



ANALIA SAB AN JONATHAN OWEN

Materiality has emerged as fascinating elements of the NGV Triennial. The materiality of a work in many ways element relates to body – it's physicality, its internal construct and external surfaces. Artists and designers are pushing the limitations and conventions of traditional materials, and also introducing completely new materials that are refreshingly surprising to the eye. Some artists, such as **Jonathan Owen** and **Analia Saban**, fall into both categories. The artists share common ground in their affinity for marble and references to art history through their work.

Analia Saban,
Draped marble, (Crema Dorlion), 2015 (detail)

ANALIA SABAN

NGV Magazine: *Draped marble* (*Fior di Pesco Carnico, Fior di Pesco Apuano, Crema Dorlion, Onyx*), 2015, has been described as your most ambitious work to date and is presented during the NGV Triennial. Why has it been such an ambitious project for you?
Analia Saban: This work originated as simple idea: 'to drape marble as if it was a flexible material'. But it took two years to figure out how to make it happen. It was a collaborative effort between my studio team and a marble specialist in Los Angeles; together we were able to figure out the technique.

NGV: Can you talk about these 'broken marble canvases' and your inspiration behind this work?
AS: I am always inspired by art history. What has driven artists through generations to focus on specific subject matter or techniques? For many years artists have been fascinated with drapery both in drawing and marble sculpture. It is the search for the sublime, to make a piece of marble look as light as a piece of fabric. I wanted to revisit that obsession. How can I drape marble today?

NGV: During college you created a sculpture made of 900 printed pieces of paper that each illustrated one frame of a 30-second commercial. You then went on to physically unravel paintings and use the threads to create a new object. There seems to be a common theme – transformation of the physical. Where does this stem from?
AS: I want to ask basic questions. What is a sculpture? What is a painting? Why do we look at them? What are they made of? By printing a video frame by frame, it became a sculpture. I realised time started to fill up space; it became tangible. Then, I applied the same practice to painting: the two-dimensional work we are used to seeing hanging on the wall became a three-dimensional sculpture. A painting can be the work of art on the wall that can be worth up to $450 million or it can be woven thread with pigment attached to it, depending on how one sees it. It's not about destroying painting but about seeing the object from a different angle and asking ourselves what we are looking at.

NGV: You describe your own work as both 'artistic and scientific'.
AS: Every project requires a lot of research in terms of materials and techniques. In many cases we reach out to material experts or conservation scientists for guidance.

NGV: Would you say you are in a way 'recycling art' with some of your projects?
AS: In some terms I am thinking more about giving them a second life. I try to be as aware as I can of art history and hopefully avoid reinventing the wheel. On the other hand, art comes out of art and I enjoy having that constant dialogue with art history, my artist peers and society as a whole.

NGV: Why are you currently working with marble? What's special about this material?
AS: Marble has a great place in art history. It has made some of the most memorable sculptures and buildings of the last centuries, and it's also our kitchen counters or bathroom floors.

NGV: What is your background and when did you decide you wanted to be an artist?
AS: When I was younger, it never occurred to me to become an artist. I thought I was going to become a mathematician or a filmmaker. Only after visiting New York for the first time and seeing museums like MoMA, Guggenheim, Whitney, did I realise the power of art. I felt that New York wouldn't be a great city without those institutions. I wanted to become part of that dialogue. So when I was about nineteen, I decided to become an art major at my university. I felt it in my heart that I had found my home even though I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into! Later on, I realized that art is the place where I can combine all my scientific and aesthetic interests.

NGV: You have worked closely with conceptual artist John Baldessari. Have his ideas influenced you along the way, or vice versa?
AS: John has given many generations of students the best gift an artist can get, the 'license' and reminder that there are no limitations, that as artists we can do whatever we want to do. I try to pass on that gift when I teach.

NGV: What would you like the audience to learn or discover from your work?
AS: Hopefully that reality is complex and that there's a lot of pleasure in seeing the different faces of it.

JONATHAN OWEN

NGV Magazine: Tell us about the work *Untitled*, 2016, which is your largest and only life-size work to date, presented at the NGV Triennial.
Jonathan Owen: This is the third in a series of sculptural interventions using pre-existing marble figures. It's a life-size female figure, originally carved in Rome by an English sculptor in the 1830s. My intervention involves carving sections of the statue into moveable, interlinking rings, which causes the figure to partially collapse or slump into a different posture. I made the work as a commission for the Edinburgh Art Festival in 2016, which offered the chance to do something for a non-gallery space. For the duration of the festival, the sculpture was installed inside the Neo-Classical Burns Monument, which is a small, circular temple-like structure, built in the 1830s to house a life-size marble statue. The original statue was only there a few years, and then removed, and the building had been empty ever since.

NGV: Do you learn about the original works and who or what they originally represented, and does this play a role in the works you then create?
JO: Yes, I learn as much as I can about them, although my interest is in a type of object more than the specific biographical or historic details of the subjects (sometimes I've worked with marble portrait/commemorative busts). There are so many of these objects in the world, but it's only a minority that feel potentially good to work with. There has to be the potential for something unanticipated to happen. I need to feel some uncertainty about exactly how my intervention will alter the object.

The older they are, the more their surface accumulates a patina of dirt. It holds and shows time, like a skin. As soon as you even scratch into an old statue the whiter stone beneath is exposed, and I'm very conscious of these edges where the old surface meets the new surfaces I make. The old surface is highly finished, very smooth, and I choose not to finish the surfaces of my work to the same level. I don't sand and polish them, and make them blend in. It needs to be clear where the edges are between my work and the work of the original sculptor. I feel this acknowledges the period of time that's passed between their decision that the object is finished and my decision to start working with it.

NGV: Your sculptures were defined as 'elegant vandalism' during the Edinburgh Art Festival in 2016. Do you agree with this definition of your work?
JO: No, they're not acts of vandalism. They are attempts to transform what seems fixed and certain, to make new propositions. I'm trying to create more by taking matter away. This is a creative impulse. I'm not interested in damaging or destroying the object. My intention is to reactivate it, to make it say something different about permanence and control – something more doubtful.

NGV: You 'replace' some parts of these sculptures with marble chains…
JO: The chain links are formed from the existing stone of the statue. This is a form of carving associated with folk craft traditions like scrimshaw and whimsy carving. For me these forms are more functional than symbolic. They allow me to re-pose the statue. It's like releasing parts of the object without removing them, so this very fixed, familiar form becomes malleable and distorted. The links hold the thing intact, stopping it from completely collapsing but allowing it to partially collapse. It's like making a single object into several new objects, but they are still forming a more precarious, chaotic version of the original. My intention is to restart the process of carving, using the very same process that made the object to destabilise it. In a sense it's the same process – removing material – but it's a collision of two very different types of carving. The statue was made by someone with the finest material (Carrara marble), the best tools, specific training etc., and I apply a more rustic kind of carving, a kind of carving that's usually associated with someone who has next to nothing; an amateur with just a piece of wood, a knife and lots of time.

SEE ANALIA SABAN AND JONATHAN OWEN'S WORK AT NGV TRIENNIAL UNTIL 15 APRIL 2018.



Analia Saban,
Draped marble, (Crema Dorlion), 2015 (detail)



Jonathan Owen
Untitled, 2016