

CRUDELY CROWNED,
WOULD-BE MARTYR;
EMACIATED FOOL

HONORS THESIS

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by

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ABSTRACT

Crudely Crowned, Would-be Martyr; Emaciated Fool is the collective title of a body of sculptural work created in 2015/16 that serves to indirectly address nothingness as a condition of truth in pursuit of the sublime. This document contains photographic images of the work itself, as well as elaborations on conceptual content and creative process. Art historical and contemporary context is explored in order to better understand the work.

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Eye (Dark Mirror)
2016
Wood and Glass
9 x 13 inches

STATEMENT

“Is not density, in all its splendour, necessary to address the void?”¹

- Eduardo Chillida

I understand materials with significant hardness and mass to be physically manifest counterpoints to conceptually limitless negative space. I mean this in both dimensional and philosophical terms. Existing simultaneously within and surrounding all things, meaningless and empty space is the most essential and universal truth. By defining a physical reality in positive, objective terms, the non-physical reality of the negative becomes evident. My work addresses this void, and each object I make serves as a mirror with which I can indirectly observe nothingness without disturbing its inherent nature.

Iron and concrete possess precisely the kind of physical qualities these experiments require. Rigid and dense materials appeal to the tactile sense required to contemplate the nature of material in space, and insist upon the kind of visceral experience necessary to affect both the spirit and body equally. Each object I make nurtures a burdensome relationship to the viewer's physical presence, and simultaneously exists as an empty vessel, without essence of its own, begging to be filled with meaning by its witness.

CONTEXT

Crudely Crowned, Would-be Martyr; Emaciated Fool can best be understood as an artistic pursuit of the sublime.² In order to position this work in an art historical context, I have cited a few select reference points as they relate to this theme as it has evolved over time. It is not my intention to present this thesis as academic research on the sublime, nor is it to construct a treatise on the sublime in contemporary art. Instead, I only aim to articulate my understanding of my work as it has come to be, *ex post facto* of the act of making. My working process does not serve to testify, but rather to investigate, and the following conclusions arise from such an investigation. The works themselves bear witness as I transcribe their testimony.

I'll begin by examining Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) (Fig. 1). In this painting from the German Romantic period of the 19th century, Friedrich's subject stands upon a precipice, back to the viewer, staring out into the vastness of his world. Historian John Lewis Gaddis wrote that the painting suggests, "...at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of the individual within it. We see no face, so it's impossible to know whether the prospect facing the young man is exhilarating, or terrifying, or both."³ Thus is the ambiguous nature of sublime content. In this painting, the subject exists as both participant and

observer in space, but it is the viewer's experience of this condition, which defines it as "exhilarating, or terrifying, or both." The Romantics imagined space as a quality of nature, God's expression of sublimity, and thus by rendering the beauty and drama of nature's expanse, could articulate the sublime. The viewer's experience had not yet been conceived of as an integral component of the work itself. The viewer is considered only as voyeur, not participant, and her or his experience is indirect and vicarious; second-hand. As described below, this disconnect between experience and subject evolves in modernity, and it becomes necessary to define the sublime in more obtuse terms common to modern experience and modes of thinking. Where Romanticism thrives on the apparent schism between visceral and intellectual experience, modernism seeks to reconcile the disconnect.

Note that formally, the subject of Friedrich's painting is dressed in black in contrast with the sea of white-grey fog over which he stands. With the orthogonal lines of the mountain ridge before him, Friedrich directs the viewer to consider the subject's experience of physical weight in space. I will explain the significance of weight as it relates to my own work below.

The Romantics' attempts to describe the sublime were limited by their inability to see past the figurative and metaphorical. Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square on a White Background* (1915) (Fig. 2) represents an early attempt, if not the very first, in 20th century painting to eschew representation in favor of total abstraction. Philip Shaw writes for the Tate's research project on the sublime that, "[*Black Square*] can be seen as an attempt to transcend the material restrictions of representation, presenting a feeling or impression of the divine. Malevich himself regarded his minimalistic geometrical forms

as the secular equivalents of Russian icons, a form of painting, which aspires to present the divine as pure or unmediated reality.”⁴ Whereas the Romantics perceived nature as a physical manifestation of God’s sublimity, and thus strove to emulate its magnificence, Malevich declines to attempt such a simulation, or even acknowledge a deified provenance, and instead opts to manifest the essence of sublimity itself. The void presented by *Black Square* grants the viewer direct access to the *Wanderer*’s sea of fog, and her or his experience is no longer mitigated through a third party. The viewer becomes the wanderer. Her or his immediate experience becomes the subject, and the illustrated void serves as a vessel in which meaning can be collected. As with *Wanderer*, the formal effect of black subject in white space creates an empathetic sense of gravitas, which serves to substantiate the painting’s theme.

Both *Black Square* and *Wanderer*, however, are bound by the physical limitations of the two-dimensional picture plane. By 1962, Tony Smith created his three-dimensional elaboration of Malevich’s painting, and liberated *Black Square* from its frame. With *Die* (Fig. 3), *Black Square* becomes a six foot black cube in space. Smith and other minimalist sculptors of the time believed in a kind of literalism, where the object itself and the audience’s experience thereof was, in fact, the subject of the work. Michael Fried writes in his essay *Art and Objecthood* that, “literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work.”⁵ He goes on to criticize literalist sculptors for this theatricality. He agrees that the objecthood of the work makes evident the subjecthood of the audience, and the theatricality he refers to alludes to the phenomenological presupposition of the literalist’s intent. However, he believes that the presence of the

object supplants the “presentness” of the viewer. It obstructs the path to awareness, and acts as barrier, separating the viewer from the experience of truth.

If Fried is correct in his assessment of *Die*’s theatricality, a term that suggests falsehood, I would argue that it is because of the work’s lack of actual, physical mass. *Die* is, after all, a hollow construction, and this implies perjury in the face of inquisition. In this way, it could certainly be thought of as a mere stage-prop in a kind of theatrical production. When we carefully examine contemporary art trends, this kind of theatricality becomes apparent as a recurring theme. Anish Kapoor takes this illusory approach to its logical conclusion in his work *Descent Into Limbo* (Fig. 4). Like Malevich before him, Kapoor attempts to illustrate what would presumably be a direct observation of the void. Though he does speak with some degree of truth when he depicts empty space with empty space, the work still relies on artifice in order to construct its image and its message. His work does, in fact, possess physical boundaries, even if they are obscured, but the void is, by definition, both infinite and lacking in physical quality.

In contrast, Eduardo Chillida’s sculptures in solid wrought iron, concrete, and alabaster are precisely the objects they claim to be. With a work such as *La Sirena Varada* (*The Stranded Mermaid*) (1972) (Fig. 5), Chillida explores the sympathetic relationship between mass and space. The sculpture is solid cast concrete, and suspended mid-air beneath an over-pass in Madrid. “‘It is meant to fill a certain space,’ he told Henry Giniger of the *New York Times*, ‘and to give the impression of heaviness even though floating.’”⁶ But the work does not simply “give the impression of heaviness.” Unlike *Die*, *The Stranded Mermaid*’s function is not predicated on illusion. The

sculpture *is* heavy, and its position in space implies a subtle but existential threat. Chillida announces this fact by leaving concrete bare, exposing its common material quality. The suspension system he employs further accentuates weight by virtue of its minimal and unapologetic engineering, and a linear directionality that references the orthogonals found in Friedrich's *Wanderer*. Most importantly, Chillida liberates his sculpture from the ground, and the surrounding negative becomes integral to the work and immediately evident. By working with solid material, he defines space by physically displacing any other material with which he might otherwise be forced to share it. If the void is infinite in quantity, and lacking in quality, then only in this indirect way, he proposes, can it be addressed, by virtue of a sort of deductive reasoning, through mass and form.

PROCESS

My relationship with my work begins with the rational mind and is manifest and mediated through my hands. Concept develops as a result of the dialog I entertain with the work in the process of its manufacture. For this to occur organically, I strive to maintain a high degree of creative flexibility, and not bind myself with overly strict conceptual expectations at the start. After initial and thorough planning, and once the work has begun, intuition begins to play a more prominent role in the physical process. The work develops in a reflexive manner as an ongoing conversation between material, space, form, hand, heart, and mind. If and when genuine conceptual or emotive insight presents itself, it will be encoded within this conversation, and it is crucial that I be prepared to listen and decipher in real time.

In this way, my hands serve the most critical function. They are fallible, but it is precisely this fallibility that allows for unexpected developments to occur. They are inefficient, but it is precisely this inefficiency that allows for the meditation necessary to gain significant philosophical insight with every new work. My hands serve as a medium through which to develop intimacy with material, process, and inevitably, concept. Significant density and weight are qualities that I look for when choosing a material, and it is only with my hands that I can sense these characteristics. I can see with my eyes the effect that an object of significant weight might have on its environment, but I can only

intuitively understand this quality in terms of how it might feel in my hands, or borne upon my body. Sight can hint at essence, but it can only provide a perspective on truth. Sight *can* speak truth, but it can also lie. A thing may appear solid or massive when it is not, but weight cannot be felt that does not exist. Mass *is* truth, and a definitive ballast against its sympathetic counterpoint: space. One cannot exist without the other. Through mass, I can access space, and through space, I can express the sublimity of the void.

INTENT

I have developed a body of work that explores the aesthetic and conceptual themes of existentialism, nothingness, and the sublime. This work is ultimately sculptural, but can better be understood as it relates to both personal adornment and vessel-making within the metalsmithing tradition. Still, each piece is essentially literalist; a singular object, with essential qualities and presence, that requires no further justification than its own objecthood.

All work in the collection has a particular relationship to the body and references the traditions of adornment. *Crown(ed, Crudely)* is a headpiece. *Yoke (Would-be Martyr)* is a neckpiece. *Shackles (Emaciated Fool)* can be imagined worn around the ankles. The viewer is seduced by the object, and invited to imagine a physical relationship with it. Inevitably a palpable response to weight is felt. Mass has a particular visceral effect on the viewer, and where Michael Fried argues that the presence of a specific object supplants “presentness,” I propose that such is not the case *if* the object in question is *real* i.e. solid. A viewer will immediately empathize with a real object because real objects demand acceptance as a response to their physical proximity. Real objects confront the viewer with her or his own physicality. The effect is an acute awareness of presentness. I agree with Michael Fried when he writes that, “Presentness is grace,” and I would add

that presentness is an awareness of the infinite. An awareness of the infinite is an experience of the sublime.

At the same time, each sculpture serves as a vessel, and its form reflects this. As with Malevich's *Black Square*, content does not originate with the work itself, but rather with the actively participating viewer. The work only serves to define the psychological space into which content can be projected. Formally, negative space becomes an essential indicator with respect to this purpose. The negative space in the center of *Crown* seduces the viewer to stand directly beneath it, where it can make its brutish existential threat by virtue of its mass. The negative space existing within *Yoke* can be closed and sealed, preserving its contents indefinitely. The negative space in *Shackles* is lined with fur, soft and inviting; equally comforting and oppressive. First, the participant is invited to recognize presentness, and to experience the sublime, but then it is up to her or him to endow this experience with meaning, or be crushed by its weight.

CRUDELY CROWNED,
WOULD-BE MARTYR;
EMACIATED FOOL



Crudely Crowned, Would-be Martyr; Emaciated Fool
2016



Shackles (Emaciated Fool)

2015

Steel, Concrete, Rabbit Fur

12 x 24 x 12 inches



Shackles (Emaciated Fool)
Detail



Yoke (Would-be Martyr)
2016
Steel, Concrete, Bronze
60 x 24 x 18 inches



Yoke (Would-be Martyr)
Detail



Yoke (Would-be Martyr)
Detail



Crown(ed, Crudely)
2016
Steel, Concrete, Brass
48 x 120 x 18 inches



Crown(ed, Crudely)
Detail



Crown(ed, Crudely)
Detail



Crown(ed, Crudely)
Detail



Encapsulated Mass

2016

Steel, Concrete, Aluminum, Rabbit Fur

6 x 8 x 6 inches



Encapsulated Mass
Detail



Penetrated Mass (Ring Bearer)

2016

Cast Bronze

4 x 4 x 4 inches



Untitled Object (Material Study)

2015

Steel, Concrete, Copper

10 x 10 x 10 inches

APPENDIX

Figure 1.



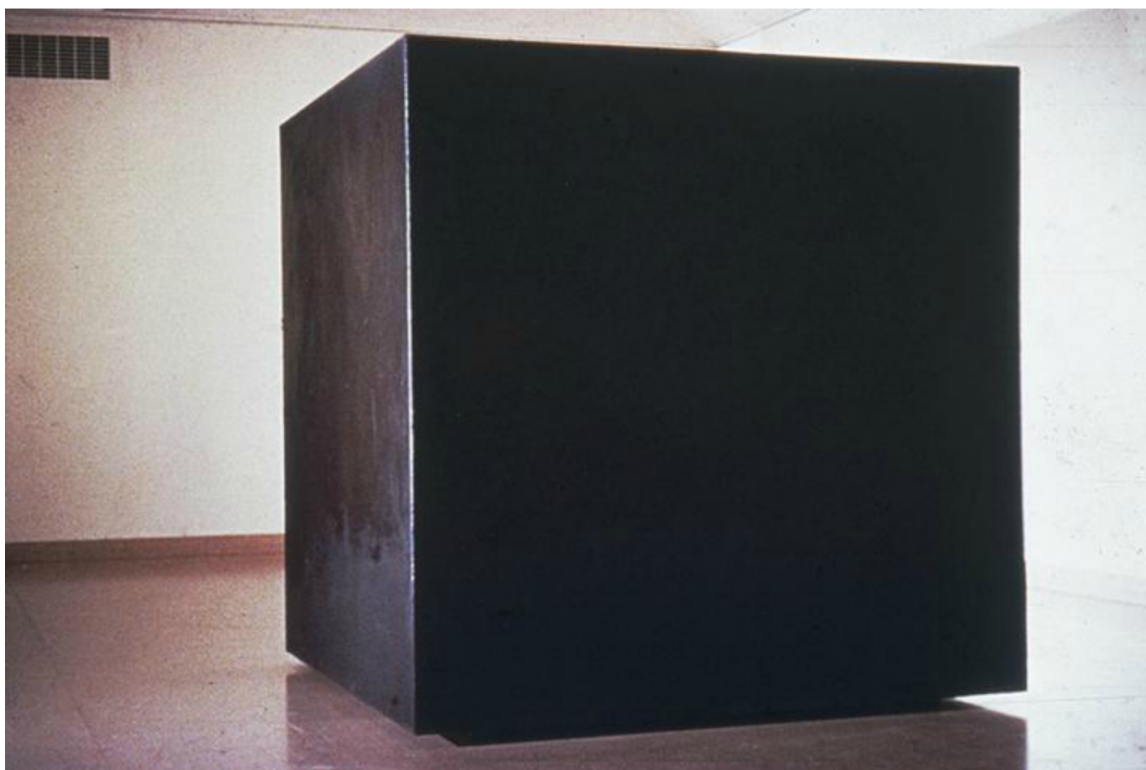
Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer
(*Wanderer Above the Sea and Fog*)
also known as *Wanderer Above the Mist*
Caspar David Friedrich
1818
Oil on Canvas
37 x 25 inches

Figure 2.



Black Square on a White Background
Kazimir Severinovich Malevich
1915
Oil on Linen
31 x 31 inches

Figure 3.



Die
Tony Smith
1962
Steel
72 x 72 x 72 inches

Figure 4.



Descent Into Limbo
Anish Kapoor
1992

Figure 5.



La Sirena Varada
(*The Stranded Mermaid*)
also known as *Meeting Place III*
Eduardo Chillida
Reinforced Concrete

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