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Alex Potts and Lily Cox-Richard

Alex Potts in Conversation with Lily Cox-Richard: *The Stand*
(*Possessing Powers*)

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Abstract:

Alex Potts interviews sculptor Lily Cox-Richard in relation to her recent project *The Stand* (*Possessing Powers*). Each of these plaster sculptures takes a major work by Hiram Powers, such as *The Greek Slave*, as its starting point, removing the naked female figure for which Powers is best known and isolating and refashioning the stand—the part most people ignore. The transformation effected by such a radical displacement of the figure and refashioning of the stand as an autonomous sculpture paradoxically draws attention to a significance inherent in Powers's work which might otherwise be ignored. Cox-Richard's project raises important questions about how Powers's work can still speak to a contemporary artist for whom the core values informing his conception of sculpture are in many respects radically alien.

Alex Potts in Conversation with Lily Cox-Richard: *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*

by Alex Potts and Lily Cox-Richard

[*The Stand \(Possessing Powers\)*](#) is a series of sculptures by Lily Cox-Richard, made in 2010–14 (fig. 1). Each of her plaster sculptures takes a major work by Hiram Powers (1805–73) as its starting point, focusing on the support or stand rather than the figure. In developing *The Stand*, Lily Cox-Richard was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Michigan Society of Fellows from 2010 to 2013. Further support was provided by residencies at The Core Program, MacDowell Colony, and Millay Colony, as well as a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship.



Fig. 1, Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*, as exhibited at Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2013. Plaster and mixed media. Photograph by Sharad Patel.

The Stand has been exhibited at a number of galleries since 2013, including Vox Populi in Philadelphia, PA; Second Street Gallery in Charlottesville, VA; and Hirschl & Adler Modern in

New York, NY. In 2014, it was shown alongside some of Powers's original sculptures at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, NY (fig. 2).



Fig. 2, Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: Eve Tempted*, 2013, as exhibited at the Hudson River Museum, 2014. Plaster. Collection of William H. and Abigail Booth Gerdts, New York. Photograph by Sharad Patel.

AP: Your contribution approaches Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* from a perspective quite different from that of other contributors to this special issue. You raise intriguing questions about the significance Powers's work could have for a contemporary artist practicing in a context where the core values informing his conception of sculpture would seem to be radically alien. Your project, which involves displacing the naked female figures for which Powers is best known and isolating and refashioning their stands—the parts most people ignore—strikes me as neither an attempted revival, nor as a postmodern appropriation. This radical displacement and refashioning of his sculpture draws attention to something inherent in it that still speaks to us despite its distance from the norms of contemporary sculptural practice. I see in your work a simultaneous disengagement from and fascination with the artistic and cultural values represented by sculptures such as *The Greek Slave*, which many of us feel when we try and come to terms with it.

I want to begin by asking how and why you became intrigued by Powers's work and found yourself engaging with the neoclassical tradition he represents as the reputed father of American sculpture. What was at stake in your taking up and refashioning his work as you did?

LCR: This project is very much about trying to come to terms with sculpture, and specifically the uncomfortable disengagement/fascination you describe. I found it intimidating to take on this work and the complicated issues it comes with, but I wanted to find a way to explore the myths and allegories used to promote American national and artistic identity in the nineteenth century. Without getting bogged down by a critique of these nineteenth-century issues, I wanted to better understand how they persist today, especially as the specifics of their formal codes—a forehead shaped according to phrenology, the contours of a waist to advocate dress reform—have become illegible to most viewers. It started to feel dangerous *not* to take up this project: avoidance eases the process of naturalization. I was also thinking about how sculptures can induce feelings of embarrassment, and I was trying to figure out what it might mean to forge a relationship to an anachronistic sculptural legacy that was, for a time, too embarrassing for American modernism to even acknowledge as part of the medium's history.

Monuments are toppled during revolution and regime change, but what do we do with sculptures when culture shifts more slowly? I think the timing of this special issue on *The Greek Slave* is so interesting, coinciding with conversations all over the United States: over 150 years after the end of the Civil War, and we are trying to figure out what to do with Confederate monuments. Part of sculpture's baggage is its physical burden—it takes up space and is difficult to get rid of. There are many stories of finding major works by neoclassical sculptors in garden sheds, stored there when they went out of style but were not wrong enough to warrant a more proactive destruction. Perhaps this level of neglect is precisely what necessitates renewed attention from scholars and conservators later. This push and pull is one thing for a viewer or a historian, but for a maker, this grappling becomes physical, and it feels like the accountability shifts. Feeling conflicted, I wanted to create a situation in which it would be literally impossible to keep this sculptural history at arm's length. The process of making precludes such a safe distance.

AP: In the approach you took I see a close engagement with Powers's neoclassicism but also, as you say, a keeping it at arm's length. What prompted you to single out the stands of Hiram Powers's sculptures and embark on making your own sculpture out of what was left when the figure was removed?

LCR: I spent the summer of 2009 living and working in a quarry near Salzburg, Austria, to learn stone carving, and started to notice the strategies sculptors use to integrate a support, carved as part of the sculpture, to stabilize the figure so it doesn't break off at the ankles. Sometimes these are discreetly positioned: a small stump behind the figure. Other sculptors integrate them seamlessly into the composition: drapery extends to the base, to serve as a buttress for the figure. Powers's works do something else: the elements are prominently positioned as supports while being fully integrated into the allegory. His solutions to these structural challenges seemed bizarre to me, and the elaborate and explicit props that structurally support the figures became the way for me to access his work.

I realized that it was the classicizing figures that had kept me at a distance. By shifting my focus away from the figure, I could begin to reckon with the idealized versions of gender, racial tropes, and oversimplified national allegories embodied in them, and make new sculptures that negotiate this historical/ideological baggage. By using them to inform my work, I could complicate these traditions and histories without erasing or easing them.

AP: You suggest that Powers's work might speak more directly to a modern viewer if the figure were to be displaced and we focused instead on the stand. Could you comment on how you think this comes about?

LCR: In trying to have an increasingly intimate relationship to Powers's work, I found myself imagining this as a collaboration with Powers, part time travel and part séance. Alex, is this experience typically induced by close engagement with art history?

To put it simply, I think these figures make it really hard for contemporary viewers to see the sculpture. It's as if the very sentiment that was said to clothe *The Greek Slave* and make her nude body acceptable to a nineteenth-century American audience now serves as an invisibility cloak. So, in part, I get rid of the figure to see the sculpture. It's counterintuitive, but in Powers's works, the allegories hold up better without the figure than they would without the support/stand. Through my intimate relationship with Powers, and the process of unmaking his work, my project understands each of these supports and the site of its connection to the figure *as* the whole sculpture, or at least as a synecdoche for it.

AP: Powers's sculpture is carved in marble. Clearly materiality and material process are very important for you as a sculptor, so why did you choose to work in plaster? To what extent does the process of sculpting embodied in Powers's work matter for you, and what is at stake for you in the comparison a viewer is bound to make between your involvement with the materiality of sculpture and Powers's?

LCR: The experience of working in marble led me into the project, but I knew I wouldn't make the work in marble. First of all, I didn't want to perpetuate the troubling ways that marble was used to gloss issues of race and sensuality in neoclassical sculpture, "purifying" them through the sparkling whiteness of unblemished stone. Second, despite the material challenges that make working in marble difficult, I worried that it would simplify the project, making it easier to determine skill, value, and meaning.

I thought plaster had the greatest potential to bring me closest to the sculpture, while keeping the content messy. Compared to Powers's highly regarded Seravezza marble, my plaster is dingy and marred. Historically, plaster was a provisional material used in the study and process of sculpture: to draft models of sculptures to be executed in marble, and also to create replicas of sculptures, to make objects of study more widely available. I used plaster for this ability to straddle the before and after of sculpture. Collapsing time, or traveling through it, became important in this project.

Powers had an interesting relationship to plaster, eventually developing and patenting rasps to work the material directly (the standard approach was to model in clay, which would be cast in plaster, then pointed in marble), so plaster could bring me closer to Powers, his process, and his works. (For a detailed account of Powers's practice see Karen Lemmey's article "[From Skeleton to Skin](#)".)

These material processes were useful ways to think through the legacies and histories they are part of. Powers aligned himself with a sculptural tradition by working in Italy, just as neoclassicism aligned young America with older republics. As I use *Possessing Powers* to carve out a place in this tradition for myself, my position slips between performing "The Father of American Sculpture" and critically taking up his work. At the same time, the parts of the sculptures that I carved are the least likely to have been made by Powers's hands, so I'm also serving as his studio assistant or a student of his work, questioning positions of mastery/master.

AP: Before we move on to consider in more detail your remaking of Powers's *Greek Slave*, I should like to ask you about your first experiment with Powers's *The Last of the Tribes*. How did you handle this flagrantly mythic allegory on the "disappearance" of indigenous peoples? It strikes me that, in removing the partly nude figure, you were not simply setting aside this historical baggage, but rather in a way dealing with its legacy. Can you also say something about the intriguing way your sculpture, by retaining a fragment of the figure's dress, focuses attention on the charge lodged in the junction between figure and support?

LCR: *The Stand (Possessing Powers)* started with one sculpture, and began when I returned from the quarry with a new appreciation for stone carving and noticed the structural support in Powers's [The Last of the Tribes](#) (1867–74). The sculpture depicts a bare-breasted Native American woman, running, or in Powers' words, "fleeing before civilization."^[1] The *last* of her tribe— Powers's sculptural eulogy purports to cleanly close this chapter of American history, subbing in the mournful corruption of nature for an ongoing genocide. Again, white marble is leveraged symbolically, here as the very civilization from which she flees, and locks the narrative into a trajectory of empirical inevitability. Not exactly a legacy I want to align myself with, but once I started wading in, it felt like a cop-out not to acknowledge and try and deal with it in some way.

There is something messy going on in this sculpture, but it's masked by the way the allegory tidies it up. I was drawn into the sculpture through the contact point between the figure and the support: as she runs, her short skirt brushes across the top of a hewn tree stump, and it is this remarkably sensuous moment that stabilizes the figure (fig. 3). This skirt/stump buttress does some work to complicate the allegory. As the contact point between culture and nature, figure and ground, it also serves to align the figure and the tree, as both are threatened by encroaching civilization. Still, it is such a strange solution to the structural problem. Tree stumps are common forms of support, but are often more discreet, positioned behind the figure. Powers foregrounds the flirtation between stump and skirt, positioning it between the viewer and the figure, making it difficult to ignore.



Fig. 3, Detail of Hiram Powers, *The Last of the Tribes*, 1874. Marble. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Photograph by Lily Cox-Richard.

The stump/skirt is necessary to the sculpture, not just structurally or compositionally, but because it is the only moment within the sculpture that this running figure actually moves. There is no wind in her hair or bounce in her breasts. Without the flit of her skirt, the figure would be static, balancing on one leg.

When I began, I thought this would be a sculpture of the support and base. But, in the process of making, I found it impossible to tease the figure from the support. Instead, they merge into a singular form to create a sculpture of the contact point. This also became a way to refuse the myth of eradication embodied in *The Last of the Tribes*, hopefully in a way that doesn't diminish the historical facts. The skirt both rests on and emerges from the stump, and at the point where the skirt ends, the plaster reveals itself as plaster: it's laid up in fluid layers and left uncarved (fig. 4). The sculpture seems to have a molten core. The contact point that I frame is not the place where the tree stump plunders the skirt, as it seems to do in Powers's sculpture. It is not a convergence of the female figure and the phallic tree stump, but a conflation of the two. This evidence of plaster's liquid state, and the chipped base as evidence of its brittle state, brackets the sculpture, like plaster as a material brackets the object.



Fig. 4, Details of two views of Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: Last of the Tribes*, 2010. Plaster. Photograph by Robert Murphy.

Rather than understanding Powers's *The Last of the Tribes* as a depiction of a privileged scene in an allegory, I began to understand it as the whole story. The stump/skirt is the pregnant moment of this structurally inherent allegory, the site of action, the spark charging the rest of the sculpture.

AP: With regard to your fascinating remaking of Powers's *Greek Slave*, I have two questions I particularly want to ask. First, this is a work where the mythic baggage of the allegory, played out in the chained or manacled nude figure, is particularly complex and contentious. How have you negotiated this, and how does removing the figure expose something about the charge inherent in the work that the classicizing nude blocks us from seeing? Also, I have noticed that your approach to rendering the stand in this case seems very different than with *The Last of the Tribes*. What is happening here? For me the stand works as a curiously provoking free-standing sculpture partly because it highlights a very odd pad-like juncture between figure and support (fig. 5).



Fig. 5, Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: Greek Slave*, 2013. Plaster. Photograph by Sharad Patel.

LCR: Not only does *The Greek Slave* have mythic baggage relevant to the political moment in which it was made, but it also took on mythic importance for Powers in the context of his sculptural practice and spiritual beliefs. Nineteenth-century spiritualists believed that psychic energies could gather in certain objects, and something like a sculpture had the potential to become supersaturated with these “imponderable fluids” and manifest spiritual powers, such as navigating through time and space in nonlinear ways. For Powers, this fluidity allowed for premonitions, such as his recurring childhood dream of a glowing white figure, which he later understood as *The Greek Slave*. He also employed this spiritual agency as an explanation regarding his initial denial of *The Greek Slave*’s relationship to the abolitionist movement—although he did not knowingly make the sculpture for the cause, he supposed that it might have traveled to him from the future to become such a symbol. Of course, his spiritualism also facilitated our collaboration; I began the project with an interest in sculpture as a medium, and it evolved into an interest in *sculptor* as medium. For the exhibition of *The Stand (Possessing Powers)* at Second Street Gallery in Charlottesville in 2013, I created a series of wall niches that housed attributes from each sculpture (fig. 6). These power objects range from oracular to enslaving: the shell from *Fisher Boy*, the divining rod from *California*, and the manacles from *The Greek Slave*. While they provide an important layer, and I wanted to have them in the room, it didn’t make sense to incorporate them into the sculptures. Hovering midair or resting on the base, they would emphasize absence, and I wanted to insist on presence. Niches work as another kind of sculptural support, and a particularly fitting form to house such power objects.



Fig. 6, Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: Greek Slave* shown with custom wall niches and plaster objects, 2013. Plaster. Photograph by Sharad Patel.

For the first two sculptures in the series (*Last of the Tribes* and *California*), my approach was to look, measure, and make. This began to fall apart with *Greek Slave*. For one thing, the tassel count is different on the various versions. In the earlier sculptures, I was as accurate as possible, measuring every knothole and crystal facet, limited only by my own carving ability, but borrowing all of the decisions available in Powers's sculptures, and only intervening at the contact points, where that information doesn't exist.



Fig. 7, Lily Cox-Richard, *Two Greek Slaves*, 2013. Photo collage of (left) Parian ware manufactured by Minton and Co., 1849, after Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and (right) Parian ware after Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, DC.

In making *The Stand: Greek Slave*, the questions were not just how much detail to include, or how faithful to be, but to which version? In trying to figure out how many folds and tassels to include, I sought out other sculptures of this sculpture, and ended up looking at two Parian-ware versions to see how they navigated these details (fig. 7). Looking at the version by Minton and Company (dated 1849, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), and one that's at the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, I was struck by how different they are, and how this difference parallels the different symbolic functions of *The Greek Slave* (fig. 8). As a symbol for a heightened level of American taste, the Minton figure needs the detail of the small cross hanging with the robe, specifically depicting the injustice of an enslaved Christian woman, and rendering her naked body nude. The version at the Frederick Douglass house doesn't include the cross. As a symbol of abolition, it incites empathy that isn't limited to white/chaste/Christian slaves, but potentially extends to the injustice of slavery in general.



Fig. 8, Lily Cox-Richard, *Two rooms joined by a barrier*, 2013. Photo collage of (left) Rococo Revival Parlor, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and (right) West Parlor, Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, DC.

In Powers's allegorical marbles, the *main event* of the figure obscures all the other details of the sculpture. But I find the sculptures so much more interesting when this hierarchy is denied. As in *Tribes* and Powers's other works, while the figure itself might pass the test of Victorian morality, it's only because the sexiest parts aren't where you first look for them. Nudity is justified by narrative, and necessitates sentimentality over sensuality. The charge is in the tension between this, and the erotic moments elsewhere in the sculpture.

As I began work on *Greek Slave*, my sculpture seemed more and more like a thing dressed up as another thing. If in *Tribes* and *California*, I was making sculptures of the contact points, in *Greek Slave* and *Fisher Boy*, it felt more like I was condensing the figure into the supports, creating these elements themselves as strangely figurative. In *The Stand: Greek Slave*, the robes are not passively draped, but actively twisting. In Powers's *Greek Slave*, the point of contact—the pad-like juncture—is a cap that acts like a cushion; in my sculpture, it becomes more clearly a cushion (fig. 9). I kept coming back to lines of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* ("A cushion has that cover," and "A circle of fine card board and a chance to see a tassel."), and the agency granted to these kinds of domestic details, and somehow it made sense for the sculpture to turn and look at the viewer, as if witnessing.^[2]



Fig. 9, Detail of Lily Cox-Richard, *The Stand: Greek Slave*, 2013. Plaster. Photograph by Sharad Patel.

AP: By way of conclusion, would you like to make a final comment about what you feel you have achieved through your engagement with Powers's work and the neoclassical tradition it represents?

LCR: This project became a kind of reenactment in which I try on the title of "Father of American Sculpture" to reformulate and perform an obsolete origin myth. I take up several facets of gender and power, from the idealized versions of gender found in neoclassical sculpture, to the traditionally gendered formal language of sculpture, and the male-dominated profession itself. Ultimately, *The Stand (Possessing Powers)* is my attempt to forge a very close engagement with this sculptural history, and understand it through unmaking and remaking. Rather than reproduce or erase these problematic figures and their layered histories, I want to advocate for their complicated presence and renewed visibility. In *The Color of Stone*, Charmaine Nelson attributes the seemingly aesthetic impenetrability of neoclassical sculptures to the

distance that separates us from the time of their production, and to the generally unfashionable nature of neoclassicism today.^[3] I think that making these sculptures in a contemporary context both relieves and exacerbates this estrangement.

Alex Potts is Max Loehr Collegiate Professor in the Department of History of Art at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is author of the books *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994 and 2000); *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). He is co-editor of *The Modern Sculpture Reader* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012). His recent publications on sculpture include the catalogue essays “Melvin Edwards’ Sculptural Intensity” (2015) and “Martin Puryear: the Persistence of Sculpture” (2016).

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Lily Cox-Richard is a sculptor based in Houston, Texas. Her work engages cultural and material histories of sculptural and vernacular forms. She has exhibited at Hirschl & Adler in New York, Vox Populi in Philadelphia, and the Poor Farm in Manawa, Wisconsin. Her accolades include an Artadia Award, a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, and residencies at the CORE Program, the MacDowell Colony, and Artpace.

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Notes

All photographs provided courtesy of the artist.

[1] Richard P. Wunder, *Hiram Powers: Vermont Sculptor, 1805–1873*, 2 vols. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), 2:183.

[2] Gertrude Stein, “Objects,” in *Tender Buttons* (New York: Claire Marie, 1914; Bartleby.com, 1999), accessed April 27, 2016, <http://www.bartleby.com/140/1.html>.

[3] Charmaine A. Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xii.