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Neo-neoclassical art
By Francesca Gavin



In front of me is a man's naked bottom; pert and marble. The ancient Greek relic is instantly familiar and yet, used as part of a contemporary artwork being shown at the Venice Biennale by artist Danh Vo, it's also out of place – and all the more striking for it. Ancient Greco-Roman motifs once again have an increasing presence in the contemporary art world and this neo-neoclassicism is being used as a compelling device to grapple – through sculpture, painting and photography – with subjects from colonialism to feminism.

As Catherine Milner wrote in this magazine earlier this year (see “The rise of antiquities” on Howtospendit.com), contemporary art collectors are now extending their gaze to include ancient pieces. In parallel, “We’ve seen bidding from antiquities collectors on contemporary works,” says Cheyenne Westphal, co-head of Contemporary Art Worldwide at Sotheby’s. It’s little surprise, then, that the two genres are meeting within one artwork.

“In an uncertain world where values are constantly shifting, ancient Greece provides something more constant, more dependable. If people really look, they’ll discover what the Greeks themselves wanted to represent, which is the order behind the chaos of the world,” says Ian Jenkins, curator of the British Museum’s recent exhibition *Defining Beauty: The Body in Ancient Greek Art*.

Take the opening show of the Fondazione Prada’s new exhibition space in Milan this May (and extended in its Venice space for the Biennale), which was proposed by Miuccia Prada with an express desire to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of ancient art. The exhibition of classical sculptures, designed and installed by

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starchitect Rem Koolhaas and curated by art historian Salvatore Settis, explores ideas of seriality and (mass) reproduction in both the ancient world and ours. But can Jenkins' thesis be true of the contemporary artworks in which classical imagery appears?

In the work of Berlin-based artist Oliver Laric, the Roman process of reproducing Greek sculptures is presented as a blueprint for the infinite reproduction of imagery online. Classical motifs are used to highlight the adaptability of an image – they can be reused and reused “for insurance advertising or for a McDonald’s special Greek burger”, says Laric. “I’m fascinated by how an image can be really flexible online. It doesn’t have a constant ownership. It is mutable and modifiable.” In the past year, Laric has exhibited works exploring such themes at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence and Fridericianum in Kassel, ranging from replicas of classical sculptures in layered multicoloured resins (from €17,000) to 3D scans of historical items at The Collection and Usher Gallery in Lincoln, which he archived on the internet with the intention that they be used by the public. “Lincoln 3D scans” have subsequently been used for thousands of new images and objects – including the set for Italy’s Eurovision Song Contest singers. Laric’s recent shows include those at the CCA in Tel Aviv and the Austrian Cultural Forum in London, with an upcoming exhibition at Secession in Vienna in 2016.

Laric’s work shows just one way in which ancient imagery can be liberated from its original stories and symbolism – and loaded with new meaning. Vietnamese-born Vo, representing Denmark at this year’s Venice Biennale, has based much of his recent work (price on request) on found classical objects, but splices them with Renaissance or medieval pieces – melding two civilisations in time like a 3D collage – to explore colonial themes. “I’ve always been interested in the idea that power structures are not dialectic,” says Vo. “Civilisations just break down and others take over. I’ve explored the history of the United States, so it was a natural path to take things further back.” In one work, the dress of a Gothic wooden Virgin sits on top of a Roman marble Adonis, cut at the crotch. In another, a Roman marble boy’s legs are combined with a medieval wooden Madonna’s head. Both are included in Slip of the Tongue, the exhibition Vo has co-curated with Caroline Bourgeois, showing until January 10 at François Pinault’s Punta della Dogana in Venice. Vo has no qualms about this destruction and reforming of antiquity, highlighting its precedent in Christian iconography and cultural adaptation. “There’s nothing new under the sun,” he says.

The endurance of classical works over millennia also means that they naturally become symbols of longevity, the survivor’s spirit (through their scars) and authenticity, all of which contemporary artists strive to connect with and channel in their own work. “What happened over 2,000 years as these objects were pushed over and limbs fell off?” asks London-based artist Daniel Silver. “That process is very sculptural. A kind of collage of time.” Inspired by this, he creates inventive, misshapen and modern takes on classical sculpture (from £50,000) that recreate the destruction through the ages. Silver has gained recognition for his increasingly raw and unfinished figurative works, ranging from rough figures to tactile busts and beautiful watercolours (from £5,000) of Greco-Roman faces (often with a good beard). His most recent show, Plasters: Casts and Copies, was at The Hepworth Wakefield gallery in Yorkshire this summer, and he is currently working on public art pieces in London, as well as items for private collectors.

Also connecting ancient times to the modern day is American artist Sara VanDerBeek (works from \$5,000). Her photographs of ancient statues (coloured an intense blue to heighten their beauty) were first shown at New York’s Metro Pictures, juxtaposed with the minimalist sculptures they subsequently inspired. “I hope a comprehension of the classical can be interwoven into a larger, more prismatic approach to understanding and interpreting the world,” she says. “I feel that elements of the ancient are ever present in our lives.” VanDerBeek’s show at The Approach in London opens on October 14.

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"The attraction of the neo-neoclassical is the shock one gets from recognising a familiar image in a new context," says Ken Rowe, vice chairman of global business consultancy YSC, who has been collecting art for 25 years. He owns a number of works that draw on the classical, including pieces by VanDerBeek, AR Penck and Markus Lüpertz. "Great artists are always engaged in the process of subtraction from historical motifs," he says. "Lüpertz in particular is a great example – using the classical to explore emotional or political points with freshness." The German painter has just had a major retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris that included 140 works, many of which have a typically playful, irreverent approach to the ideals of beauty so key to classical imagery, as do works in a current show at the Arnulf Rainer Museum, Baden, which runs until October 26. He has been working for over 40 years and his depictions of classical bodies are more popular than ever, with work leaping from €50,000 at auction 10 years ago to €250,000 in the past year.

Los Angeles-based artist Amy Bessone uses female torsos and reclining nudes – often in strong colours such as hot pink and blood red – to imbue her paintings and ceramics (from \$6,000) with a feminist subtext. "I'm interested in female embodiments of power past, present and future," she says. "The classical body was always in my work, but self-awareness around my use of it came later – and is still developing." The truncated female torso, variously detached, put on a pedestal, copied, embellished and more, serves "as a shifting glyph for both art history and myself". A recent two-person show at Salon 94, Torsos & Buckets, with Matt Merkel Hess, saw hollowed out replicas of classical female statues inspired by a found vase. Bessone is currently working on a body of large-scale figurative ceramics for an upcoming solo show at Gavlak Gallery, Los Angeles, in January, in what sounds like the perfect neo-neoclassicist studio: "Imagine a female-only ceramic version of the Met's Greek and Roman Galleries in the living room of a funky 1970s stucco house on the eastern edge of the Hollywood Hills."

From feminism to architecture and urban development – and the work of London artist Pablo Bronstein, who zooms in on and pulls apart classical references in city public spaces in his art. "Classical architecture was crucial in the 1980s and 1990s, when public spaces were sold to private developers who dressed them up as neoclassical piazzas with shops and fountains," he says. "They seem public, but actually they are entirely privatised. I've made work about that." His intricate drawings and sculptures (prices from £6,000) focus on details, excess and the classical architectural origins of prefabrication and interiors, and range from proposals for fantasy neoclassical fireplaces and Italian piazzas to a resin replica of a classical column. These are used to examine power, order, democracy and conservatism in contemporary society. Several works will be at Museo Marino Marini, Florence in December, as well as being part of the touring group exhibition British Art Show 8, which runs from this month to January 2017.

And it's not just artists from the west who are appropriating these classical Greek and Roman images and motifs. Chinese contemporary artists are also exploring the potent power of their symbolism in a socio-cultural context. Sui Jianguo creates pop sculptural reinterpretations of iconic classical statues (such as Myron's Discobolus) – inspired by casts artist Xu Beihong brought to China in the 1930s. In his work, the classical is used to highlight the cultural repression of both political and his own personal history. His discus thrower – clad in a Mao jacket and made of fibreglass painted white rather than marble – is casting aside the bonds of socialist ideology. Made in 1998, Jianguo's Discobolus and similar works continue to be much talked about; they fetch ever-higher sums at auction (in 2013, a group of Jianguo's contemporary takes on classical sculpture sold for Rmb10m – about £1,013,000 – at Christie's), while earlier this year the Discobolus was exhibited as part of the Saatchi Gallery's show Post Pop: East Meets West.



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For Belgian collector Alain Servais, bank securitisation advisor and former head of international bond trading at Dewaay, who owns several contemporary works that reference the classical, such “sampling” is most powerful when used for provocative ends: “Contemporary art should open us to the ‘other’, and surprise, question and disturb,” he says. “Art should be a pocket of resistance.”

Amy Bessone, see Gavlak Gallery and Salon 94. Danh Vo, see Marian Goodman Gallery. Daniel Silver, www.danielsilver.org and see Frith Street Gallery. Frith Street Gallery, 17–18 Golden Square, London W1 (020-7494 1550; www.frithstreetgallery.com). Gavlak Gallery, 1034 North Highland Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90038 (+1323-467 5700; www.gavlakgallery.com). Herald St, 2 Herald Street, London E2 (020-7168 2566; www.heraldst.com). Marian Goodman Gallery, 5-8 Lower John Street, London W1 (020-7099 0088; www.mariangoodman.com). Markus Lüpertz, see Michael Werner Gallery. Metro Pictures, 519 W 24th Street, New York, NY 10011 (+1212-206 7100; www.metropictures.com). Michael Werner Gallery, 22 Upper Brook Street, London W1 (020-7495 6855; www.michaelwerner.com). Oliver Laric, www.oliverlaric.com and see Tanya Leighton. Pablo Bronstein, see Herald St. Pace, 6 Burlington Gardens, London W1 (020-3206 7600; www.pacegallery.com). Salon 94, 12 East 94th Street, New York, NY 10128 (+1646-672 9212; www.salon94.com). Sara VanDerBeek, see Metro Pictures. Sui Jianguo, see Pace. Tanya Leighton, 156 Kurfürstenstrasse, Berlin 10785 (+4930-2216 07770; www.tanyaleighton.com).