

# sculpture

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*Gradations of Slow Release*, 2015. Wood, copper, jesmonite, paper, and pigment, 50 x 298 x 44 cm. Photo: © Enrico David, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

## Enrico David: Accomplice to the Unfinished

May 1, 2019 by Francesca Gavin

How do you lift a drawing off a page? This complex thought is at the heart of Enrico David's work. His sculptures, installations, paintings, textiles, and collages are all rooted in a body of drawings. His practice is self-referential. David's pieces echo and orient around each other. Work made today could easily sit next to pieces that he made a decade or even two decades ago. This timelessness has made him one of the most interesting sculptors of his generation and garnered him a slot representing Italy at this year's Venice Biennale, along with a major traveling retrospective, on view at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, through September 2, 2019.

Over the past decade, David has focused on sculpture, something he describes as a "perverse consolidation." Sitting in his studio/apartment in a modern block in East London, he described how he was drawn to the difficulty of the medium: "I think it was the hardest thing for me to do, and therefore, it was the thing that I felt was the most interesting. It felt a lot more complex, just in terms of logistics and playfulness, and touching, and tactility, and interpretation."



*Mother Tunnel*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 278 x 286 cm. Photo: © Enrico David, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

David's objects all begin as drawings that he translates into forms. The dissection, examination, and translation of line into object fascinate him. He has a large portfolio of older drawing works that he regularly re-examines and reinterprets. "I feel like there is a backlog of information that I'm still processing," he explains. "I never really draw with a sculpture or with a painting in mind." Often these drawings are unclear and undefined, loosely indicating forms and bodies. Every drawing is a continuation of a previous drawing. David himself does not necessarily know at first what is going on in his images: "There is an interesting phase of deciphering what that drawing is trying to do. How do you describe it in a way that is not just a line on a piece of paper? How do you translate a line into a form?"

When he comes to manifesting his work as sculpture, he draws on a large breadth of media. He sometimes fuses or unites more than one material in a single object—bronze, jesmonite, wood, vinyl, copper, patinated steel, expanding foam, pigment, wool, wax, silicone rubber, graphite, bone, acrylic, and tissue paper. Once he has chosen the best medium to manifest a drawing, he rarely strays from his decision: "It just becomes really fixed. It becomes pure execution."



*Life Sentences*, 2014. Bronze, 43 x 106 x 12.5 cm. Photo: © Enrico David, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

David's work explores the intangibility of the body. What at first appears rooted and physical loses its center and melts and spills into something unclear and upside down. There is a sense of incompleteness. "I have stopped questioning it. I'm just assuming that that's the way things are for me right now. I'm an accomplice to my own desire to leave the body unfinished. There's always been the sense of fragmentation," he observes. David's bodies were initially very stylized, almost touching on Francis Picabia's silhouettes or Aubrey Beardsley's sexual, androgynous figures. David's figures have since become more elongated, less defined, until finally becoming almost un-bodies. They seem to waste away. Rather than something anatomical, David instead considers the body as linguistic: "There is a sense of the body as a language device more than anything. It's like watching the body and not understanding it in the same way that you would not understand language, or a meaning that is not quite clear to you. I'm not sure what the body means as a metaphor."



*The Assumption of Weee*, 2014. Jesmonite and graphite, 50 x 28 x 10.5 cm. Photo: © Enrico David, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London

“Gradations of Slow Release,” which opened at the Hirshhorn in April, is filled with his figures. The exhibition became classical under the helm of Michael Darling at MCA Chicago, the first stop on its tour. David explains, “I focused much more on the dramatization of the work within the formal constraints of the actual object.” The Hirshhorn’s circular space results in another take on David’s approach. “It suits the organicity of his work much better,” Hirshhorn curator Stéphane Aquin explains. “The way David works, starting from a drawing and then coming to just the right figure, and makes a painting out of it, and then elements of that painting become the basis for another series or cycle of works. You really follow the stream of consciousness, or the stream of thought.” Aquin aligns David’s work with the heritage of the Hirshhorn collection, which includes a number of artists who have served as reference points for the younger artist, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Giacomo Manzù. David’s work is a perfect fusion of bodily figuration and Modernist media. As Aquin notes, “It’s a very singular voice. It’s a voice that stands out.”

This summer, David’s work is getting serious attention at the Venice Biennale. This is the fourth time that he has shown in Venice in some capacity, though representing Italy is very different from his past inclusions. In 2013, he exhibited as part of Massimiliano Gioni’s Encyclopedic Palace in the 55th Biennale, and in 2008, he was included in a show at the Palazzo Grassi curated by Francesco Bonami. David also worked with Milovan Farronato, the current curator of the Italian Pavilion, on a solo show at Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa in 2011. In contrast to the ornate, decadent interior of the Fondazione, which is near San Marco, the Italian Pavilion is like an empty barn. Filling this cavernous space is not solely David’s concern—he will be sharing it with the work of Liliana Moro and the late Chiara Fumai. “I particularly value David’s position of resistance,” Farronato explains. “His figures do not give up, they endure, resigned but also armed with weapons which are not known, nor accessible to us. They are political statements.” Although David has been based in London for over 30 years, representing his home country sits well. Farronato highlights David’s reference to the archaic and traditional, which echoes Italian art in the early 1980s. “His Italianness is a dynamic and open concept, always ready to engage with his personal memories, his collective origins, and with any other unfamiliar/unknown notions.”





*Untitled*, 2015. Jesmonite, pigment, graphite, and cast-iron balls, 53 x 49 x 37 cm. Photo: Nathan Keay, Courtesy MCA Chicago

David made his name—and garnered a nomination for the 2009 Turner Prize—for innately theatrical installations reminiscent of set design or choreographed space. In recent years, he has edited things down to single freestanding objects, often on complex sculptural plinths. “I think that has taken a lot of that externalization of drama away,” he says. “It has simmered down into the finish and the surface. The surface of the work has absorbed the external euphoria of these larger, sprawling environments.” His pieces have shrunk and become more intimate: “You could handle them with your hands. There was a reference to maybe using them as tools or toys. When the works got slightly bigger, which is what they are now, they are more referring to a sense of architecture. I think of them as being something that in scale replicates the size of the human at a certain age—maybe six, seven years old. I try to imagine the sculptures as if they were life-size for a young person.”

His architectural references include plinths taken from 17th-century Indian structures used for astronomical observation in Delhi and Jaipur. These odd pavilions resemble staircases leading to nowhere. “They’re very, very bizarre and beautiful,” David enthuses. “I liked the idea of using them as bases for the work to imply this sense of trying to understand the work. They’re almost like deciphering objects, or devices to do something, or some sort of study.”



*Tools and Toys III*, 2014. Jesmonite, graphite, and copper, 56 x 52 x 8 cm. Photo: © Enrico David, Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and London





As in human consciousness, there is ambiguity in David's work. He hints at a narrative, but nothing clear is given away. He once referred to his work as the manifestation of trauma. There is an uncanny atmosphere at play here. As he puts it, "There's an illusion. I think the work demarcates an area. I believe that the work is there as a marker of an area where a certain type of thinking can occur. I don't even know what that would be in terms of my own personal narrative." David's work is not just about him, though it does emerge from an intuitive place. Nor is it just about our contemporary context. In fact, there is a timelessness to it that jars and stands out from an era focused on the sociopolitical. David's work feels like it strives more for an emotional universality. "The broader picture is always the one to somehow heal."

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