Disarticulate—Repurpose—Disrupt: Art/Archaeology

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This project sees archaeology and art as a political tool for disrupting conventional, politically loaded narratives of the past. Rather than producing institutionally safe narratives conventionally certified as truth, archaeologists should follow the lead of artists who use the past as a source of materials to be reconfigured in new ways to help people see in new ways. Using as an example the works of the Canadian artist Ken Monkman, who subverts nineteenth- century landscape painting to reinsert the missing critiques of Anglo-American colonialism, dominance of nature, and heteronormativity, this paper advocates disarticulating materials from the past by severing them from their context, repurposing them to bring contemporary concerns to the fore and creating new, disruptive visions from them. The article proposes the practice of an art/archaeology.

In the summer of 2016, a teenage boy from New Jersey, dressed in khakis and a pale blue button-down Oxford-cloth shirt, stood in polished loafers in front of a painting in a first-floor gallery of the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University. On a trip with his parents to visit the elite universities that he (and his parents) prayed that he would attend after high school, he had been looking at the painting for some time. His parents were downstairs respecting the Rodin sculptures. The boy moved his eyes slowly across the huge canvas, from the heavy, gilt frame on one side to the other; he was drawn in, seduced by the size of the work, the grandeur of the expanse and the perfect beauty of the blue skies and ripe, raw landscape. The work, perhaps of the nineteenth century, maybe more recent, was bold, with majestic, snow-covered peaks in the central background, tumbling clouds over rocky, steep slopes running down to clear waters of an alpine lake or river. On the near side of the water, tall pines, perhaps sequoias, stood giant and straight by the water's edge.

The boy knew this sort of art. At his 210-year-old Connecticut private boarding-school, creepy Mr Coburn had spoken with reverence about the great North American landscape painters of the nineteenth century: Bierstadt, Catlin, McStanley, Thomas Cole, the Hudson River School. The boy looked again at the detail in the painting. He stepped closer. On the near side of the water, the artist had painted male figures in various positions: some standing, some siting, one pair boxing, another wrestling. All were nude. In the painting's middle distance the artist had included a group of 10 or so younger men or boys swimming in the lake, jumping in off the rocks. That image looked familiar, though it did not really fit into the landscape scene of this painting.

Then the teenager's eyes tripped over a darker-skinned figure, standing on the rocks of the near shore, in the front centre of the canvas. The boy took a step closer to the painting. This figure was different. Long, luxurious, dark hair spilled over the top of its shoulders. In one hand the figure held a paintbrush, in the other an artist's palette; in front stood an easel holding a canvas on which the darker figure had painted two rows of horses and riders. The image on the easel also was familiar: perhaps something from last term's class on The Making of the American West. Like the men depicted in the large painting, the artist figure was naked, but, absurdly, wore thigh-high, cherry-red, stiletto-heeled boots. Viewed from the back as painted, the figure looked like a man, though on second look, perhaps he wasn't. Or maybe he was; it was hard to tell. Stepping closer still to the canvas, the teenager's eyes locked onto the gaze of the high-heeled painter who looked straight into the boy's eyes with a wicked smirk. Breaking away, the teenager's eyes strayed down the figure's back, resting on a tight ass, with hips cocked pushing one

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Figure 1. *'History is Painted by the Victors', by Kent Monkman (2013). 1829×2870 mm, acrylic on canvas. (Reproduced courtesy of the artist.)*

buttock up in a lean provocation. The teenager swallowed, looked around him, and stepped back.

Kent Monkman: works and intent

The painting in the Cantor gallery is Kent Monkman's 'History is Painted by the Victors' (2013), a substantial work (1.8×2.9 m) in acrylic on canvas (Fig. 1). It is one of a series in which Monkman copies known nineteenth-century landscape works by other artists, and on to which he adds his own politically and sexually charged features and motifs. The red-booted, androgynous painter in the work is Monkman's *alter ego*, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (read, 'mischief egotistical'), a leading character of many of the artist's graphic, filmic and performance works (Fig. 2).

A Canadian, Monkman is a Swampy Cree of English and Irish stock and a member of the Fish River Band of Northern Manitoba.[1] Son of a preacher, the artist worked as a set designer and illustrator and now stars on the contemporary political arts scene as painter, filmmaker and performance artist. Monkman's works invert received knowledge about sexuality, race, class and political history. To make 'History …', Monkman faithfully copied the subject, layout, style, and content of Albert Bierstadt's 'Mount Corcoran' (1876–7) (Fig. 3), and then peopled the newly created work with sets of historically referenced (though nude) people, including members of Lt Col. George A. Custer's Seventh Calvary (Custer and almost 300 of the Seventh were killed at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876). The boys bathing and swimming off of the rock are a tight riff on Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) painting 'The Swimming Hole' (1884–5) and the poses held by the men in the foreground refer to other Eakins works (e.g. Monkman's wrestling pair are Eakins' 1899 'Wrestlers'). The half-finished canvas that Miss Chief is painting is a scene from the Teton Sioux artist Red Horse's 1881 graphite, coloured pencil and ink images of the victory by the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne and Arapahoe at the Battle of Greasy Grass (known to the defeated as the Battle of Little Big Horn) (Fig. 4).

In works such as 'History …', Monkman's goal is to invert the power imbalance between First Nations people and European immigrants and colonizers, with special reference to 'stealing back the landscape', as a way metaphorically to reclaim land taken

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Figure 2. *Detail of Miss Chief in 'History is Painted by the Victors', by Kent Monkman (2013). (Reproduced courtesy of the artist.)*

by European colonizers in the nineteenth century. At the base of much of his work is an interrogation of the ways that European Christian perspectives replaced and dominated native cultures in North America (Liss 2005, 80).

Across a range of media, Miss Chief is central to many Monkman works. As Monkman's *alter ego*, Miss Chief is provocateur, trickster and supernatural being, often in drag, illuminating and critiquing the heteronormativity of the colonial legacy (Elston 2012, 188). In his art, Monkman deploys Miss Chief and other motifs and characters in order to recalibrate pre-contact sensibilities (including sexualities). Miss Chief sits in the context of Native gender senses that, at the time, ranged beyond nineteenth-century Western bi-gendered structure. One strong reference is to individuals of native traditions called Two Spirit, the term that has now replaced the original European concept of *berdache*, a derogatory pan-Indian term used by non-Natives to describe native male- and female-bodied individuals.

Miss Chief is more than just the inclusion of the non-heterosexual in a (repurposed) romantic landscape painting; s/he is Monkman's way to insert the artist-as-creator into the work as the creative agent who wields the power of representation (literally of painting the history). The reference is to the way that nineteenth-century painters such as George Catlin or John McStanley painted themselves into the paintings that they were making. Further, Monkman gives Miss Chief the power to reverse the gaze, to look back at the Europeans, or in the Cantor Gallery at Stanford, the 17-year-old future 'master of the universe'. Finally, by including Miss Chief in 'History …' and other works, and by including ghost-like representations of dandies in his 2008 series (e.g. 'Two Crows, a Band Chief with Tinseled Buck No 7429'), Monkman succeeds in representing those parts of the native social landscape that the nineteenth-century European painters found distasteful and refused to record; in discussing his work, Monkman tells us how George Catlin wanted the Two Spirit Dance to be extinguished (Monkman 2015).

Monkman has spoken about the central connection between his work and history and the way that he plays with that connection to make people realize how history can be told in different ways: as he puts it, 'how history folds different ways', and how the creation of different pasts depends on the teller of that history (Monkman 2015). For example, focusing specifically on the landscape, Monkman works to overturn the received artistic representation in romantic landscape paintings that North America was an empty, wild land waiting (and needing) to

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Figure 3. *'Mount Corcoran', by Albert Bierstadt (1876–7). 1541×2435 mm, oil on canvas. (Reproduced courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington (DC).)*

be discovered, controlled, tamed and settled; in fact the continent was fully populated, and Monkman's decision to (ab)use work by artists such as Bierstadt is partially founded in the way that Bierstadt represented the land as wild and unoccupied. By inserting people into his appropriated landscape scene, Monkman takes on what he calls modernity's 'deliberate amnesia': the trend to forget and move away from the past (Monkman 2015).

Monkman's work is provocative in both topic and in its medium. His work presents sexuality (particularly homosexuality) in contexts dominated by heteronormative perspectives, approaches, traditions, structures and prejudices. He works with the classic iconography of cowboys and Indians, and with particularly well known individuals of North American history and folklore. Custer, his soldiers and the Battle of Greasy Grass are one example in 'History …'; Daniel Boone's son in 'Rape of Daniel Boone Jr' (2002) is one of numerous examples in many of Monkman's other works.

To propel his work, Monkman harnesses the rhetorical powers of specific art forms: large-scale landscape painting, performance art, museum diorama. He has spoken about how the size and framing of large landscapes like 'History …' 'draw in' the viewers, to lead them astray with a subconsciously acceptable format in an otherwise, normally, neutral, conservative context (e.g. the museum or gallery). He has discussed how he inserts his unexpected characters (e.g. the soldiers of the Seventh Calvary) as flat representations in what otherwise are deep, almost three-dimensional paintings (Monkman 2015); the contrast arrests the viewer's eye onto the new figures as it otherwise cruises through the deep richness of the landscape, clouds, vegetation and water.

Art/Archaeology: defined and the example of 'History …'

The call to an art/archaeology (Bailey 2014a; and examples Bailey 2013; 2014b) is a plea to move beyond the boundaries of archaeological practice and archaeological interpretation as well as of art history and practice. It promotes archaeology as an action that goes beyond the documentation and certification of the human past, beyond the straightforward

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Figure 4. *Page from* The Battle of Little Bighorn: An Eyewitness Account by the Lakota Chief Red Horse Recorded in Pictographs and Text at the Cheyenne River Reservation, *Red Horse (1881) (MS2367A – OPPS NEG 72–3917). (Reproduced by permission of the National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.)*

description, classification and dating of peoples and past behaviours. The archaeologist's job is not to discover officially (and tell) the stories of the past. Rather, the goal of archaeology is to open people's minds and disrupt received perceptions of society, politics, places, peoples and material culture. To this end, art/archaeology is an invitation to use artefacts, traces, features, analyses and perceptions from the past as if they were fresh, raw materials, palettes and tools in our creation of original work that has political intention and impact. It is a search for new spaces in which to make work that is both of the past, but also wholly in the present. One way to conceive of doing art/archaeology is through a three-step process: disarticulation, repurposing and disruption. Monkman's *oeuvre* is a good example of the art/archaeology philosophy thriving in contemporary political art (another example is Virgil Ortiz's 'Revolt' series; see discussion in Bailey in press); 'History is Painted by the Victors', as described above, is a particularly good illustration.

Disarticulation

Disarticulation is the separation of an object from its historic past, a severance of ties to the (pre)historic context, intention, function, use and any particularly tethered, anchored, or located meaning or interpretation that an object might have in the terms and expectations of standard archaeological practice. Archaeologically, such disarticulation is counter-intuitive; the goal of (most) archaeology is to find, identify, analyse, reconstruct, interpret and explain objects and traces of behaviour as accurately as possible and as securely anchored to a specific moment in, or a set of actions and peoples of, the past. Disarticulation disregards all of this; it breaks the connection between object and past context and it prohibits (or, at the least, avoids) any effort to seek that link or reconstruct that connection. The only common element between art/archaeology and traditional archaeology is the object, artefact, analysis, interpretation, or explanation itself; each artefact or analysis is of the past, and regardless of what one may eventually do (in a

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departure from expectations or code of practice) to that object or interpretation, the two different engagements with the past are linked.

In 'History …', Monkman disarticulates the following objects, interpretations and traces from their pasts: Bierstadt's 'Mount Corcoran' from its nineteenth-century Romantic landscape context, from its location as historic illustration to be viewed and from its position within the European construction of the North American west; Lt Col. George Custer and the Seventh Calvary from their positions in United States historical military martyrdom; Thomas Eakins' 'The Swimming Hole' from its location and membership of the masterpieces of American painting; Red Horse's 1881 graphite drawings of the battle from that particular Native representation of the confrontation and its particular local sets of intentions and impacts; Eakins' various studies of pose and position from neo-classical painting; and the Two Spirit from its hidden and disappeared absence from nineteenth-century, European, visual representations of native America.

In fact, Monkman severs from the past (and the present) all of the standard representations (textual, visual, oral, or otherwise) constructed both by European incomers and by local native populations who accepted (or at least did not overturn) those conceptions of empty landscapes waiting to be tamed, civilized and occupied. In this sense, one could take the specific Bierstadt work that Monkman hijacks to stand for all nineteenth-century landscapes of this broad tradition. One could embrace Eakins' 'The Swimming Hole' for all neo-classical homoerotic art of young nude boys and men. One could read the Seventh Calvary for all institutional soldiers or government agents, decrees and laws set to dislodge native people from the land. Bringing these images and references onto his 2013 canvas of 'History …', Monkman snaps off each of these from its specific past. Though the connection may remain at some level (subconscious for many; specific and named for a few), the particular past reference is not present for the teenage visitor to the Cantor gallery (or to any other viewer) as might otherwise be provided in paragraphs of background context or footnoted clarifications attached (as if it were possible) to the bottom of the frame or even contained in the short text of labelling on the museum wall.

But what of a more traditionally archaeological example of disarticulation? One answer is that Monkman's work is, itself, archaeological in the sense advocated here as art/archaeology: using the past to interrogate political and social perception in the present. Working with a more standard archaeological box of raw materials, I suggest that one could take an artefact (a Neolithic figurine from southeastern Europe, for example) (Fig. 5) and remove it from its well-conditioned typological, chronological, or interpretative contexts: that is to say, it is a Type A example from a burial at the site of the Hamangia Culture of southern Romania and northern Bulgaria dating to 5200–4500 cal. BC and representing the deceased or a member of the deceased's co-residents. The proposal is that we erase that set of archaeological information of context, periodization, culture history and interpretation; we disarticulate the figurine from its past.

Repurposing

Repurposing is the exploitation of the newly disarticulated objects (in their new status as no-longer-of-the-past) as best afforded by their physical and latent facets. Liberated from their histories and back stories, these objects become available (as if they were paints, chalks, oils, acrylics, marble, copper, clay, wood) for a contemporary maker-of-work to arrange and deploy as she wishes. They are newly mined raw materials, available for use and transformation in the same way that Monkman deploys a tube of acrylic paint in 'History …'. There is no direct connection between the acrylic-ness of the paint and what Monkman makes with it. The former makes the latter possible, but does not determine it. The criterion of importance in repurposing is that what is made with these raw materials is novel and independent, that the new work can stand on its own, and that even if it has latent aromas of relevance to its former articulated self, those traces are fugitive, barely sensed, if they are present at all.

The artistic metaphor used here is merely a handy device, initially relevant to the Monkman example and the visual economy in which he works. The making-of-new-work may just as easily be literary (thus words, phrases, semantics, diction would be invoked) or any other trope of the creative. Of course, none of these raw materials are ever fully clear of the energies or senses of their past lives, regardless of the cleanliness of the break of their articulation; depending on their personal experiences, education, political biases and social position, the viewers, readers, handlers of the freshly created work will each come to the work with their own individual perceptions, expectations, desires and fears. The metaphor holds, though; the uses of ochre for body painting or obsidian for knapping a sickle blade, at the same time, both are new creations, but also retentive of the materiality of those specific stuffs: of hydrated iron oxide or of glossy, black, quickly cooled lava.

In 'History …', therefore, Monkman repurposes each of the newly disarticulated items from the past

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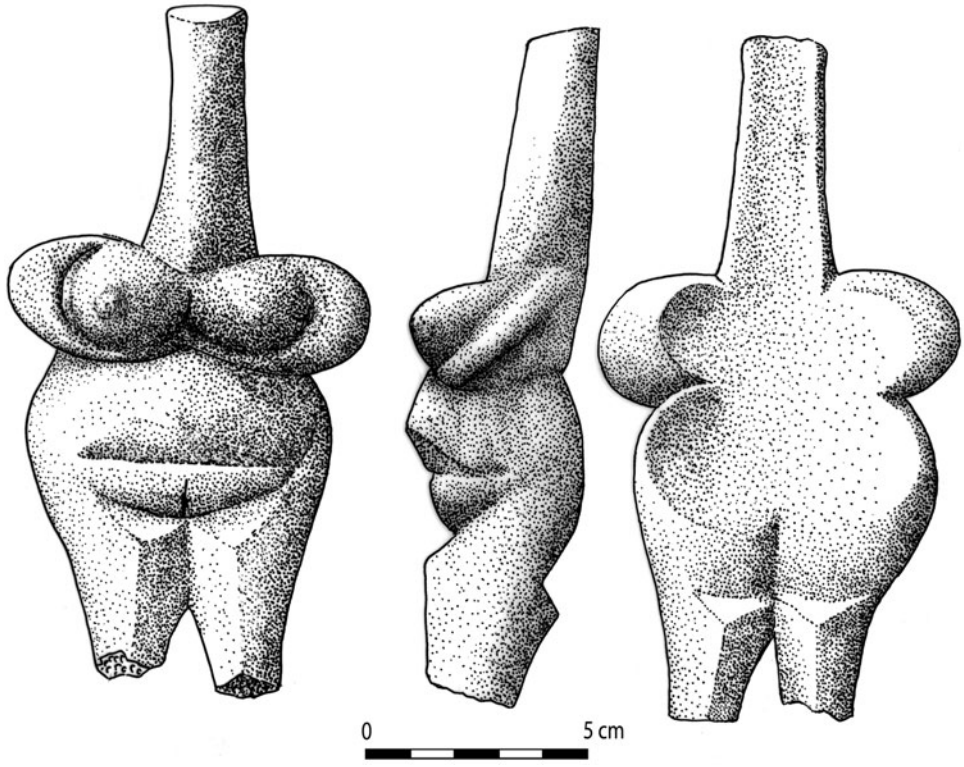


Figure 5. *Figurine from the Hamangia Culture (5200–4500 cal. BC). (Illustration: Howard Mason, after Berciu 1966.)*

and uses them as raw materials to create the novel, unique, and original work, 'History is Painted by the Victors': Bierstadt's 1876–7 'Mount Corcoran' becomes the fresh canvas upon which and with which Monkman makes his new work; Custer and the Seventh Calvary become a set of graphically flat characters which the artist positions on the banks of the lake, arranged as if pieces in a collage, cut out from some historical text or lithograph; the boys of Eakins' 'The Swimming Hole' are likewise dropped on to the canvas like dollops of paint; Red Horse's drawings slot in front of Miss Chief, stuck to the canvas on the easel, as if selected from a supply room and glued in place.

For the Hamangia figurine, the heavy and solid fullness of the fired clay object is positioned in a man's two hands so that the hands cover and control the appearance and the expression of that body in its three-dimensional and partly sexual form (Fig. 6). The artefact, thus positioned, is now a prop in the creation of a photograph taken in 2003 and then exhibited at an installation in a gallery in northern California in 2015. The once-figurine, having been disarticulated, became the raw material for the creative action of making photographic images that are both printed on Hahnemühle Matt FineArt paper, framed and hung for consumption by visitors to the Badè Museum of Biblical Archaeology (Berkeley, USA), and that are distributed in electronic format as part of that institution's installation as well as in other manifestations projected by the museum and by the photographer.

Disruption

Disruption is the positioning of the newly created work into a context where it will interfere and disorder an existing imbalance of power, resource and knowledge. To disrupt is to invert, intervene and affect change in the ways that people view, think and speak about common issues and positions in today's socio-political realities and in the ways that the past and the future are represented and projected. Disruption is a political act with intention and thus has targets and goals. However, and perhaps more important, the disruptive act of interference and disordering provokes and leaves a trail of unintended consequences that are beyond the control and the original intention of the work and its creator. The fields into which the work brings disordering (and re-ordering) are not archaeological, nor are they related to the past, though, of course, they may well have connections to what is normally understood to be the remit of high-quality archaeological or historical work. Disruption

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Figure 6. *'Untitled-A19.6', by Doug Bailey (2003). 279×356 mm, inkjet print.*

takes place in the present (today, now), and it recognizes that the past only ever exists in that present.

In 'History …', therefore, Monkman disrupts the following: the static understanding of an empty, wild, continent that was somehow (supposedly and extraordinarily) in need of exploration and civilizing by European colonizers; the disappeared sexualities of non-heteronormative identities and relationships; the egotistical position of the painter in his own constructions of the North American west; the passive role given to art (i.e. it is the static thing gazed upon); the understanding that there can even be one, true, objective, agreed-upon version of past events; the received solidity with which pictorial and written accounts of warfare are consumed; the assumption that representational depiction is neutral and realistic; and the perceptions that the 17-year-old applicant to Stanford University holds not only about North American history, the 'settling' of the 'wild' frontier and its representation by nineteenth-century landscape painters, but also, perhaps, his own position within the elite hierarchy of a white, male, entitled aristocracy of East Coast America, and perhaps also his own sexual desires and identity.

For the Hamangia figure positioned, photographed, displayed, disseminated, viewed and discussed, the targets for disruption are standard heteronormative, patriarchal acceptances of the ways that the female body and its representations are displayed and consumed in the communities of the modern western industrial world. The photographs become one component in an installation that includes prehistoric artefacts (e.g. figurines from other cultures), modern popular culture (e.g. a Wonder Woman bobble-head) and text prompts that ask the visitor to open up their, potentially subconscious,

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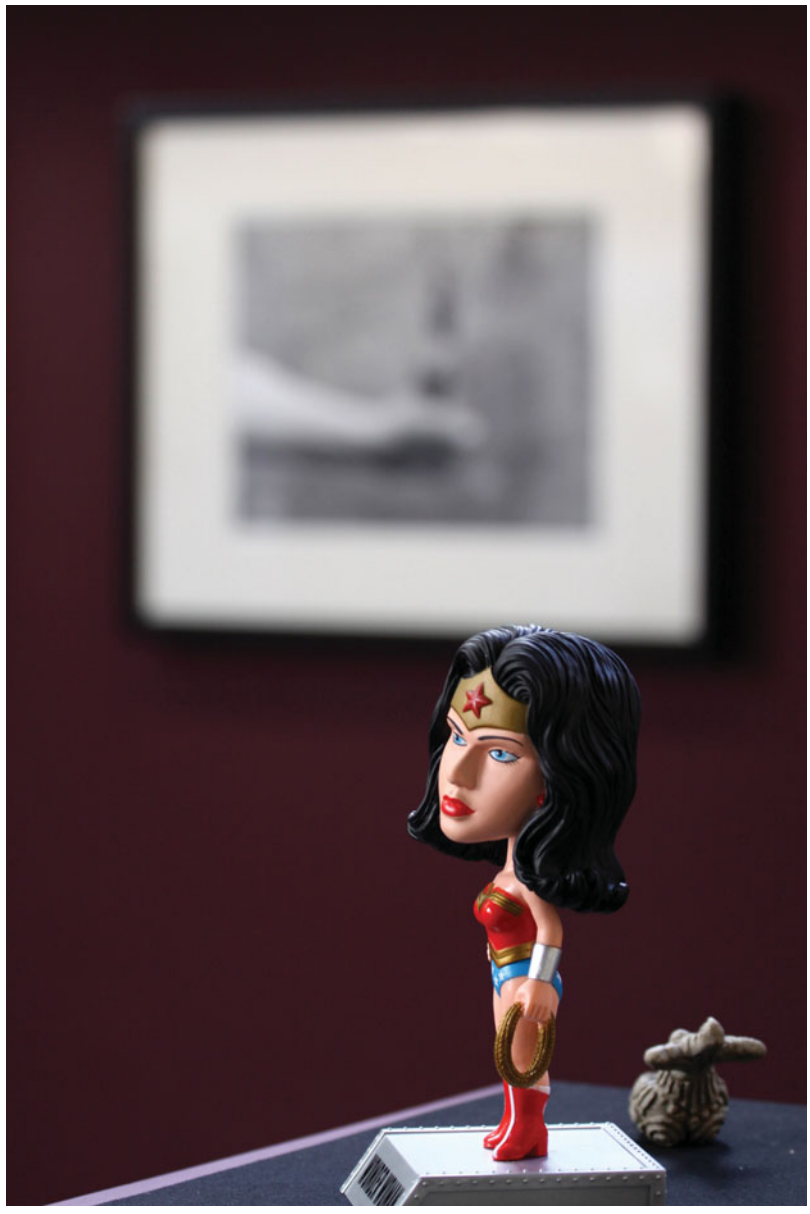


Figure 7. *View of 'Ancient Figurines: Controlling Bodies' installation (June–September 2015), Badè Museum, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California. (Photograph: Doug Bailey.)*

understandings of the ways in which the naked female body is (literally) manipulated by men (Fig. 7).

Art/Archaeology: the challenge

How is any of this archaeological, beyond the vague connection that is allowed at a subconscious level of a past-in-the-present, or in addition to the thin recognition that objects that are disarticulated were once of the past? Is the disarticulation-repurposing-disruption programme only applicable to contemporary art workers and work, as illustrated in the Monkman example? Is the use of the Hamangia figure at the Badè Museum legitimate, or even archaeologically ethical? One answer is that none of it is very archaeological. Thus the work that takes place and its results and impacts occur in intellectual, disciplinary and institutional contexts beyond the boundaries of archaeology as traditionally practised. This non-archaeologicality is part of the proposal. Similarly, is the creative work in an art/archaeology artistic in any standard understanding of that concept? Does that work make something new that affects the senses of the gallery visitor or painting viewer? The

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answers to both questions appear to be negative ones. In that sense, one might suggest that 'History …' is barely more than a forgery, and that it is not archaeological; one could argue that the photograph of the Hamangia figure has no respect for the prehistoric or cultural context of the artefact. Art/archaeology, however, works beyond the boundaries of both archaeology and of art or art history; it is beyond the limits, expectations, or potential for archaeology as traditionally practised.

Seen from one perspective, using the example of 'History …' may be an easy path to take. Is there not more space and freedom to make work that provokes and disrupts in the work of 'art' and its creativity? I suggest that the opposite may be the case; there is more room for creation in the archaeological. As archaeologists, we work on the basis of faith and trust, adhering to professional codes of conduct (of institutions, grant-giving bodies and publication houses). The public and the institutions trust us to tell the truth about the past. The last 30 years of the development of archaeological thought have coherently exposed the fragility of the assumption that there is any one truth to be told about the past, indeed that there are set, stable truths to be excavated, recorded, cleaned-up, reconstructed and displayed in museum or site report.

What is evident, though, is that when compared to the excavation grid and analytic laboratory, the studio and gallery are places in which to create work that is less restrained by the formulations and implicit limitations of the academy or funding institution's expectations. Compare any major statement on a period, culture, technology, or analysis of the past with a similarly significant work of two-, three-, or electronically dimensional art, and I contend that the latter possesses an energy distinct from the former; the rhetorical potentials are of different dimensions and the audiences are populated with different needs and desires. What is enticing is to note that both art-creation and archaeology-creation take on the same themes: life, death, space, time, progress, change, socio-politics, among many, perhaps all, others that make up the humanities and social sciences.

One of the significant differences between output in the two fields is the stress that the different disciplinary sets of gatekeepers place on context. For archaeological creations, context is paramount, requiring explicit declaration, usually in advance of any work to proceed. For artistic creations, context is of a different character, less easily present, less explicit, perhaps lurking in an under-illuminated background, indeed if any reference is made to it at all. Hence the heavy chapters of argument positioning and derivative theorizing in most authoritative archaeological output, and the lightness of obvious guidance present when we encounter a painting, sculpture, photograph, song, poem, or dance. To note this distinction is not to judge or to denigrate archaeology and its successes, but it is to suggest that some of the limitations and contradictions of a modern, theoretically informed archaeology find their home in the institutions' well-established mode of practice and criteria for vetting work.

The proposal, therefore, is to be politically affective, to locate the past honestly in the politics of the present, to make the world a better place in which to live. In many ways, archaeology does this already in declaring the inherently political character of the past, its recovery and its deployment in the present. The suggestion made here is for an additional, complementary venture: to disarticulate artefacts from their pasts and to release them into the contested dynamics of the present, through the making of new creative works, not traditionally seen as historic or archaeological in form, display or intention. Hence, the proposal for disruption within an art/archaeology. If a robust and applied archaeology (of any period or region) is defined as one that looks beyond our particular local biases and perspectives, and plumbs other ways of knowing what it means to be of this world, then it is important that we create as broad an inclusive and enabling space as possible for that to happen. I contend that one part of that space is the art/archaeological. What that space will contain, who will work there and what will emerge is the excitement of potential, and of a looking forward.

Note

1. The reader will find more information about Monkman and his work in McClellan (2008) and the essays in that edited volume by Liss, McIntosh, McMaster, Madill and the interview of Miss Chief by Mattes. Also see Liss (2005), Swanson (2005), McIntosh (2006) and Elston (2012).

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Author biography

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