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## Openings:

# Gilda Williams on Daniel Silver

[\*Artforum\*, Summer, 2008](#), pp. 418-19

MUCH OF LONDON-BASED SCULPTOR Daniel Silver's work occupies an in-between state--between complete and incomplete, between handmade and mass-produced, between artistic object and castoff. For an exhibition at Ibid Projects in London this past winter, for example, Silver acquired several discarded marble copies of Roman and Greek statuary, recently carved in Carrara, Italy, that had been tossed aside by local artisans because the sculptures were cracked, chipped, or rendered crooked during their making. Whereas the Italian craftspeople had deemed the work too crummy to bother finishing, Silver took these fragments in idiosyncratic directions, pursuing the "failures" further, in fact, and often to antiquarian effect: A limb might be amputated under Silver's hands, or a semi-polished surface chipped and rendered rougher. In turn, the status of these rejected sculptures, presented by the artist in a gallery exhibition, demanded some reassessment. As Silver's title for the show, "Making Something Your Own," implies, these objects were no longer unfinished copies but rather works existing in an ambiguous, liminal zone between quarry reject, antique simulation, and Daniel Silver original.

The complexity of Silver's gesture toward the past was underlined by the fact that each of the seven pieces in the exhibition was supported by its own unique plinth, tailored to--and ultimately given as much attention as--the sculpture above. In most of these works, the found sculptures from Carrara appear on tall, roughly constructed pedestals, which are usually painted white but occasionally are gray or yellow. Some are quasi-modernist, hacked wooden sculptures in their own right, and some are more tablelike, while others resemble secondhand gallery supports or recently abandoned wooden crates. (Notably, in Silver's earlier installations, human heads are propped on plinthlike forms as well: In *Page Go There, Just There*, 2003, a centrifugal machine makes the hair on a bewigged head spin outward; heads are also set on a variety of such supports in *The Buddha and the Chaise Longue*, 2003.) Working with busts and plinths might well seem conservative for a contemporary sculptor; but, as has often been the case in art, Silver's use of the old is intended to generate newly resonant implications. In considering his compositions, one should also take into account that when Silver was attending the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal College of Art in the late 1990s, the plinth had effectively been banned--outlawed in the wake of New British Sculptors such as Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, and Alison Wilding, whose works were placed directly on the ground or on the wall, and whom Silver has more generally described as "apologetic towards traditional sculpture."

By contrast, Silver is not shy about seeing himself as something of a traditionalist, as his strategic deployment of outmoded forms makes plain--and yet the dynamic quality of his relationship with history is clearest when considered in terms of the artist's unconventional choices in artistic media and procedures. In other words, just as Silver reclaims discarded or overlooked materials--ranging, in "Making Something Your Own,"

from the marble rejects themselves to the makeshift accumulations of boxes several of them rest on--so he reclaims genres from the trash heap of art history. In this regard, one notes that even in his earliest works--before the patchy, bumpy surfaces he relishes in stone now, where rough bits are left partially polished or defects are exaggerated--Silver used unstable materials such as wax, unfired clay, and expandable foam, seeking to maintain a sense of indeterminacy in his objects. This predisposition would seem a perfect match for sculpture that is somehow delimited in its making (it is often impossible to identify exactly what Silver's contribution to his works has been); or which, perhaps more accurately, denotes a kind of openended collaboration with everyone from contemporary Italian artisans to ancient Roman and Greek sculptors (and even, perhaps, the complicit viewers invited to "make the sculptures their own"). When speaking of primary influences on his own practice, Silver mentions figures such as Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and Louise Bourgeois (and her marble works in particular), and it seems a detail of no small importance that all these artists leave in view the original stone block from which their sculpture is extracted. Literally and metaphorically, when it comes to the matter of art history, Silver's work similarly makes evident the grounds of its own "extraction."

On occasion, these grounds come into contact with Silver's own complicated history (as a Jewish Briton whose [white] mother was born in South Africa and grew up in Zimbabwe), which, when apparent in his work, has wrought implications along axes political, geographic, and art historical. The work that perhaps best illuminates this is *Heads*, 2006, which consists of eighty busts, each, again, on its own individually wrought plinth. These busts were carved in Zimbabwe, from regionally sourced black springstone or green soapstone, by sculptor Dominic Benhura and local craftsmen commissioned by Silver. But they are based on photographs taken by the United States government of prisoners on death row in Texas, which Silver downloaded from the Internet. Not that this would be immediately evident, however: If these imprisoned individuals, who are generally invisible to society, are commemorated (indeed, immortalized in some sense) through Silver's work, it is also true that, like so much ancient sculpture, they are in the artistic context at risk of anonymity--of succumbing to formal concerns or even losing their very identity to history. Certainly, the works in *Heads* are not naturalistic sculptures; some of the rougher sculptures in the group resemble nothing so much as the so-called Makapansgat pebble, the very first representational work in the history of humankind, which presents a rudimentary face--two eye sockets, an approximate mouth--carved by nature before being found and preserved by South African tribes millennia ago.

In this light, it is worth noting that Silver has said he admires Marlene Dumas because her work "looks back at you"--it asks for some reaction on the part of the viewer. When it comes to *Heads*, this demand is in part steeped for Silver in the political issues surrounding the people rendered in stone. But one recalls as well that the Makapansgat pebble was valued for its apparently human characteristics, and this aspect of his own sculptures is of the utmost importance to Silver, who considers, he says, the pieces in *Heads* as one might an interlocutor: In an interview published to accompany the display of these sculptures at the Camden Arts Centre in London last year, he even claimed that spending some time with the works made it clear that they "can take care of themselves,"

also noting that "some are shouting." Elsewhere he has observed that he is unable to work with found sculptures that are missing a head--he needs a face to return his gaze, to talk to while working.

He has recently taken this concern into two-dimensional portraiture: In a series of fourteen expressionistic watercolors, each titled *Untitled (Armenian Monk)*, 2007, he painted a picture in various colors after a found photograph of an Armenian monk in Jerusalem in the '70s. If this series on paper is something of a departure for Silver, who works primarily as a sculptor, though one who draws and watercolors in sketch form regularly, it nevertheless emphasizes, as his respect for Dumas also makes plain, that Silver's predominant interest has never been in the specifics of a chosen medium. More compelling is the implicit question of representation: Each version of this face has its own character and emotional emphasis, which seems to reflect larger political concerns--Armenian Christians form the city's rarely recognized minority, who have traditionally been neutral throughout its long history of conflict.

Notably, the genesis of these portraits is similar to that of *Heads*: the casual discovery of a found photograph that "spoke" to Silver and eventually led to a new body of work. In keeping with this approach, it would seem that for Silver the role of the artist is to pinpoint an exact moment when the combination of various sources, influences, and techniques allows an artwork to take on its own life. The artist's anthropomorphizing of his work might, then, be considered an integral part of his strategy of reclamation, mirroring his deployment of forgotten or overlooked forms as well as historical, geographic, and political contexts--and, hence, as something that itself contributes to how Silver's own works "speak" to the viewer, forging a dialogue across time and space.

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