831-36 by the architect, William Henry Playfair. His design included a gallery on its upper floor to accommodate the cast collection of the drawing school of the Board of Trustees for Manufactures and Fisheries for Scotland. The drawing school came to be known as the Trustees Academy. Founded in 1760, eight years before the Royal Academy in London, it was the oldest publicly funded art school in the UK. The new college was designed with a Sculpture Court for the display of the cast collection. The proportions of the Sculpture Court were modelled using a measurement from the Parthenon of Athens, and like Playfair's display at the Mound, the court was top-lit and the casts of the Parthenon frieze were placed above head height.¹ The double-height, arcaded Sculpture Court was, however, modelled on the great court of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. These choices demonstrate the governors' respect and awareness of the value of the cast collection.



Sculpture Court at Edinburgh College of Art (Photo: John K. McGregor)

Educational role of casts

The fortunes of casts' collections have fluctuated according to changing perceptions about their educational function and current art fashions, and this is no less true of the collection in Edinburgh. At the height of its prestige it was used to teach drawing of the ideal human form based on intensive studies of Graeco-Roman statues or selected works of the great Renaissance masters. The counterpart to the Antique School was the Life School where the students studied the live model nude and draped as the un-ideal human form. The casts were also used for rigorous drawing examinations. From c.1852 Robert Scott Lauder introduced a new method for drawing casts.² Formerly a single cast would be moved into a convenient well-lit position and studied with little or no reference to its visual context. Lauder, however, positioned his students in front of the casts where they were placed when not in use against the walls of the Sculpture Gallery. The casts were tightly packed in, and in random groups – as we



Sculpture Gallery of the Trustees Academy, c.1890 (ECA Archives)

William McTaggart, prize drawing after the Antique, 1855 (Photo: John K. McGregor)

can still see them today in the corridors at the College. Lauder's only intervention was the addition of a low raking light which shone a strong contrasting light onto the creamy surfaces. This method taught skills in observation: in a single drawing, which could take over a year to complete, Lauder's pupils learnt composition, tone, perspective, depth of field, shadowing, the balance of light a dark for dramatic effect, and they also developed the graphic ability to distinguish figures set in complex overlapping groups. Three of the drawings that were awarded prizes at South Kensington are preserved as part of the College's retained student work. These were used in the studios for many years as exemplars of excellence in drawing. Lauder's pupils became some of the finest artists in Scotland – William McTaggart, William Chalmers, William Quiller Orchardson, John Pettie and others are still known as the Scott Lauder School.³ Despite the praise Lauder's method received from the government's inspectors it is not known to have been adopted beyond Edinburgh.

In the later nineteenth century all the UK schools, including Edinburgh College of Art, introduced standardised examinations. Single casts such as *Marcellus*, or the *Venus de' Medici* were the pieces specified for the examinations – this explains why some art schools still have multiple casts of these figures. The examination required three drawings of one single cast: drawn as it stands, drawn as an (imagined) *écorché* with the skin and fat removed to expose the muscles, and finally the (imagined) skeleton of the figure was drawn within a diagrammatic outline of the cast. The exam tested knowledge of anatomy acquired from lectures and from dissections of human corpses.

The College owns one of only two casts of 'Smugglerius' – the other is in the collection of the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Smugglerius is the anatomised corpse of a criminal called James Langar who was executed at Tyburn in 1776.⁴ His corpse was anatomised by Dr. William Hunter, put into the pose of the Graeco-Roman *Dying Gaul* (also in the ECA collection) and then moulded for casting in plaster. Putting the corpse into a classical



'Smuggerius', cast made by William Pink in 1854 (Photo: John K. McGregor)

pose makes the visual and metaphysical link for us between the idealised classical beauty of the Graeco-Roman sculpture and the human body at its most corporeal.

This form of study prepared the student to make credible renderings of ideal bodies in their 'history' its most corporeal. This form of study prepared the student to make credible renderings of ideal bodies in their 'history' paintings, that is, classical art. This was the standard form of academic art education formulated from the Renaissance onwards. It was an embedded and institutionalised education that required physical and mental endurance on the part of the students to complete the course. It took a social, cultural and artistic revolution to change it.

Decline in cast collections

The educational value of cast collections hit rock bottom in the mid-twentieth century. The revolution that initiated this change was Modernism with its rejection of bodily beauty and realism, and its advocacy of 'art for art's sake'. Non-representational art killed off cast collections as the principle tools of art education. They became associated with an education that was believed to suppress the creative imagination. Consequently large numbers of cast collections were wholly or partly destroyed. At Edinburgh College of Art casts were reportedly broken up in the 1960s and 1970s when they became too damaged (and too expensive) to repair. Nevertheless, thanks to the vigilance of some staff a good many of the most valuable casts survived.⁵ We now have just over 200 casts but this is only a fragment of the original collection which must have numbered many hundreds.⁶ Some losses were recorded, and we know that there were huge numbers of architectural and ornamental casts that no longer exist.



Goddess Nike unfastening her Sandal (Photo: ECA Cast Collection)

Casts of the west frieze of the Parthenon, cast by Pietro Sarti (Photo: John K. McGregor)

The historical significance of the Edinburgh casts

Art school collections like the College's, still housed in their original settings, are rare survivals. It is the oldest cast collection in Scotland, and the second oldest educational collection in the UK, and the ninth oldest in the world. In the UK all art school collections, except the collection at the Royal Academy in London which still has eighteenth-century casts, were largely accumulated after the mid-nineteenth century from industrial workshops such as Brucciani who supplied art schools all over the British Empire and the Americas.

The Trustees Academy had a modest collection of casts including a *Spinario* and a *Laocoön* (both destroyed) in the Academy in the eighteenth century but it was soon to be unique amongst art schools and private collections in having Parthenon casts from as early as 1817. Shortly before Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, sold his famous collection of Athenian marbles to the British Museum in 1816, the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon had obtained Elgin's permission to mould some pieces. Haydon's moulds and casts were made by Mazzoni. According to Haydon's journal these included a selection of frieze panels and statuary casts of the Theseus and the Illisos that were sent to Edinburgh.⁷ However, while Elgin sold all his marbles and moulds to the British Museum he seems to have retained one set of frieze casts of the Temple of Nike Apteros, a slab of the *Goddess Nike unfastening her Sandal* and the metopes from the Temple of Theseus in Athens. He donated these casts to the Academy in 1827 because, as he stated in a letter '... neither there [in London] nor in any other country in Europe ... has more



Reclining Goddesses from the Parthenon, cast made from a Mazzoni mould in 1837 (Photo: John K. McGregor)

been done than [by Edinburgh in] furnishing to individuals the facilities for drawing...'.⁸ The frieze from the Temple of Nike Apteros and a replica cast of the slab are now the only part of his gift surviving in the collection. This donation initiated a policy by the Trustees of collecting only the finest casts; many are first and second strikes from original moulds, either commissioned from Italy, or casts of modern works gifted by the sculptors Canova and Thorvaldsen.

In the 1820s the Scottish sculptor Thomas Campbell was in Rome where he obtained permission to have *The Dead Christ* from Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St Peter's Basilica moulded specially for the Trustees' collection. In the 1830s the Board of Trustees undertook an ambitious acquisition programme: a complete 'Elgin set' was acquired from the British Museum in 1837.⁹

This included a set of casts of the west frieze of the Parthenon made by Pietro Sarti using his own moulds which we now know were the same moulds that Elgin had sold to the British Museum in 1816. The remainder of the casts were specially moulded and cast by Richard Westmacott, except for the *Reclining Goddesses* and *Seated Goddesses* which had been commissioned for the British government but were not sent as diplomatic gifts to the Louvre and the Vatican as originally intended. The casts record in crisp detail the condition of the marbles in the early nineteenth century.



Gates of Paradise, cast made by Clement Pappi (Photo: Chris Dorsett)

Dying Adonis, cast made by Clement Pappi (Photo: Margaret Stewart)

In the same decade a series of casts was imported to Edinburgh from Florence. We know that Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* and the *Dying Adonis*, and possibly other Italian casts included in that shipment, were made from the moulds of Clemente Pappi.¹⁰ The moulding of these sculptures for casting was a commission by the great neoclassical painter, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Director of the French Academy in Rome, to supply casts of important Renaissance masterpieces for the French artists.

In the 1839 Andrew Wilson, an art dealer, artist and historian resident in Italy acquired the collection of 255 Albacini busts for the Trustees.¹¹ This important collection of Graeco-Roman busts and portrait busts was considered one of the most valued in Europe at that date. When the Board of Trustees ceased in 1906, the collection was removed to the National Gallery of Scotland where a portion is now displayed in the gallery at the Mound in Edinburgh. The Albacini busts were the last of the great classical acquisitions acquired for the Trustees collection.

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century the classical cast and the life model remained the pre-eminent tools of art education. But in the mid decades, and largely as a result of the innovations of Charles Heath Wilson, the emphasis in the Academy swung back towards design. Design had always been immensely important but neoclassical taste had influenced the choice of designs as well as the subject matter. Robert Scott Lauder as the Master of the Academy successfully fought for the retention of a life class in the Trustees Academy which the Royal Scottish Academy considered inappropriate for a mere design school. Lauder's response to this was that designers needed to be able to draw as skillfully and fluently as 'fine artists'. Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, the Secretary of the Board, was in the vanguard of the Trustees' promotion of industrial development all over Scotland. Textiles, lace, ceramics, glass, ironwork, crockery and metal work were acquired for the Academy's collections. In addition to this premiums were awarded for improved machinery design and to farmers for livestock breeding

to improve the qualities of wool and flax for linen production. Winners of premiums displayed their designs at an annual exhibition held in Edinburgh. An outstanding success in the 1830s was the production of cashmere shawls of better quality and at lower cost than the French shawls. From the late 1830s the Trustees' policies were driven by three great art education administrators: Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, the designer and architect Charles Heath Wilson, and the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Dyce. Wilson, whose father was the Board's art agent in Italy, was an articulate and urbane theorist of art. He and Dyce were uniquely qualified to select samples of objects, ancient and modern for their pupils to study. The Academy's achievements did not go unnoticed and Wilson and Dyce were summoned to London to assist the government with the introduction of new schemes for design and art education in the UK: Dyce helped found the municipal art schools' system, while Wilson laid the foundation of the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Another vital aspect of the success of the Academy was its library. A large portion of the Board's art library was discovered at the College in the summer of 2011 and it provides an additional insight into the range of material made available to the design students to consult in their studies.

The last great additions to the cast collection were made in 1912 after the college was established in its new building at Lauriston. The *Princess Margaret Tomb* and *Sedilia* from Lincluden Collegiate Church were commissioned by the Governors of the College from Joseph Cavagnari in 1912. The other large architectural casts in the Sculpture Court are the *Tomb of Ferry de Gros*, *Lord of Dyeghem Nieunland* and the medieval mantelpiece from a house in Le Mans. These were probably purchased by a deputation of Governors, including the architect Sir Robert Lorimer, who travelled to the Continent to buy casts in 1913. The Scottish casts were commissioned by Robert Rowand Anderson, possibly in connection with his direction of the Scottish National Art Survey which undertook the most accurate and scrupulous survey of Scotland's important historical monuments that had ever been attempted.

Restoring the role of casts

The College's collection holds some of the oldest and best preserved casts to be found in the UK and Europe. Its history credentials are unsurpassed but nevertheless casts in a contemporary art school must earn their keep as active elements in the creative life of the institution. One of the aims of the Cast Collection project was to ensure that it could find a new role in that context. The collection had to remain mobile in order to vacate spaces for other uses, so we repaired the plinths and replaced the old castors to reduce vibrational damage; had it been made a static collection it would eventually have been put in storage. Removing the casts would have denuded the College of its spirit.

The twentieth century was the nemesis of the older art tradition as well as of cast collections as tools of emulation. Danto, Lukács, Derrida and other philosophers of aesthetics have debated Hegel's theory of the 'end of art'. To varying degrees they have concluded that art no longer has any constraining tradition, consistency, standards or internal self-justification. It is futile to speak about post-modernism as the 'end of art' because it is not art that has run out of steam but the rules that once dictated our cultural values. Disposing of casts cannot be justified even by the Modernists striving to purge art of its history. Casts can be disturbing reminders of former certainties – the orthodoxies of classicism and Modernism no longer dictate the certainties by which we make judgments. Possibly it is the visual power of casts, rather than their former honorific role as icons of the western tradition, which will carry them forward through the unfinished and unfinishable narrative of history. It is no longer appropriate to reject

or smash casts because they do not serve the ideology of Modernism because Modernism is also now obsolete, and the cast in the art school has recovered the right to be there and to survive.

As it happens young artists know this better than their tutors and are comfortable interacting with their heritages. Since the project began we have had over twenty student 'interventions' - non-invasive uses of the casts by students in their own creative work. In our own exhibitions we have used the casts as the principle medium of non-traditional ways of thinking – 'Smugglerius' used photography, and 'Refuge for the Muses' used real trees, poetry and prose to evoke links between Scotland's cultural heritage and ancient Greece.

Cast Contemporaries is the culmination of the Cast Collection project's determination to demonstrate the continuing value of the cast collection. Classicism – dead or alive, hated or loved, but now liberated from the burden of its own historiography can continue to be an unending source of thought, imagery and creativity.

1. Stewart, M. C. H. and Naik, A (2007), "The Hellenization of Edinburgh: Cityscape, Architecture and Athenian Cast Collection", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 66, no. 3, pp. 365-390.
2. Duncan Macmillan, *Scottish Art 1460-2000 (2000)*, Mainstream, Edinburgh, pp. 204, 231.
3. Macmillan, 231.
4. For the research of Joan Smith and Jeanne Cannizzo see, <http://www.executedtoday.com/2012/05/27/1776-benjamin-harley-thomas-henman-smugglerius/>. Accessed 5 July 2012.
5. Vincent Butler undertook the repair of casts saving many from destruction. He and William Brotherston continued to use casts to teach sculptors drawing right up until the 1990s.
6. There were in fact two principal collections: the casts of the School of Art and the casts of the School of Design but in practice there was no distinction between the collections.
7. Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Annals of Fine Arts* (1817) p.260. I am grateful to Steve Lorenti for drawing my attention to this source for the Mazzoni casts. The arrival of the Mazzoni casts is recorded in the archives of the Board of Trustees.
8. Letter from Lord Elgin in Paris to William Allan in Edinburgh, Paris, 6 February 1840, National Register of Archives (Scotland), 1464/39.
9. Once acquired the Mazzoni casts were sold at auction.
10. Ecole nationale superieure des Beaux-Arts, Archives, Microfilm AJ52.446, Bobine 1, Accounts, 1835 for works made by Pappi in 1834.
11. NG1/3/25, Letter book of the Board of Manufactures, Nov 1833-June 1839, f.358, 359 Letter to Freeborn, Jones & Co, Roma from George Thomson, 6 June 1839. <http://jhc.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/2/145.full.pdf>. Glenys Davies, 'The Albacini Collection. Character and significance', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol 3, Volume 3, Issue 2, pp. 145-165.



Photographs from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Ashmolean Museum, and V&A Museum.
(Photo: Murdo Macdonald)



Courting Casts

Murdo Macdonald

I care about casts so I wanted to contribute something to this exhibition of *Cast Contemporaries*. But – in the spirit of casting – I wanted to set limits to my work. A cast is limited and can be repeated, up to a point. That is what I wanted – or something of what I wanted – here. The advent of digital photography helped me to make photographs of casts in the informal but directed way I had always tried to. For me it seems that the natural state of the pencil of nature is to draw on a medium density digital sensor. It also gave me a way of finding the limits I was looking for.



To provide a physical limit I used the digital printer at the Visual Research Centre in Dundee. I used its largest printing size to specify the size of the prints. A conceptual limit was the decision to print the images without cropping. Another was to print them in black and white. That reduced the variables of production sufficiently to make me feel the images might emerge. And they did.

But why casts? At least for me? The aesthetic/sexual charge of a cast of a Greek hero or goddess? Who has not felt that? Man Ray certainly felt it. His photographic approach to a cast of a torso of Aphrodite and to his models, including Meret Oppenheim and Kiki de Montparnasse, are more or less identical.

When I could, I used to spend time in the then dilapidated cast court of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It was a place of wonder, beauty and because of its run-down dustiness a place of informality. Later when I came to work in Dundee, I found another group of run-down and dusty casts and, again, I loved being in their presence. Despite damage, peeling coats of paint, and innumerable student interventions and transformations (a cling-film wrap worked particularly well), these works retained their wonder. I was recently among the neatly restored casts in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. They were perhaps a bit too clean for my taste: the Laocoon group looked so freshly scrubbed it began to lose its mythical edge. But I am being unfair, the whole experience among those refurbished casts was a fabulous ramble through myth-as-material-culture.

Every encounter with a cast is an education. The more so if you have the good fortune to be able to draw it, as students like William McTaggart (whose dynamic cast drawings prefigure the dynamism of his seascapes) were able to draw the superb early generation casts which have always informed the heart Edinburgh College of Art.

Thinking more about casts, I remember that in film and theatre casting gives rise to the good or bad performance of a work. For the artist-caster the plaster fills-out the mold to make the cast, which then ‘performs’, that is to say completely furnishes, the meaning of the piece from which the mold was taken. Interesting. There is much more I want to say here, not least about the value of being able to photograph casts when the original is badly or fitfully illuminated. For that precise reason in the 1890s much excellent photography of West Highland Sculpture was done from casts made on site with papier-maché moulds. But a good cast is in itself like a good set of photographs. It enables you to understand. In that respect as three-dimensional printing becomes more easy, to the cast-enthusiast it is just a move to digital, rather than a change of perspective. A coming full circle so to speak. A traditional cast is just an earlier printing process.

It is interesting to think about a photographer like Muybridge here. His *Human Figure in Motion* reminds me strongly of a cast court. But that’s for another essay.



Carlo and Filippo Albacini
*Various busts on the stairway
of the Scottish National Gallery*
Scottish National Gallery

For the first time since 1907...

seven plaster Albacini busts will be reunited with casts from the ECA collection. In 1835 the Trustees Academy in Edinburgh acquired by purchase a rare collection of 255 casts of Roman busts from the Albacini family of Florence. At the time this was considered to be the most complete collection of antique busts in existence. The acquisition and delivery of the collection to Edinburgh was managed by the art historian and agent of the Trustees Academy in Italy, Andrew Wilson, assisted by his son Charles Heath Wilson, who was a master of the Academy.

When the Board of Trustees for Manufactures and Fisheries and its art school ceased in 1907 a new municipal art school (now the ECA) was built on a new site at Lauriston. The Board's art collections were divided between the new College and the National Gallery of Scotland: the College took the educational materials – retained student work, the historic cast collection and the art library, while the Albacini casts and the oil paintings and drawings of distinguished artists became part of the present-day collections of the Scottish National Gallery. A large selection of the Albacini casts is currently displayed in the south staircase of the National Gallery building at The Mound.

The Albacini busts have been loaned to *Cast Contemporaries* by the Scottish National Gallery

Cast Contemporaries

Exhibition Summary

Visitors to *Cast Contemporaries* will find selected examples of the celebrated collection of plaster casts that are, for those who teach and study at Edinburgh College of Art, a feature of everyday life. The exhibition is an opportunity to place these sculptures, too easily seen as furnishings within the extraordinary architecture of the ECA building, alongside contemporary art – for example, the inventive use of plaster as a medium in its own right (Gareth Fisher) or an approach to casting that replicates, and yet curiously transforms, over-familiar objects (Kenny Hunter's bin bag and FACTICE's make-up sachets). However our purpose is also to explore how artists are responding to the forgotten casts that have been stored away in college basements and art school cupboards for decades. For example, chancing upon an anonymous anatomical figure, dusty and broken, can sharpen our understanding of the ethical dilemmas that straddle the gap between art and science (Christine Borland) or, in relation to a discarded *Eros of Centocelle*, trigger an interest in aesthetic pleasure, suggesting contested notions of sensual and intellectual wellbeing (Chris Dorsett). Whilst some exhibits help us recall a time when casts were common-place teaching aids (Andrew Sneddon's new bronze sculpture uses a broken fragment of an anatomical figure by Eduardo Lanteri), others celebrate the conservation techniques now required to restore these sculptures to museum-worthy standards (Ruxandra-Iulia Stoica & Graciela Ainsworth). The exhibition also demonstrates how young artists are turning new eyes, sometimes with clear reference to popular culture, on the Classical and Renaissance sculptures that the casts reproduced (Tim Croft, John Farrugia, Clare Flatley, Dylan Shields). Because the Hellenic styles that dominated 18th and 19th century European taste were, in part, disseminated and absorbed through cast collections, *Cast Contemporaries* also embraces (in the form of architectural models) Edinburgh's status as 'Athens of the North' (Douglas Cruikshank & Scott Licznerski), digitally reconfigures a Classical frieze (Beverley Hood) and discovers a Stuckist dimension to the decorative designs of Pompeian wall painting (Paul Harvey). Moreover, the exhibition has its own contemporary way of representing the mentality and materiality of Neoclassicism (Graeme Durant's out-of-scale 'Platonic' forms and Maria Mitsoula's photographic abstractions of marble quarries in Athens). In the 19th century casts were collected for the purposes of study, mostly through careful observational drawing. These days artists use photography to explore the shapes and forms of Graeco-Roman sculpture (Murdo Macdonald, Norman McBeath) whilst others continue to make cast drawings in museums or art schools, with unexpected humour and poetry (Steven Morant, Joan Smith). *Cast Contemporaries* offers a unique opportunity to compare a contemporary application of 'stump' drawing with 19th century examination works which used this technique to draw the ECA casts (Charles Stiven) – it also features (from 10th August) a live video stream from a drawing class in one of ECA's atmospheric studios (Chris Speed, Jane Macdonald, Jules Rawlinson & Margaret Stewart). Lastly, we must not forget that the starting point of a monumental sculpture is often a clay model which is destroyed as the mould is made. *Cast Contemporaries* would be incomplete if it did not try to represent this unexhibitable stage in the development of a public sculpture (Alexander Stoddart).

Cast Contemporaries

Exhibitors



Christine Borland
Plaster cast of anatomized man (mid-nineteenth century)
Source of *Cast From Nature*
2010



So this is really gonna be a bit like watching paint dry.

Tim Croft
Stand Up
2012



Douglas Cruikshank & Scott Licznerski

Model of Calton Hill, Edinburgh

2010

Displayed with a bronze model of the Parthenon

Attributed to Sir Edward Thomason (1769-1849)

Lent by the Scottish National Gallery



Chris Dorsett
Eros of the Studio Cupboard IV
2012



Graeme Durant
Platonic Form
2012



FACTICE (Corinne Felgate & Ludovica Gioscia)
Liquid injection (detail)
2011
Photo: Michele Panzeri



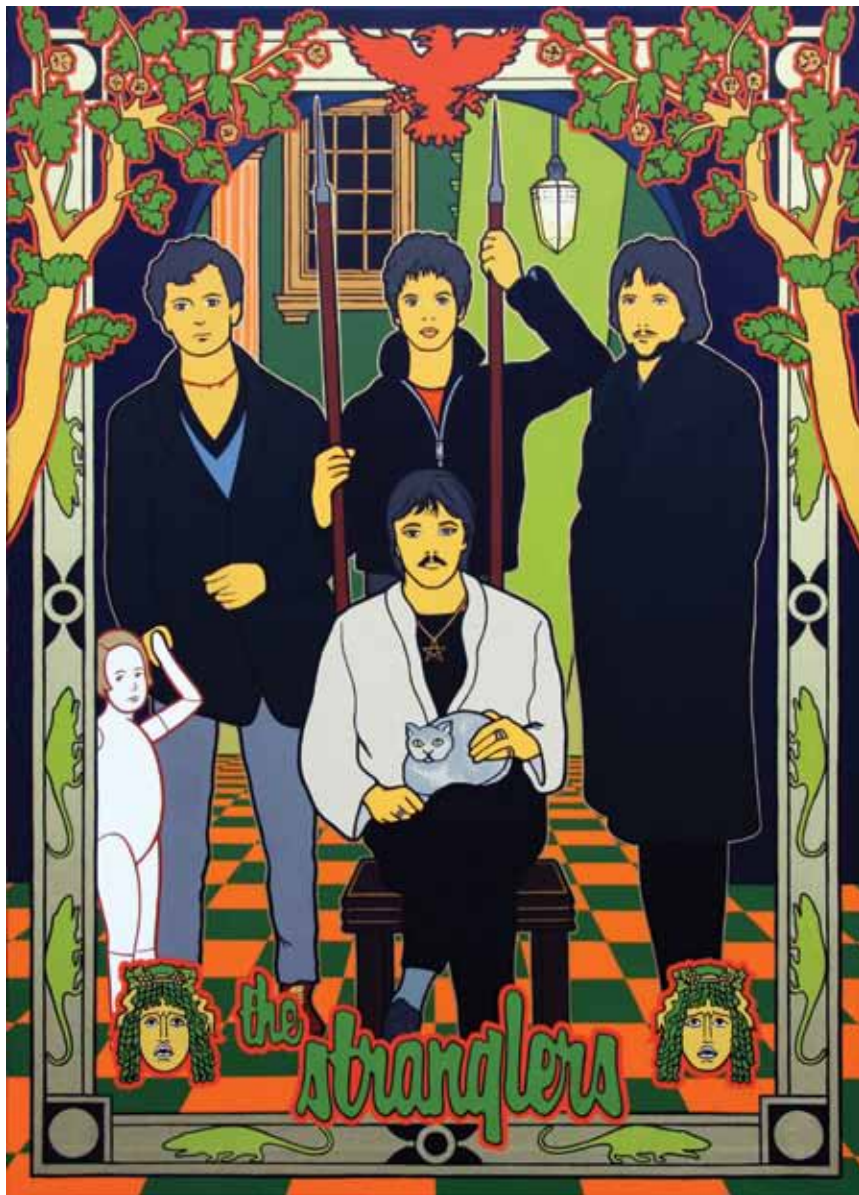
John Farrugia
Shrouded
2012



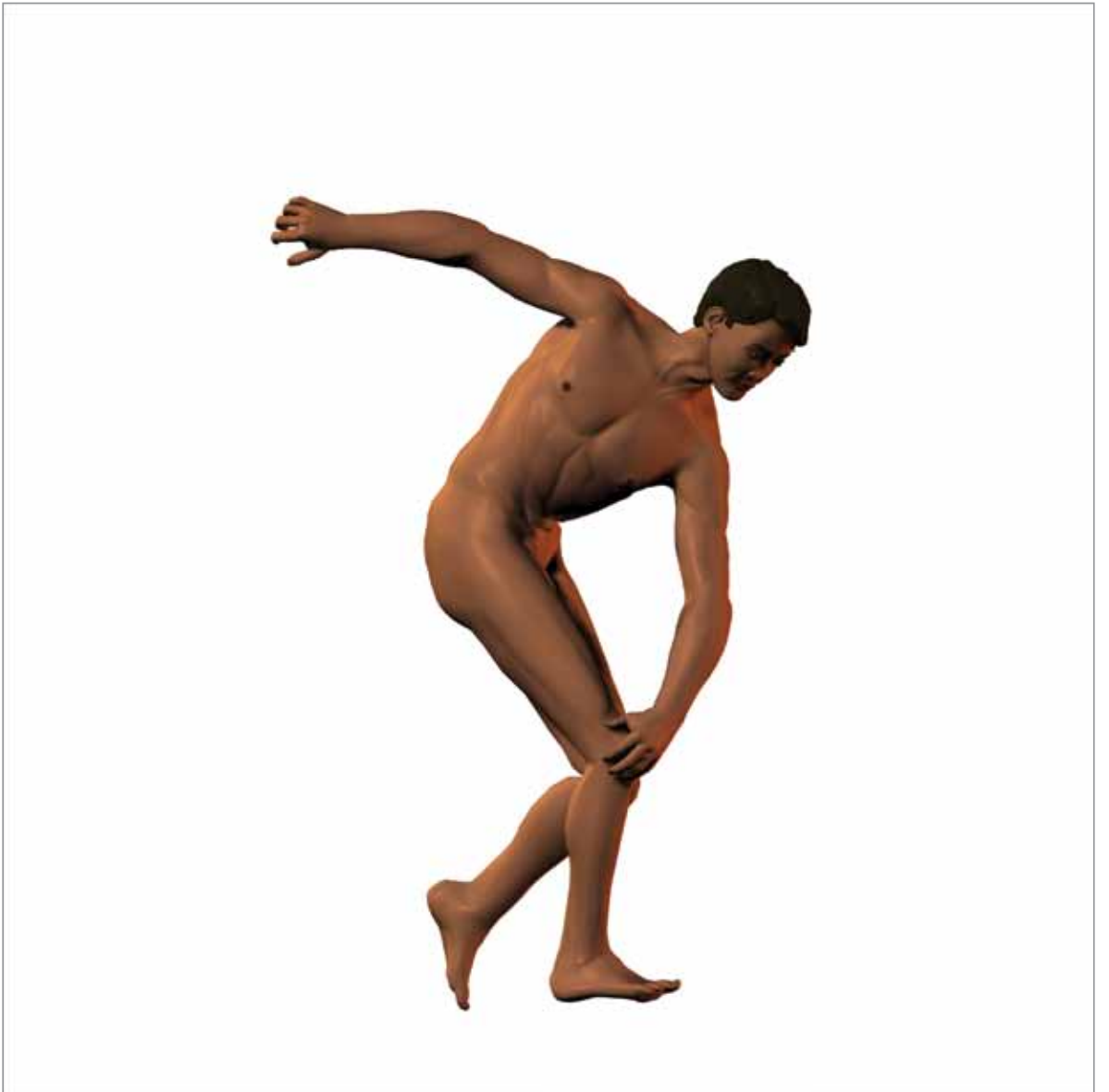
Gareth Fisher
Walking Figure
2010



Clare Flatley
The Black Gates
2012



Paul Harvey
The Stranglers
2012



Beverley Hood
Classical (Discobolus)
2001



Kenny Hunter
End Product
2008



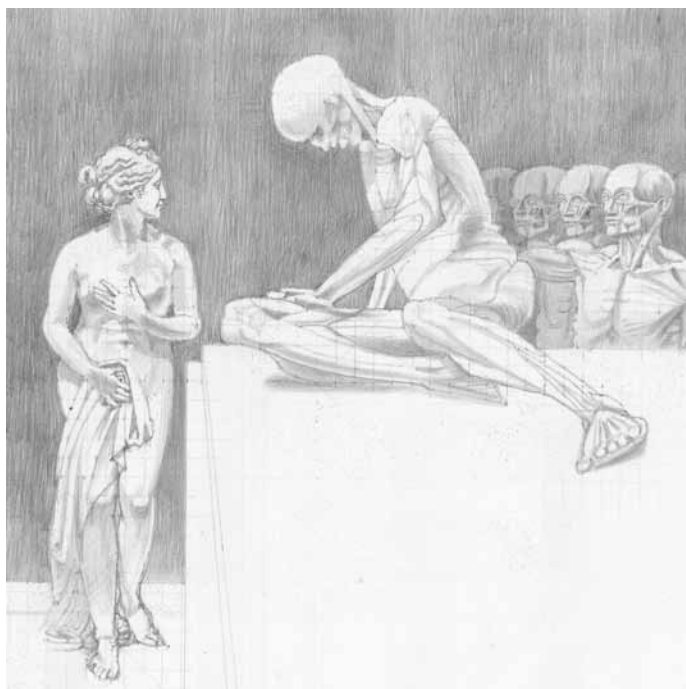
Murdo Macdonald
Cast Detail 3
2012



Norman McBeath
Isabella of Aragon
2012



Maria Mitsoula
The Underground Marble Quarries of Dionysos in Athens
2011



Steven Morant

Night at Leeds Art Gallery 2 - "Smugglerius" tells Canova's "Venus" the Plan for the Zombie Invasion of Leeds
2009



Dylan Shields
The Fall of Phaeton I
2012



Joan Smith
Echo
2012



Andrew Sneddon
When Edouard met Lafcadio to discuss the story of Mini-Nashi-Hoichi
2012



Chris Speed, Jane Macdonald, Jules Rawlinson & Margaret Stewart
Casting Time
2012
Image: John McGregor / Chris Speed © Edinburgh College of Art

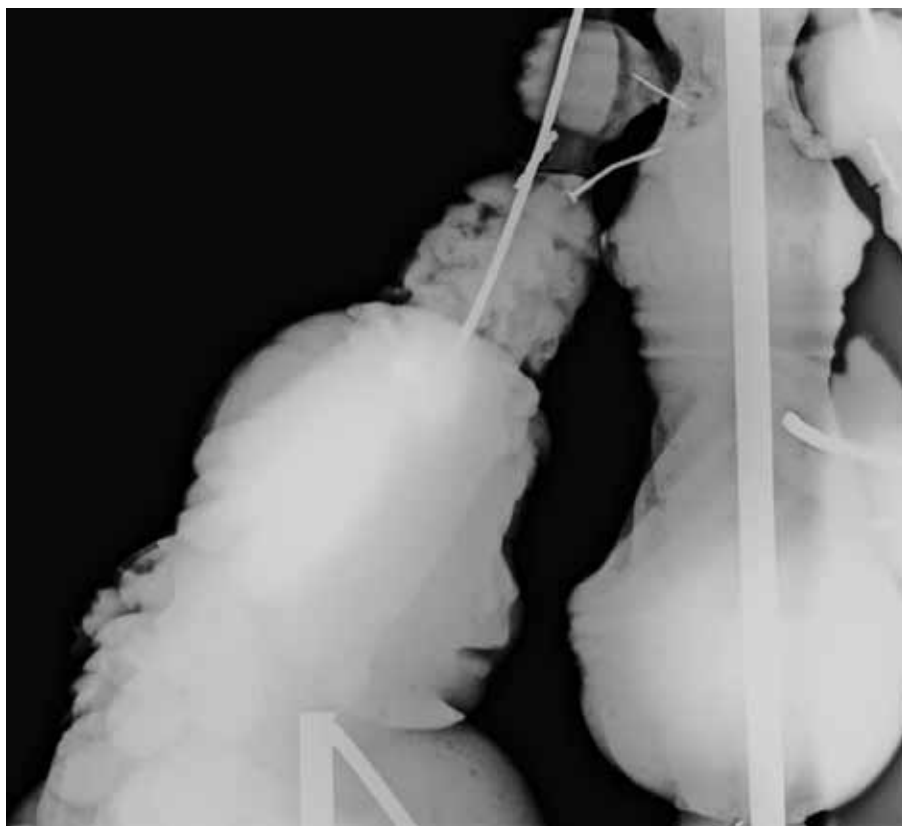


Charles Stiven
Paradies Strasse
2006
Stiven's stump drawing tools



Alexander Stoddart

Statue of Coila in clay model state in the sculptor's studios at the University of the West of Scotland, Paisley Campus
2012



Ruxandra-Iulia Stoica & Graciela Ainsworth
Ruminating on Reflections
2012

Postscript: Spinario – boy picking a thorn from his foot

Kelly Pearson

After years in storage, Northumbria University's casts now stand in our Graduate Studio. I wanted to help the *Cast Contemporaries* project and so took on the task of finding out their history. The first step was to locate Nick Whitmore who used to be Head of Sculpture and remembers them arriving in the University.

When I met Nick we talked about how, for a short time, they were used for drawing classes. Nick sketched the casts he could remember whilst we talked. Some of them no longer exist.

I still do not know why they have been neglected.



Drawing Nicholas Whitmore

In such a world of denial, the status of the plaster-cast is naturally questionable. If one is very honest and observant, one will recognise that there is *something* in the plaster copy, especially if it be of a work from a specifically classical original – or a neo-classical – that excites tremendous anger in certain hearts. Those who find themselves nevertheless drawn towards those objects have, beyond a museological or installational excuse to approach them, a third option with which to cover their erring steps. They can always claim they have a “great love of plaster.” To the real sculptor, who has nothing but a hearty contempt for this atrocious substance, his ten-thousandth bucket of which he has just mixed that very morning, this infatuation is both laughable and mendacious. If the plaster-lover is struck on the head by some of the revolting stuff falling on her from her rotten ceiling, she will likely alter her opinion in some haste, and were she to die, after a long career of inhaling its dust, of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, she might take a somewhat jaded view of the charms of powdered gypsum, hanging in the studio air, shafts of fairy sunshine glancing through its enchanted veil. She claws at her dermatitic forearms? She ain’t so enamoured. In her claim – to “love plaster” – the connoisseuse is really hiding behind a political shield of dialectical materialism. She knows her status as a paid-up member of the Marxian establishment will be seriously compromised if she professes a categorical love of the shapes, forms, handlings and pure aesthetics of the plaster-cast’s *artistic substance*; we all know that to adore these things is as politically suspect as it is to be seen drawing them. But if one invokes the material with which they are made, again one can move to cuddle up to these unholy totems without fear of censure. Never mention their beauty, nor their unscribed eyes beaming “keen with honour”, nor that diabolical drop of the knee towards the centre of the earth, nor dare to proclaim their authority beyond time and place, and all will be well. Make no aesthetic comment, cast no glance of approval, above all make no recommendation on their example for generations past and to come – and you can “love” all you like. For the material, the stupid plaster, is nearly nothing about these things; to “love plaster” in the plaster-cast is similar to those modern architects who love “space”. Why does she feel so strongly about some matter, if it were not the shape that the matter is in?

The true sculptor, who has no illusions about plaster, is strongly drawn to a metaphysical view of the world – the world as a material illusion. This is because he knows all about the action of casting - the process of making a multiple material conversion through a sequence of geometric exchanges between positive and negative forms. First the sculptor makes a clay model (he makes it – not some underpaid fabricator, grateful for the pittance and accustomed to the exploitation) upon which he puts a plaster negative – the mould. He then opens the mould destroying the clay original (at this point certain contemporary pants become moist as the promise of destruction arises). From this negative another positive is made, in plaster, swilled into the mould interior. Once the cast is set within the mould, the mould is then chipped away (that is, destroyed; more joy in the underwear). What is released (Marxian emblem of Fidelio-style deliverance) is the plaster cast. It stands as the surviving print of the lost form of the original clay. It concludes the first phase of the material dialectic and because it is a little terminus of action, so it tends to disappoint the vitalist sensibility. Thus it becomes vulnerable to attack, especially by its furious author, if he be young. I know this from within, for I was young once, sort of.

After the plaster cast is dry it is sent to the foundry. A *further* mould, made of rubber, is constructed around this master form. The mould, when taken off the original plaster, does not destroy the latter. This is a great disappointment to the aesthetic Trotskyite, who loves, like Moses, to see a statue destroyed. Yet there is promise of more fun in the future, for the wax cast that is taken from the rubber mould will be invested in a third mould, fireproof this time. This mould, with the wax copy encased within it, is put in a kiln to be melted out. This ought to satisfy the violence-craving contemporary artist philistine, yet the process is concealed and the wax disappears as a vapour, so it is altogether too ethereal an iconoclasm to count in the aggregate. Next there is fire again, which is Nature’s fundamental element, so Nature is once more appeased. In goes the molten bronze, down the ducts in the negative. There is a rumble of mixed anger and pleasure on Sinai at this point; God himself is in a certain turmoil about the whole thing. Then the mould for the bronze is chipped away, and what a dull ending – for a work of art has been secured in a hardish material or no great distinction (since it is all material rubbish in the end.) But the *process* has stopped, and no promise of further destruction stands in the future. The sculpture has won – for the moment. But shortly the art schools will train their students to embrace an aesthetic of destruction, Jehovah will be thrilled and the desperate old Dialectic will start up all over again, in which words will trump objects, talented people will be ousted and a great many people will be terribly, terribly hurt. And the bust might be toppled, and if done so in an “interesting” or “thoughtful” way, then the toppler might gain a Degree from Edinburgh University, First Class.

Words will trump objects... Yes, the art schools are full of students writing about plaster-casts. Where are the students who, in silence, are *sculpting* about plaster-casts – and making plaster-casts of their own in the process? They are nowhere to be found. Always keep the profound truth of the Molten Calf story close to hand when you go among contemporary artists. Always remember what it was that Moses opposed to the Calf before he had it smashed to pieces and ground to a paste and forced down the throats of the innocents dancing round it. He opposed a *text*, the second clause of which read “Thou shalt not sculpt.”

And never forget what that old sculptor Kritios did. He affronted Nature, by showing Him so clearly, with that relaxed stance and “playing” leg. Don’t think my view of the enormity of what he did in Athens in the 5th century BC is fanciful, nor suppose my idea exaggerated - that some great transgression was committed when he went first to cut that little Boy of his, under four feet tall in its surviving fragment. For if you look carefully at the work you will find that the head is made from a different piece of stone than the body. Some grown-up specialists in work of this period believe that the piece, which is entirely intact on a stylistic level, its parts conclusively carved at the same time, might well have been damaged in the studio. Who knows? Perhaps Kritios himself, or his Department Head, “freaked out” at the sight of such closely re-produced Nature and “lost it.” You have to forgive my use of modern terminology at this point. I only use it to indicate that Dialectical Modernism, which loves to ding down a statue, is perennial, persistent, nothing new and terribly, terribly vulgar. The story also supposes some man of taste and sensibility in the scene who recognised the moral significance of what Kritios had done, and stood as protector while the most important sculpture in the history of the world was repaired.

Alexander Stoddart, Paisley 2012.



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