

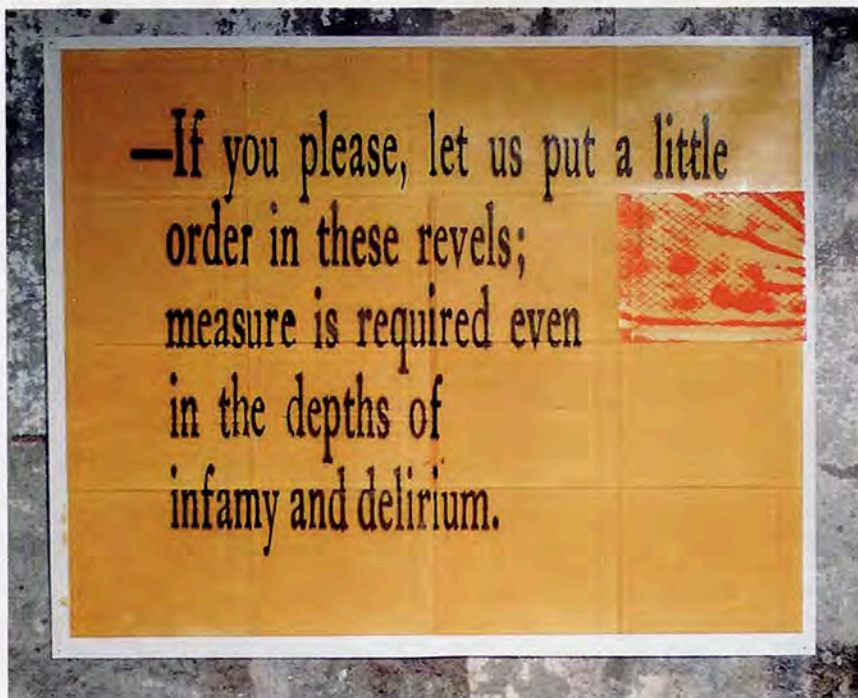


Justin Matherly, *New Beaches*, 2012, glass-reinforced concrete, ambulatory devices, 10' 6" x 11' x 6'. Installation view, City Hall Park, New York.

OPENINGS

Justin Matherly

BOB NICKAS



Above: Justin Matherly, *Untitled (If you please)*, 2010, ink-jet transfer on paper, 33½ x 41¾".

Right: Justin Matherly, *Knowing, even the grass We must tear up so it will stay green*, 2010–11, concrete, ambulatory devices, 54½ x 34 x 39½".



IN HIS 1938 PAINTING *Imaginary Portrait of D. A. F. de Sade*, Man Ray renders the great libertine in profile, his features recognizably human—a blue eye, red lips—but his face and body made of worn gray blocks of stone, his name and dates of birth and death inscribed as if by chisel. Literally “built like a brick shithouse,” as artist John Miller has observed, and just as impassive, Sade looks on while the Bastille, his former site of imprisonment, is engulfed in flames. Man Ray memorializes him as if he were a monumental living statue, animate yet inorganic.

The writings of Sade are important to the sculptor Justin Matherly, even if Man Ray is not. “Sade’s reason,” Matherly insists, “his unyielding and intransigent use of reason, is meant to shed light on the totalitarian aspect of reason unchecked.” Matherly pursues his own critique of reason in sculptural terms, using cast concrete, ambulatory devices, and a determinedly convoluted process to reanimate and deflate

the same classical sculptural tradition that Man Ray sends up in his imaginary portrait. Sade, as the purveyor of both madness and reason, of madness as reason, resonates in Matherly’s misshapen, monstrously anthropomorphic forms.

One of the traps of contemporary art is that it remains almost perpetually in a recognizable present, or just-past. For all their archaeologies of the modern, artists are caught in this institutional matrix of perpetual nowness. Their work conforms precisely through estrangement, as familiar as the chance encounter in a gallery of a sheep and a sewing machine on a dissecting table. Matherly is among those artists who appear to take the impossibility of true estrangement as a given. Alienation seems to be one among the many familiar tropes of Western art he treats as relics—not entirely denying their continuing power in the present but always acknowledging that power’s diminished or partial status, its

embeddedness in a vanished past. His subjects have seemingly been unearthed, their presence and pathos deriving from their origins not in the here and now or even in the recent past but in antiquity. Matherly radically contorts cultural forms that seem at once ever present and impossibly remote—classical Greek and Roman statuary.

Among contemporary figurative sculptors, there are some who engage its visual-material language with acts of willful mistranslation. This is the case, for example, with the ravaged assemblage of Huma Bhabha, both mute and mutable; Sterling Ruby’s pumped-up deformities and melted-down fragments; and the more Brutalist (per)versification of Matherly’s concrete poetry. To date he has translated the forms as well as re-created and reimagined the missing parts of the Laocoön (in the serpentine *Fixed immovably into blank types of placid reverie; the eye is wide and without pupil*, 2011), the Belvedere Torso (as in the

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disturbing *Knowing, even the grass We must tear up so it will stay green*, 2010–11), and the Pasquino (in *The body needs for its preservation many other bodies by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated*, 2011). All of these famous statues are damaged. The central, eponymous figure in the Laocoön is missing its original right arm, while the Belvedere Torso, thought to be a representation of Hercules, is headless and lacking arms and legs, an ideal of beauty and strength reduced to a battered, amputated hulk. As for the Pasquino, this limbless Hellenistic effigy was the first of Rome's "talking statues"—those sculptures whose eroded plinths have been used for centuries as billboards for anonymous satiric verses aimed at the failings of church and state.

Drawn as he is to historical dismemberment, Matherly's abstractly figurative works deserve a more apt designation: disfigurative. As if to underscore this, he sets them neither on the ground nor on pedestals, but on armatures of medical equipment, walkers and elbow crutches that may be reconfigured, as prosthetics are for the disabled, or interlocked. Foregrounding the immobility of these "mobility aids," Matherly entwines pathos and pathology, something that Cady Noland advanced in the 1980s with her walkers and canes, albeit with very different intentions.

One would have to go back to the '60s, and also to Rome, to find a true antecedent for Matherly's practice. With Paul Thek's *La Corazza di Michelangelo*, a small breastplate meant to evoke the corporeal, blood-encrusted armor of a centurion, which the artist made in the Italian capital in 1963, we see the anthropomorphic purely in terms of loss. In this work, Thek reduces the body to a hollow chest or cavity, nothing more than traces of viscous matter and decomposition. As with the severed limbs of his "Technological Reliquaries"—an arm, a leg—our sense of the body is delineated by absence. The passage from Thek to Matherly is a matter of the body made monumental and calcified, no longer preserved as a relic, a personal talisman or icon, but memorialized in the form of a cenotaph—a matter of displacement, a figure whose remains lie elsewhere. Representation, rather than the body itself, is the subject here.

Matherly approaches his work as a kind of forensic cavity search. Despite the solidity of his sculptures, the viewer is almost always aware of their interiors, cavernlike spaces glimpsed in the cracks and crevices of concrete, suggesting wounds or the collateral damage of time. The process is a matter of working from the inside out. He begins with a positive form carved from rigid foam that, once cast, becomes the interior of the sculpture. Because his casting materials are pliable—foam, polyurethane rubber, glue, and big green PVC bags made for watering trees—there is an element of unpredictability in play. What emerges

from the mold has a kind of promiscuous life of its own, shaped by the contours of a particular form yet also amorphous. Casting the final version in concrete, Matherly produces an object that is and is not set in stone. Miller's "brick shithouse," which binds Sadean transgression to the excretory like mortar to brick, is conjured here in Matherly's entwined notion of rationality and irrationality, pain and pleasure. When he quotes Sade's *Philosophy of the Bedroom* in a 2010 ink-jet transfer, it's as if the Marquis not only speaks to the artist's process and its infidelities but sits in judgment as the sole voice of reason: IF YOU PLEASE, LET US PUT A LITTLE ORDER IN THESE REVELS; MEASURE IS REQUIRED EVEN IN THE DEPTHS OF INFAMY AND DELIRIUM.

Matherly's *New Beaches*, 2012, currently on view in New York's City Hall Park, is the artist's first public commission and his most ambitious work to date, a massive rendering of Laocoön's head and arm set atop an interlocked cluster of thirty-one walkers. These imbue what appears to be a heavy, drowning figure with both a sense of weightlessness and an appearance of impalement—rendering the anguish of the illusion of freedom. Exhibited in a modern city-state whose police force has been referred to as a "private army," where dissension is crushed or routinely dismissed, and in a specific location that can in no way be understood as a non-site, this work could be seen as a beachhead. For Matherly a title is an act of inscription, and this one has a history worth considering. It is drawn from Malevich's "On New Systems in Art" of 1919 ("the machine . . . is preparing to run in a million forms onto the new beaches of the future"), as was Matherly's original title, now discarded: *Where is there more peace than in the grave? But even there, there is no peace*. Planted in the shadow of City Hall, Matherly's sculpture, literal and obstinate (to use his own term), is about much more than the mining of antiquity and the fragility of the body. Matherly acknowledges that his work may at times be seen to reflect the increasingly totalitarian nature of modern life. But his art is by no means merely reflective—it aligns itself, one might say, with the *anti-* in Robert Smithson's anti-monuments, establishing its own forms of what Smithson called "ruins in reverse," evoking the contingent nature of more or less everything—power relations, armed conflict, political economies, the body politic, notions of free movement and free speech. In the shadow of Matherly's pathos and collapse, we might well ask the age-old question, If civilizations crumble, is it because the foundation of reason they were built on was fatally flawed? Are they victims of their own inherent vice? What art can do at the end of empire is anyone's guess. Maybe ruins are reason enough. □

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Justin Matherly, *New Beaches* (detail), 2012, glass-reinforced concrete, ambulatory devices, 10' 6" x 11' x 6'.





Justin Matherly, *The degenerated instinct which turns against life with subterranean vengefulness; See you again in your muck of tomorrow*, 2010, concrete, ambulatory devices, 76 x 29 x 39".



Above: Justin Matherly, *And it was work like any other work*, 2010, ink-jet transfer, 36 x 27".

Below: Justin Matherly, *The body needs for its preservation many other bodies by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated*, 2011, concrete, ambulatory devices, 92½ x 45¼ x 34¾".

