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ARTSEEN

Davina Semo
by Noah Dillon



Davina Semo, "EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED," 2014. Pigmented reinforced concrete, Cor-ten steel, 6 × 6 × 7'. Broadway Morey Boogie, 117th Street & Broadway, New York. Courtesy Marlborough Chelsea, New York.

Davina Semo's sculptures have recently been shown in three concurrent New York exhibitions. Marlborough Chelsea's extended public art installation, *Broadway Morey Boogie*, is on view through April. A solo show of the artist's work, called *HOLDING THE BAG*, was at Rawson Projects through February 1st, and a two-person show with David Flaughter opened at Greenpoint's U.S. Blues Gallery February 7th to March 8th. Each was an acutely different staging of her work, providing some incomplete overall sense of what she does and what her ideas are.

Semo is interested in power and control, in the allusions and promises embedded within objects, and in the affective power of language. And these issues are comprehensible in both personal terms and in a public, social sense: how tongues are

held, how headlines conceal, how a person retains autonomy or relates to systems of dominion. Her sculptures are often big, heavy —apparently austere—concrete slabs, chains, expanded steel, wire mesh glass, cast metals, stone. They're epistolary barricades, bunkers, fetishes, monuments. She makes most of them with her own hands

Her titles are often altered appropriations from other texts, always written in all caps. That tactic is now often taken as the equivalent of shouting; it's the only emphasis most digital text will allow for. But in the context of industrial materials, Semo's titles are absolute, authoritative—even when the utterance speaks uncertainty. Much of it describes people, often with third-person feminine pronouns. A stainless steel cast of a jailhouse shiv at Rawson is called "SHE DRANK THE COFFEE AND SLID HER CUP FORWARD FOR MORE" (2015). Someone's conversation is terminated by a concrete slab, titled "I HEAR YOU SAYING THIS IS VERY HARD BUT YOU'VE DECIDED WHAT YOU NEED TO DO" (2015). The words are cutting.

Broadway Morey Boogie is a disparate array of 10 public sculptures by as many artists, installed along Broadway between Columbus Circle and 166th Street. Semo's work stands in a median at the 117th Street crosswalk, between Barnard College and Columbia's original campus. Called "EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED" (2014), the sculpture is a gray concrete box with mitered corners, seven-feet tall and six-feet square. It has four alcoves sunk into its walls, each sealed by a weathered COR-TEN steel plate. It's topped with a grate of expanded steel, laced into a pattern of Xs. In the lower-right corner on the north-facing side, a small, golden Cuban-link chain is embedded in the wall, catching sunlight.

The title has many referents: Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Crowley, etc. William Burroughs appropriated it from Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut* (1938), attributing it to 11th century Islamist warrior Hassan-i Sabbah. "Nothing is real, everything is permitted," says Sabbah, whose assassin corps prefigures almost perfectly the death cultists of al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISIS, and others— succinctly encapsulating the nihilism of ideology: that the immaterial framework of a vision is a higher power than the concerns

of the material world itself. Gods sanction violence because everything done in the deity's name is justified, because the afterlife is a truer world than our own. Similarly, American law authorizes the vengeance of extrajudicial execution and torture and interprets prohibitions as temporal illusions.

The rust-streaked and pockmarked exterior of "EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED" exudes authority. It resembles a citadel or sepulcher with no entrance, all enclosure, mimicking sites where behavior is strictly delimited and controlled. While its title goads debauchery, and can be taken as an invitation to vandalism, the sculpture remains unviolated. Its perverse call for annihilation has been submitted to the higher cultural demand that art be preserved, and anyway, where's the rebellion in harming something that solicits abuse?¹

The show at Rawson is part of the gallery's *A Process Series*—short-run exhibitions constructed around new work and its inspiration. As with many artists, Semo can be reluctant to talk about what she draws on for her work, wary of too-final identifications of influence and representation. An incisive catalogue accompanies the show, including an interview with Semo about images of detainee facilities at Guantánamo Naval Base's Camp X-Ray prison and the recent Senate Intelligence Committee report on torture by government personnel between 2001 and 2006, which serve as jumping off points for the show. Torture, kidnapping, denials of habeas, secret laws, ignored laws, extrajudicial execution, were all sanctioned by John Yoo and the Bush administration's corruption of laws of war, ostensibly in the name of preventing violence. Many of the artworks filling the gallery's sub-street-level space resemble elements from documentary photos of a Guantánamo interrogation room: one-way mirrors, a rudimentary wooden table, a rolled-up tarp like a body bag, a steel folding chair facing a concrete slab with a leg shackle. The detention facility was repeatedly redecorated to alternately apply pressure to a prisoner or to suggest rapport, and Semo recapitulates images from the harsher arrangement.

The titles for these artworks sound both like personal meditations and snippets of narrative. The block-and-leg-shackle sculpture is called “SHE OPENS HER EYES WIDE TO CLEAR HER HEAD” (2015). There’s nacreous discoloration where the restraint attaches to its inset stainless steel base. The concrete’s satiny beige-pink enamel plays against the green of a painted box and tender jade plants, sculptures titled “SHE HELD A HAND UP TO SIGNAL ME TO PLEASE STOP TALKING” and “INVOLVED IN THE DREAM SOMEHOW IS A DOG STANDING RIGIDLY IN THE DISTANCE” (both 2015), respectively.

The relationship of the characters to themselves is uncertain, anxious, counter to the surety of the works themselves. As Semo describes the detainment facility in the catalogue, “The message of the room is clear in its simplicity: you are with us now.” It’s unclear if characters are persistent across several artworks, and that correlation is complicated by the delicate tenderness visible in some of the sculptures. The jade plants and a geode inlaid in one wall are tokens of stress reduction akin to the fetid Laz-E-Boy and Oriental-style carpet seen in some of the Guantánamo photos: they are comforting, but the situation’s vivid and corporal torque is underscored by their presence.

As with earlier work, there’s the eroticism of domination and mastery, but brought into the context of nonconsensual imprisonment and loaded with reminders of the sexualized violence and humiliation of prisoners. There’s not only discipline, but a context of regimentation, of systematized demands. The table is called “SHE OPERATES ON AN EXTREMELY RIGID SCHEDULE OF NEEDS AND SATISFACTIONS” (2015).

Semo uses color pointedly, judiciously. At Rawson, there are the aforementioned emerald succulents, fleshy slab, smoky crystal geode, and another small blue-black concrete sculpture mounted on the wall near the entrance. The right color for “EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED” was chosen carefully: cool black iron oxide pigment suspended in the concrete, held against the oxidized red of the sculpture’s inset steel plates—now marked by iridescent rivulets from corroding steel embedded in the walls.

The surfaces are textured with care. There are fragile encounters with chance in the process of constructing and executing each poured concrete piece of glass and steel doing as they will when forced, broken, or obscured, which could also be read as metaphors for the deployment of power.

At U.S. Blues, her use of color is minimal, the texture made more eminent. “SHE SUPERIMPOSES A BIG SKULL AND CROSSBONES OVER THE GLOSSY FACE, MENTALLY” (2015) is a bronze cast of bolt-type paddle. Its exterior has been blackened and scratched, looking almost etched. It faces a large drawing by Flaughner, called “11.01.13” (2015)—half carved into the wall, half scratched in white on a large swath of black enamel stretching from the floor to the top of the wall. Flaughner’s work often refers to found palimpsests of commercial and domestic labor, melding with Semo’s viscerally if not seamlessly. “SHE DIDN’T FEEL LONELY IN THE PLACE WITHOUT HIM, BUT SHE DID FEEL ALONE, WHAT IT FELT LIKE” (2015), Semo’s large, casket-like steel box, echoes sharply against the haptic repose of Flaughner’s sculptures and paintings.

A concrete piece, “SHE LIKED TO KEEP HERSELF TO HERSELF” (2015), is colored with spray-paint transfer in off-white tones on pigmented concrete. Its surface is punctuated with unsinged candlewicks across its seven-foot length; they sprout from the surface, which betrays an under layer of red-copper mesh. It’s the first slab of such immensity that she’s ever mounted on the wall, and its width and depth are imposing. Like her steel box, it conjures images of prone bodies and dark odalisques, resonant with Flaughner’s “EELd” (2015): most of a car’s front bumper face down on an A-frame cart and filled with hardened wax embedded with Christmas lights.

The lights in the front space, to accommodate Flaughner’s work, are kept very dim. The work is given a third context here, in a gallery notched into a warehouse at Greenpoint’s northern tip. The space feels unfinished, clandestine. The sculptures cant toward the privacy of a romantic dungeon. The unusual built-by-hand space, its lighting and industrialism, the supine works on the floor and wall: the environment is hedonic.

Semo's work—ruminating, subjective, authoritative, declarative, and disobedient—is sensual. It's beautiful.

1. cf. Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958) and Gilles Deleuze's *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* & *Venus in Furs* (1991).

Semo's work is currently on view in *Mixed Doubles* at Sometimes, 39 Lispenard St. 2nd Floor, through April 15.