

## Materiality and the Body of Venus in 21st-century Sculpture

Sculptural representations of the goddess Venus in ancient Rome received prayerful devotions, provided models for socially acceptable desire, and gave visual pleasure to their viewers (Havelock 1995; Kousser 2010; Skinner 2013). Today, these same Venuses inspire artists to explore intersections of body and culture within their own contemporary contexts. This paper will consider how artists Fred Wilson, Jeff Koons, and Patricia Cronin re-create specific Roman Venus statues in order to challenge concepts such as beauty, race, memory, and history. Although each of these artists has created multiple works inspired by ancient Mediterranean art, they have not been examined through the lens of classical reception before (in general, scholarly publication on their art is rare) (Bonami 2014; Syson 2018). By focusing on the physical aspects of the artworks' manufacture, I also draw from the methodology of material culture studies. Representations of Venus's nude or semi-nude body, articulated in marble, bronze, silver, and clay, were part of everyday ancient visual culture across the Roman empire. Sculptors adopted and adapted standard poses and body types, making Venus's physical form easily identifiable by the viewer regardless of its scale or fabrication technique. This paper argues that these three contemporary artists' sculptures benefit from an examination together, as they all depend upon a reception that recognizes bodies of "classical" goddesses, yet each evokes new meanings by altering the original medium.

Wilson's white-pigmented bronze *The Mete of the Muse* (2006) copies a 1st-2nd century CE marble sculpture currently at the Vatican Museum. He juxtaposes the white Venus with a black Egyptian Hathor statue to interrogate definitions of "European" and "African" that depend upon skin color. The use of bronze, the medium from which most ancient Greek and Roman

statuary and public monuments today are made, signals the broad cultural significance of the work's expression. *The Mete of the Muse* is especially resonant now, as in recent years discussion of white classical statuary's original polychromy—reversed by Wilson, who paints Venus white— has received backlash from white supremacists (Quintana, 2017).

Koons, in *Gazing Ball (Esquiline Venus)* (2013), replicates the Capitoline Museum's 1st century marble goddess in bright white plaster with an added reflective blue glass sphere that prompts questions about society's construction of ideal bodies and the role of the viewer, whose reflected image becomes part of the artwork. Koons says the globes were inspired by those seen in his childhood neighborhood in Pennsylvania, while the white statues also recall mass-produced kitschy resin or concrete yard decor. The plaster, however, directly recalls the replicas commissioned and displayed by 19<sup>th</sup> century museums and art academies that wanted to elevate public taste through appreciation of the classical body.

Cronin's *Aphrodite Reimagined* (2018) copies a 1st century CE marble torso of Venus at the Tampa Museum of Art and completes its missing parts with translucent green resin that calls attention to the fragmentary nature of the original within notions of physical completeness and prosthetics. Its comment on beauty and the female body and the relationship of artificial components speaks to its moment in the age of Instagram selfies “improved” by filters, but also physical modification.

### Bibliography

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