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AiA news-service

HYPERALLERGIC

Subverting the Whiteness of Antiquity

Lily Cox-Richard questions — and successfully subverts — a long-held association between the aesthetic qualities of classical sculptures with physical whiteness.



Lydia Pyne

September 2, 2019



“She-Wolf” (2019), scagliola, plaster, rabbit skin glue, pigment (courtesy of the artist). “Ramp” (2019), fiber-reinforced concrete; aggregate including glass, shell, brick, and concrete fragments from models of the Battle Cast hair; urethane foam; pigment (courtesy of the artist). “Figs.” (2019), synthetic tulle netting, storage pallets, “Goddesses from the East Pediment of the Parthenon”; cast from the Battle Collection, University of Texas at Austin (courtesy of the artist and the Blanton Museum of Art; photo by Lydia Pyne)

AUSTIN — It’s hard to imagine a more iconic sculpture associated with ancient Rome than the Capitoline Wolf. Standing roughly 30 inches tall, the original bronze depicts the founding of Rome: a she-wolf with the mythical twins, Romulus and Remus. While the subject is an enduring and popular motif in the Western world, that particular she-wolf has practically become synonymous with Rome’s origin story. Copies of the Capitoline Wolf, her head turned to her left, the twins under her just so, can be found in museums and institutions around the world.

It’s this historical cachet — as well as the material life of the Capitoline Wolf — that sculptor Lily Cox-Richard explores in *Lily Cox-Richard: She-Wolf + Lower Figs.* currently on view in the

Contemporary Project space at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas. In addition to displaying several new works created expressly for this exhibition, including a Capitoline-inspired she-wolf, it showcases how plaster casts of classical sculptures have distinct historical legacies. Specifically, Cox-Richard uses casts from the Battle Collection, held by the Blanton Museum of Art, to explore how copies of original classical sculptures take on their own material lives, separate from those of the originals. More than anything else, *Lily Cox-Richard: She-Wolf + Lower Figs.* questions — and successfully subverts — a long-held association between the aesthetic qualities of classical sculptures with physical whiteness.

Countless ancient Greek and Roman marble sculptures — statues, reliefs, and even sarcophagi — were originally painted in a plethora of colors that wore away over time. Art historians, particularly those in the 18th century, took the white marbles at face value (as it were) and the association between whiteness, aesthetics, and antiquity was quickly canonized in Western art. “To many, the pristine whiteness of marble statues is the expectation and thus the classical ideal,” Sarah Bond, professor of history and classics at the University of Iowa, argues in *Hyperallergic*. “But the equation of white marble with beauty is not an inherent truth of the universe.”

The assumed whiteness of sculpture in antiquity is slowly and surely being challenged. Where recent exhibitions, such as the traveling *The Gods In Color*, have worked to restore or reimagine color in classical sculpture, *Lily Cox-Richard: She-Wolf + Lower Figs.* taps into an audience willing to consider what color can connote.



“Figs.” (2019), synthetic tulle netting, storage pallets, “Goddesses from the East Pediment of the Parthenon.” Cast from the Battle Collection, University of Texas at Austin (Courtesy of the artist and the Blanton Museum of Art; photo by Lydia Pyne)

“She-Wolf” (2019) is made of scagliola — an artificial marble used in ancient Rome — cast from 3D scans of the bronze original at the Capitoline Museum in Rome. Unlike the polychrome of ancient Rome, the exhibition placard explains, it is impossible for these hues to fade. The bright colors of “She-Wolf” neatly juxtapose with the vibrant colors that peek out of the seven concrete slabs that comprise “Ramp” (2019). As the twins were actually a 15th-century addition to the Capitoline sculpture, Cox-Richard has opted to remove them, thus reminding audiences that what history considers “a sculpture from antiquity” is fluid.

Beginning in the 16th century, art academies in Europe used full-scale replicas of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures to teach technical and anatomical drawing. By the 19th and 20th centuries, collections of plaster-cast replicas had made their way

into American museums and universities, where they served as stand-ins for European enlightenment.

Between 1894 and 1923, William J. Battle, of UT Austin's Classics Department, purchased 70 plaster casts of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. (One of those casts, a 19th-century reproduction of "Apollo Belvedere," was recently featured in the Blanton Museum of Art's exhibition *Copies, Fakes, and Reproductions*.) For decades, these casts (now known as the Battle Collection) were used as teaching tools, thus mediating how audiences understood ancient Greek and Roman art and, especially, how students were introduced to the aesthetic and cultural standards of taste that the collection implied.

"Figs." (2019) offers a new interpretation of two Battle Collection casts. Cox-Richard draped both in differently colored tulle, suggesting the lost polychroming of the original sculptures. (It's significant to note that the casts were only ever cast in white plaster, thus contributing to the canon of whiteness.) The draped casts are turned so that audiences can clearly see the thin beams inside the hollow pieces, exposing a sense of fragility that isn't often paired with the original marbles. By combining the casts with moving pallets, "Figs." connotes mobility, emphasizing that copies and casts of ancient sculptures have long been in circulation.

With only five pieces, *Lily Cox-Richard: She-Wolf + Lower Figs.* is a tightly focused exhibition. (There are additional plaster casts and commentaries on view in a different part of the Blanton Museum of Art.) Cox-Richard's work reminds audiences that all objects have complex life histories and are made, unmade, and remade throughout history.

Lily Cox-Richard: She-Wolf + Lower Figs. continues at the Blanton Museum of Art (200 E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Austin, Texas) through December 29. The exhibition was curated by Claire Howard, Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

