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Exhibition Review

Out of Hand: Materializing the Digital

Out of Hand: Materializing the Digital, September 3, 2016–June 18, 2017, Powerhouse Museum/Museum of Applied Arts & Science (MAAS), Sydney, Australia

Exhibition catalogue: Lyons, Jo, ed. *Out of Hand: Materializing the Digital*, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Media (formerly Powerhouse Publishing) 2016

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Digital tools deployed in art, science, fashion, design, and architecture are the primary focus of *Out of Hand*. The exhibition's first incarnation was developed by former Museum of Arts and Design, New York (MAD) Senior Curator Ronald T. Labaco and exhibited in 2013. The exhibition's Australian version brings together in excess of 90 objects with content from the American exhibition shown alongside new material inspired by Australia's Pacific Rim location. Six, arguably overlapping, themes (*Modelling Nature*, *New Geometries*, *Rebooting Revivals*, *Pattern as Structure*, *Remixing the Figure*, and *Process*) are shared by both exhibitions.

But the MAAS exhibition also uses an adapted exhibition title, dropping “postdigital” in favor of “digital” and instead adding a seventh theme: *Analog to Postdigital*. In the accompanying exhibition publication, MAAS Principal Curator Matthew Connell observes that while digital manufacturing technologies are seen to “herald a new technological and economic age [...] they also appear to point to a breakdown of the boundary between the digital and the material world so that the descriptor ‘digital’ might be considered redundant” (Lyons 2016: 25). While the original exhibition title of “postdigital” potentially captured this sentiment, Connell explains that it also ran the risk of being read to mean “after” digital—an irony for an exhibition

focused on the digital. But the change is more than antipodean semantics. Instead, it indicates the curious tension around the ubiquity of digital strategies felt in developed economies worldwide.

Out of Hand contains many examples that point to future potential, but it is eclectic approaches to the historical that make the most memorable contributions to this exhibition. American artist Barry X Ball, for example, works with 3D digital scans of canonical sculptures but uses unusual hard stones such as Golden Honeycomb Calcite rendered with high-speed water cooled/lubricated diamond milling tools. Viewers come upon *Envy* (2008–2010) early in this large exhibition, offering a seductive material sculpture before confronting a number of projects that make puns about the zeros and ones that underpin our digital data (Figure 1). *Envy* refers to the Baroque sculpture *La Invidia*

(envy in Italian) by Giusto le Court, but the artist explains “I am no longer content to have my work be ‘reminiscent of’ or ‘inspired’ by historical antecedents. Therefore I set myself the task of making new Masterpieces [...] that are ‘more perfect.’” (Ball 2009)

Ball’s quest for greater feats of perfection includes what he describes as “completing” the sculptures by creating the pedestals as part of the work and finishing the backs to allow for viewing in-the-round. (The original sculptures would have concealed these unfinished areas when displayed in a niche.) Other “improvements” issued by Ball are described as the “correction” of “confused or poorly executed details” (Ball 2009). Perhaps less bombastic is Ball’s acknowledgement that the original sculptures were made of stone both physically accessible and amenable to hand carving. Ball’s twenty-first century sources allow for materials that may not have



Fig 1 Barry X Ball, *Envy*, 2008–2010. Golden Honeycomb Calcite, stainless steel; pedestal: Macedonian Marble, stainless steel, wood, acrylic lacquer; steel, nylon, plastic. Image courtesy of Powerhouse Museum/ Museum of Applied Arts & Science (MAAS). Photographer: Jayne Ion.

been possible to hand-carve. Instead, the tools of today's technology coupled with access to a far greater range of stone fundamentally expand the aesthetic options available to the artist.

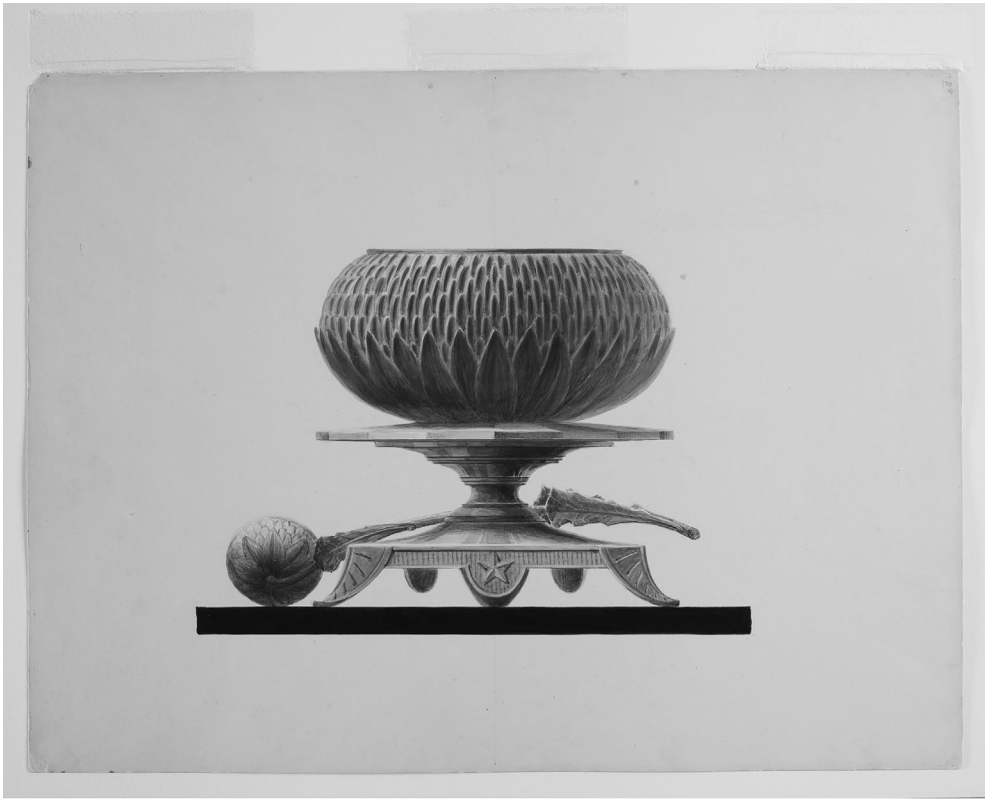
If Ball acknowledges the crucial place his expanded access to materials and tools play in his practice, Iran-born, US-based artist Morehshin Allahyari harnesses the digital to mine a very different art historical past. *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015–16) is Allahyari's series of resin sculptures made from 3D printing that recreate Assyrian artefacts from Nineveh and statues from the Roman city of Hatra intentionally destroyed by ISIS in 2015. Thirteen sculptures make up the complete series, including *King Uthal*, which is available as an open-source file

for downloading and printing through the rhizome website (rhizome.org) by anyone with access to the Internet and a 3D printer (Figure 2). A flash drive, which Alexis Anais and Anna Khachiyani (who wrote an essay on Allahyari's work) describe as "a kind of time capsule, sealed for future generations to discover," contains images, maps, videos, and email correspondence between the artist and the Mosul Museum and is embedded inside the artist's version of *King Uthal* (Anais and Khachiyani 2016).

While Allahyari supplied the open source files for anyone to print *King Uthal*, it was not the only object printed by MAAS specifically for this exhibition. Looking further into the past, the Powerhouse Museum/Museum of Applied Arts & Science also commissioned



Fig 2 Morehshin Allahyari, *King Uthal* from *Material Speculation: ISIS*, 2015–2016. 3D printed sculpture, memory card, digital files. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Fig 3 *Waratah Punch Bowl with Ladle*, 1889–1891, design by Lucien Henry. Watercolour over pencil on paper. MAAS collection.

Andrew Simpson of Sydney-based Vert Design to print from its own collection of previously unrealized designs on paper by Lucien Henry of *Protea Cup & Waratah Decanter* and *Waratah Punch Bowl with Ladle* (1889–1891). Henry was French-born and had begun to serve a death sentence for “his involvement in the Paris commune of 1870 [...] but was reprieved and banished to New Caledonia. After serving part of his sentence as a political prisoner, Henry was granted amnesty in 1879 and travelled to Sydney” where he enjoyed a celebrated career as a

sculptor, portraitist, landscapist, architect, and designer before returning to France in 1891 (Phipps 1986). His designs make use of flora indigenous to the region. For example, the colorful Waratah shrub is endemic to Australia and the state emblem of New South Wales, the southeastern region of Australia, which includes Sydney. Henry returned to France in 1891, and his designs, until now, had remained unrealized. The MAAS commission allowed Simpson, who used selective laser sintering (SLS), to bring into three dimensions plans from over a century earlier (Figure 3 and 4).



Fig 4 Andrew Simpson of Vert Design, selective laser sintering (SLS) of Lucien Henry designs, 2016. Commissioned by MAAS.

A hefty dose of poetic license arguably plays a part in each of these three examples—from Barry X Ball’s “improvements” to Allahyari’s open invitation to recreate versions of objects now lost to us all, and the realization of designs particular to Australian design history that had remained dormant for more than a century. Rather than out of hand, it is the materializing through digital tools of these utterly solid examples that offer some of the most seductive viewing this exhibition has on offer.

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