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Daide Balula's Mimed Sculptures at Art Basel Unlimited

Rosie Dalton



Photography by Davide Balula. Courtesy of the artist, galerie frank elbaz, Paris, and Gagosian Gallery.

Daide Balula is an artist enthralled with sensory substitution, and not just in the realm of the eye. “I am fascinated by tools in general,” he explains of the role technology has played in his work. “I believe in the idea of an extended body. And the brain is not everything. We put so much hope into Artificial Intelligence, but what happens between two different brains goes beyond inner neurological interactions. We know so little, we feel so much.” So for his latest work, *Mimed Sculptures*, Balula has decided to depart from the technological realm and explore, instead, this relationship with feeling.

Mimed Sculptures is being unveiled at Art Basel Unlimited this week. The distinctive performance piece sees mimes mold the shape of iconic sculptures (by Henry Moore, Louise Bourgeois, Alberto Giacometti, and Barbara Hepworth, among others) in air, recreating their form through personal interpretation. “Beauty is a personal experience that is not reserved solely for sight or tangible things,” Balula explains. “Your own mental space is built with perception, which in turn helps define your affinity with others.” Here, this affinity exists not only between

the artist and viewer, but also the mimes themselves. Although the audience does not feel the volumes personally, they do gain a sense of them by way of the mime artists, attaining a unique glimpse inside their particular field of perception.

According to Balula, the experience of touch (or pain) is one that is impossible to communicate. “It goes beyond the skin that covers your entire body, beyond the sound of a nut crackling between your teeth, beyond your words. But you can show physical representation to another person—for example, by showing the length of an inch with your thumb and forefinger.” This partial translatability is what he has brought to life with *Mimed Sculptures*—an intimate performance of physical representation. Influenced by a beautiful essay by David J. Getsy, Balula says he was intrigued by its recounting of a historical argument between two famous art historians, Clement Greenberg and Herbert Read. “One praises contrasted graphic lines and opticality, the other a compact form and tactility,” the artist elaborates. “It contrasts David Smith to Henry Moore; two icons of formal volume in space. The works I chose here reflect that duality, but I don’t believe they present the opposition of those two points of view anymore. Geometry becomes organic when represented in the air, and sensual curves are softer when cut by a machine.”

This sense of making organic that which is fixed suits Davide Balula to a tee. It is something he has explored with his technological incorporations as well, although he expresses a sort of ennui with the pervasive nature of technology, with the sense that it can numb our already imperfect perception—what with its various obsolete folders within the corporate cloud. Certainly, it can be used to our advantage, but must also be taken at face value—as merely a replica of the real thing. “Unfortunately, photography and video will miss most of what you experience while attending to the revelation of those invisible sculptures in person,” he explains. “And one of the reasons, besides it being highly dependent on your personal perception and the realities of a sensory 3-D space, is that those sculptures as a whole can only exist in your mind. Perception is imperfect, and that is how we make things ours, from our own inconsistent point of view and forever clumsy expression of it.” Ultimately, there is beauty in that clumsiness, which is one of the reasons that Balula often works with forces beyond his control, with extreme climatic conditions, or the “imperfect” perception of others, for example. Because, just like his works, “you, too, are alive.”

Art Basel Unlimited runs through Sunday in Basel, Switzerland.