

MOUSSE MAGAZINE

FALL 2018

The Myths of Succulent Concrete: The Sculptures of Kathleen Ryan

by Andrew Berardini



Kathleen Ryan, *Bacchante (Standing Three Pillars)*, 2018

*I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms...
Nothing retained its shape, one thing obstructed
another, because in the one body, cold fought with heat,
moist with dry, soft with hard, and weight
with weightless things.*

—Ovid, *The Metamorphosis*

On a hill overlooking Los Angeles, a marble goddess stands in repose, a loose shift of carved fabric falling from her graceful body, a plump fruit in her right hand. Sanguine, almost pleased, she regards the fruit, holding it up to her face as if to test its flesh, scent its perfume. Her slim face contours down to shapely hips, and you know she holds more than just fruit in the palm of her hand. Is she Pomona, a goddess lost from the orchards of ancient Rome? Olympian Demeter? Or her daughter Persephone, contemplating in the succulence of fruit the generative force of life? Maybe she's an errant priestess of Dionysus before the ecstatic dance, ready to crush the fruit and let its juices drip, sticky and wet, into her mouth and down the folds and contours of her body. Or even Eve, right before she takes her first bite of forbidden knowledge, the pleasure and danger ripe in her hand. All the Muses in a single form, or perhaps a goddess further flung than the Western imagination, who danced in groves and wrought life and death with the turns of her body?

It doesn't matter; she's all of these and none. Goddesses and fallen women always get cast in roles by their worshippers and judges. Our marble woman, statuesque in every sense, doesn't need legend or myth, disobedience or symbolism, to define her as she stands surveying her domain. Her hilltop hosts a cemetery, a grassy yard of gravestones and memorials, hundreds of thousands of bodies moldering beneath the well-kept grasses and locked into mausoleums behind names and prayers carved and cast, lifetimes caught

between the numbered years. She holds life in her hands and a legion of the dead at her feet.

The freeways in the distance sinuously snake in all directions; their concrete skeletons poured into place channel the life of the metropolis. From here she can see for miles, row after row of stucco houses and faux-Spanish haciendas, boulevards of botanicas and cafés, boutiques and liquor stores, drive-throughs and taco stands, and those crystal-palace malls engulfed in parking lots, each car a scatter of chrome and color gleaming in the sun like wavelets. In the distance she can spot all the sad, gray factories coughing out airplanes and bikinis, and beyond those the glistening, glassy corporate towers. She can witness the contours of the shrubby, undeveloped hills fade to brown through each passing drought, their peaks littered with power lines and transmitters. And ribboning through it all, she sees the rivers dying as drainage ditches hefting more concrete than the highways. During the day, the tourists who come to the cemetery on the hill can snap pictures of her presiding, a still sculpture with an undeniable beauty, another weird piece of potential kitsch in this place littered with mourning angels and weeping mothers, praying saints and merciful deities, pointed obelisks and bronze effigies. From this necropolis, she can see the swaying palms and smog-choked skies, all the manufactured thoroughfares and walled gardens, the gridded streets overlaying an almost forgotten geography of a city that invented itself with entertainments and promises of prosperity, where everything can grow even if it has to do it through cracks in the concrete.

At night, though, she steps away from her still perch and trawls Los Angeles. The sunset smears with untamed color, and the softening shadows bring her to life. She sets off down the hill and wanders the gravelling asphalt of alleyways, the shadows of orange streetlights cascading through those millions of palm fronds. She runs fingers along the curves of concrete freeways and off-ramps. The orchards that once filled California are long since chopped down, but she still finds a scatter of fruit trees in yards and parklets, in road medians and in those fingers of wilderness that reach into the city from the surrounding mountains and hills. She peers past neon signs into the windows of bars to watch weariness melt into inhibition with each wet drink, laughter and sorrow with every shot. She peers into bedrooms and parked cars at lovers, gentle and rough, faces smashed into kisses, entwined bodies slicked with sweat. She steps through the acres of factories and miles of parking lots surveying what the world has become since the first gods stepped out and away from the worship of humans, seeking solace and ecstasy from belief. She is drawn to the living, and everything she touches turns to a memorial of itself, a monument to whatever sparks her desire.

When she fingers ivy, it lusters into silver threads; palm fronds smolder into menacing black iron; their seeds turn to rose quartz and jade. She is blessed and worshipped by the wild parrots who've escaped cages and joined forces in the semi-tropics of a thousand invasive trees, clustering on denuded umbrellas and collapsed chandeliers, barred windows and spiked fences. Her fruits can bear the weight of industry. Rather than fight modernity, she synthesizes its detritus into the beauty of ancient forms, making memorials—but ones tongued with just a lick of lust and a tickle of humor. She isn't dour, our goddess. Her mysterious smile marks a mysterious delight. Her touch is both opulent and humble, heavy as concrete and light as dangling necklaces.

Discovered by a thrift-store archaeologist, the goddess gets channeled in arcane rituals: late-night sifting through online auction houses for pink bowling balls to be strung into a giantess's string of pearls, malingering in the hulking ruins of old steel mills, bejeweling rotten fruit into glittering spheres, filling balloons with concrete and chaining them to marble lest they float away; when bunched together they

hold all the plump delectability of grapes ready to burst, an altar to worship the ecstatic, each a priestess of Dionysus. They are both buoyant with bulbous life and exhausted by their weight, both psychic and physical.

This goddess lost from pagan rituals and forgotten cults makes her own iconography out of concrete and iron, lost junk and found objects. And this amateur archaeologist is of course the artist Kathleen Ryan. After a lifetime in California she's left for New York, but she has taken the rituals of this marble goddess with her. The goddess is perhaps incidental, a powerful beauty spotted and employed by Ryan simply as the image for an exhibition—but maybe not. With each sculpture the artist elevates the mundane into the mythic, makes the utilitarian sensual, bringing her sculptures to life with a deft knowledge of material and a witchy force. She makes the chill hot, the dry moist, the soft hard, and the weighty weightless again.