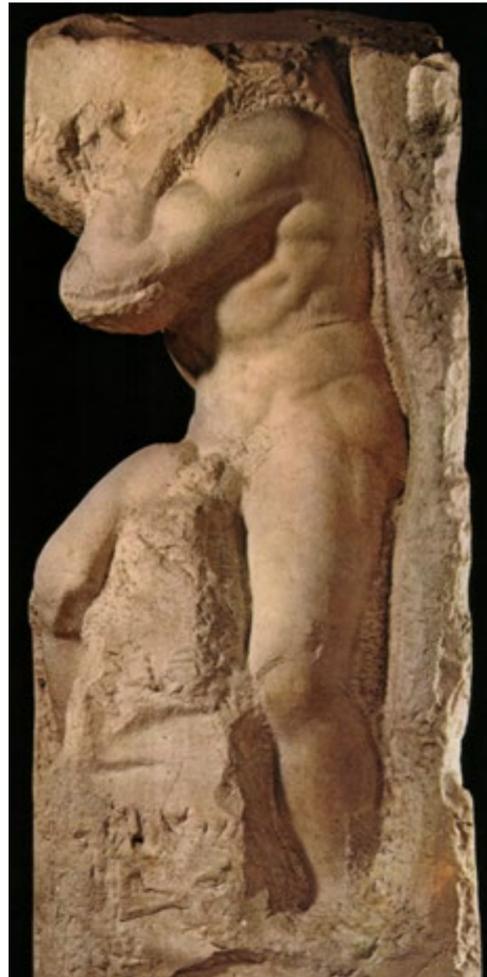Crucifixion, Cimabue (1277-1283), Fresco, Basilica superiore di San Francesco, Assisi

Garden of Eden - before and after restoration, Michelangelo, Fresco, Sistine Chapel, Rome

Fragments of Roman sculpture

Captive - Atlante, Michelangelo, unfinished marble sculpture, Florence

IMAGES IN AND BEYOND TIME: ON QUAYOLA'S LAOCOÖNS
Domenico Quaranta

When we think of an artwork, we usually think of it as a finished, stable object, one that can be framed, placed on a pedestal or hung on a wall, sold, stored, or bought. If we think a bit more, we see this is an abstraction. From its moment of conception to its current state, an artwork lives across time. When it's executed, it may be left interrupted even if unfinished, for whichever reason: because the artist likes it as it is, or because she's unsatisfied and doesn't know how to go on; because she shifts her focus on other things; because she dies. Think about Michelangelo's non finito technique, that we will discuss later on: a strategy used to visualize the process of freeing the sculpture from the matter that, according to the artist's Neoplatonic philosophy, imprisons it since its conception.

When the artist stops working on it, time starts to do its own job: the artwork ages, deteriorates very fast or very slowly; it may get dirty, or broken, and be restored; or it may reach a status of deterioration that makes it impossible to restore, as it happened with Leonardo' s Last Supper, or to those frescoes that show the sinopia under them; it may disappear underground or undersea, and resurface after centuries. Along its way through history, it may be copied, versioned, modified, or become an inspiration for other works. When this happens, it's always in its current status that the artwork becomes significant to us—and often, because of its current status. As a young art history student, reproductions of Cimabue's Crucifixion in the Basilica Superiore di San Francesco, Assisi indelibly affected me. In this fresco, the deterioration of white pigments on the wall transformed the image into something more like a film negative, imbuing the scene with an inconceivably contemporary feeling. Meanwhile, the basis of Western art history is largely informed by the 19th century ideal of beauty, as found in Greek white marble sculptures—except, they weren't white but brightly painted, with decorative stones or shells for eyes. Another example persists in Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, which had a strong influence on the color palette used by artists throughout the XIX century— except, his color palette was much brighter, as recent restorations have shown after removing centuries of dust and candle smoke. An artwork is a process developing in time, and few artists are as aware of this as Quayola. This understanding is rooted in his background, as well as in his familiarity with code and programming. Having grown up in Rome, Quayola has ruins in his blood. He comes from a city made of layers, or Strata (2008 - 2011), to quote the title of one of his best known series. After moving to London, he studied digital arts at the University of Arts, London, and started working on audiovisual performances and video installations around 2006. Code and algorithms have been his main creative tool since the beginning, and moving images his main output until 2013. His medium is fluid, based on variables that can be constantly altered and parameters that can be infinitely configured. He likens his understanding of such processes with playing a musical instrument:

«I am essentially developing systems. By changing the rules of these systems I achieve certain kind of results. It's rather like operating a musical instrument, or a synthesiser that I calibrate in order to achieve what I consider to be a meaningful and coherent composition.»

The outcome of working within systems is inherently processual, performative, and time-based. This is why Quayola understands his work with video, print, and sculpture as documentation of a process, not as the end result. It is not surprising then that moving image was his first documentation method for capturing the performativity of the code. Video allows him to keep a record of the process in motion, while preserving the temporality of the process. This doesn't mean that he understands his video works, digital prints, and recent sculptures as mere documentation of a computational process: as an artist working in constant collaboration with the machine, he understands the importance of the moment in which he recognizes the "richest image," as he calls it, and translates it into the most suitable medium. For him, the richest image is usually the one that best preserves, encapsulates, and displays the process of its own making, or its own existence in and across time.

Christ before Pilate, Damaged Fresco, Pontormo (1523-1525),
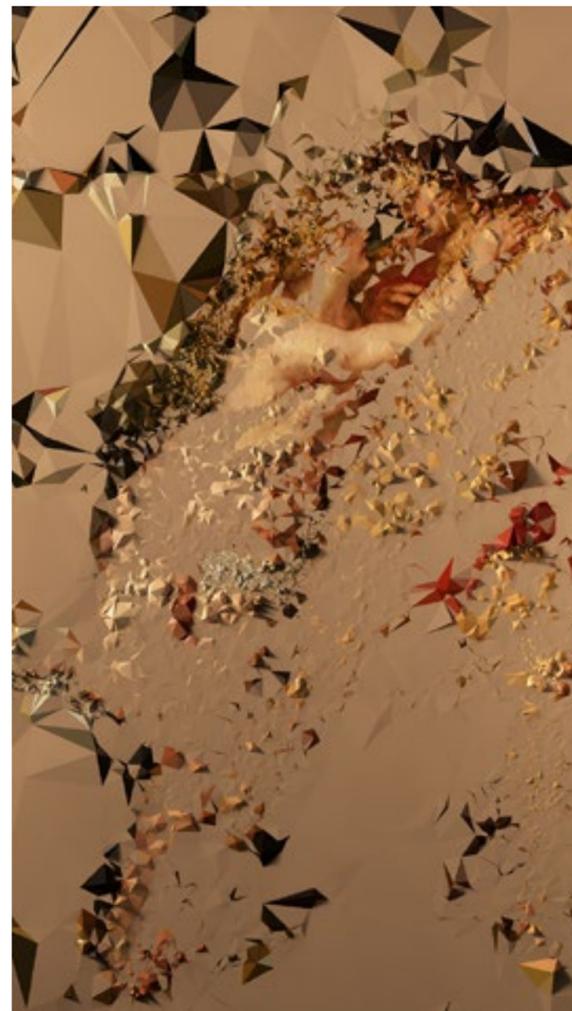
Iconographies #16: Venus and Adonis after Rubens, Quayola (2015)

Being able to display the process of their own making—like in Michelangelo's sculptures—or of their existence across time—like in archeological fragments—is what makes some artworks from the past interesting for Quayola in the first place, and what brings him to use them as sources for his work. His Captives series (2013 - 2014) drew inspiration from Michelangelo's Prigioni (1525 - 1530), with his idea that sculpture is already embedded in the marble stone, and that the artist has just to remove the marble in excess to bring it to life. In Michelangelo's words: "Nothing the best of artists can conceive / but lies, potential, in a block of stone, / superfluous matter round it. The hand alone / can free it that has intelligence for guide." Thanks to the masterful use of his "unfinished" technique, Michelangelo's Prigioni—allegorical figures of slaves meant to adorn Pope Giulio II's grave— literally become prisoners of their own matter. The tension of their bodies is the result of a perceived effort of escaping the marble stone from which they are made.

Michelangelo's approach to sculpture has strongly impacted Quayola's sculptural works, bringing him to reverse-engineer the process by using software to add virtual matter around the body, and representing this ongoing struggle between realized form and uncarved material over time. The first result of this research was Matter (2012), a video installation based on Auguste Rodin's The Thinker. The following, Captives #1 (2013), is a video installation (presented both as a three-channel triptych and an eight-channel polyptych) in which this struggle is pictured over a period of time. Of course, Quayola likes to work with the specificity of the material he's using—which is not matter, but code—so, in these videos the matter that the classical body is struggling with—a digital emulation of marble—is, in fact, an alien matter, sometimes as hard as marble, while at other times mercurial and liquid. In Captives #B8-6-0 (2013) the process takes sculptural form: Quayola selects three stages of the process, and produces them as life-size sculptures in High-Density EPS carved by a CNC (computer numerical control) robot. Finally, Captives #B06 and Captives #B04 (2014) isolate one step of the process: in both cases, the quality of the material used (High-Density EPS and industrial sand) and the features of the

machine deployed are transparent in the way the surface is treated: the sculptures don't try to look hand-made; the mechanical process of their production is not hidden, but revealed, becoming part of the subject matter itself.

The Laocoön was an obvious follow-up for the artist: when it was discovered in Rome in 1506, the Hellenistic Pergamene Baroque masterpiece Laocoön and His Sons made a strong impression on Michelangelo, and had a long-lasting influence on his understanding of sculpture. Its unearthing from the soil of the Esquiline hill reactivated it as an image, but it also gave it new life as a sculpture. Discovered with missing fragments, various attempts were made to restore the work to its original form—and Michelangelo was indeed the only one to hypothesize correctly. In Laocoön #D20-Q1 (2016), Quayola removes Laocoön's sons and the snakes that typically ensnare them, isolates the Laocoön's body, and reimagines it in virtual marble, turning him into a captive of the stone. As in the Captives series, the rough matter is rendered as polygonal, collapsing two different temporalities while still maintaining their distinction, and generating a sharp contrast between the classical aesthetics of the body and the digital aesthetics of the matter imprisoning it. However, these abstract geometries are not simple extrusions. As in Quayola's many works based on Renaissance and Baroque paintings, Laocoön is derived from an algorithmic analysis of the original work, which is built upon its lines of force—the dynamic development of its movements. Made using a marble filled resin, the sculpture is, so far, the work in which Quayola gets closer to the material quality of the artwork that inspired him; for a few seconds, the work may look like an uncanny archeological relic from a parallel universe, made by an ancient culture somehow aware of the digital. But on a closer look, the work reveals itself as a product of the XXI century, and of the means of production (software and digital prototyping) used to create it.

These two approaches, which coexist in Laocoön #D20-Q1, are developed further in two different projects: Laocoön Fragments (2016) and The Sculpture Factory (2016). The Laocoön Fragments are a series of smaller sculptures comprising a uniquely developed

Crucifixion, Cimabue Scheel (1276), Preparatory Drawing, Church of San Domenico, Pistoia
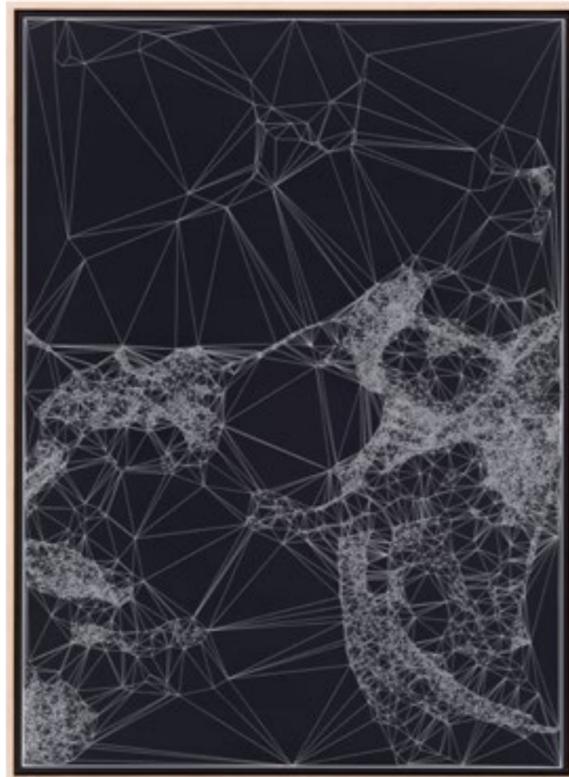
Iconographies #32: Judith and Holofernes after Caravaggio, Quayola (2015)

Iconographies #43: Judith and Holofernes after Guercino, Quayola (2015)

iron-filled resin, treated with acid in order to hasten the oxidization process so that contemporary sculpture appear ancient. Presented like a museum display for sculptural artifacts, the sculptures are realistic on the outside, while abstract geometric polygonal shapes are used to reconstruct the inside of the sculptures that would otherwise be rough and unformed. The works have the semblance of convincing archeological artifacts from a speculative future-past, made of matter that, while mimicking the material qualities of iron, breaks up in surprising ways; or from parallel universes and imaginary histories, where the Laocoön's story of creation, disappearance, discovery, breakage and restoration finds different outcomes, and follows a different path.

The Sculpture Factory (2016) is Quayola's attempt to create a bridge between his recent sculptural work and his audiovisual performances, and ultimately his return to performance as the ideal medium to display the creative process in real-time. In his previous performances, code generates sounds and visual shapes on screen; here, a large industrial robot live-sculpts endless variations of the Laocoön into white EPS blocks, following a set of coded instructions (that may be better understood as performance scores, following Quayola's musical analogy) and leaving them unfinished. Instead of forcing the machine to make a perfect copy of the sculpture, which we might expect a machine to do, or to reproduce Michelangelo's handmade non finito, Quayola adapts the code to the technical features of the machine, pushing it to produce a result that is fairly glitchy and low resolution, the rungs produced by the robot's drill still visible in the sculpture's "final" form. This result relates to another recurring topic in Quayola's work: his interest in the way the computer sees images and the way it displays them. As he says, talking about his Iconographies:

«The different new ways in which machines "see" the world have become for me an opportunity to discover new aesthetics. In my series Iconographies I am looking at historical paintings through computer-vision algorithms, deliberately creating abstract compositions that drift away from the original iconographic narratives. I'm interested in creating

new objects of contemplation that have completely different qualities of their own but at the same time are based upon the very same visual characteristics of the originals.»

As this statement shows, Quayola's interest in machine vision relates to his interest in the historical life of an image in surprising ways. Both in Strata and Iconographies, instead of working on a whole painting, Quayola often selects a detail, making it abstract and unrecognizable through his "misused" analytical algorithms, as if they were artificially isolated fragments.This methodology anticipates the speculative archeology of the Laocoön Fragments. In Iconographies #21-80 Judith & Holofernes, instead of focusing on a single artwork, Quayola explores the different iterations of a given subject through the history of painting, from Renaissance to late Baroque. Color is removed to focus on composition, which is analyzed and turned into geometric shapes. Quayola compares the resulting engravings on anodized aluminium to sinopias, preparatory drawings emerging from a ruined fresco. Fragments and ruins are back again as a source of inspiration, but the result is abstract, inhuman, polished, hi-res. It's like the artist, by looking at the life of images through the gaze of the computer, by taking on their processual nature and converting them into software processes, is forcing them to live beyond time, and beyond usual distinctions between past and future, unfinished and finished object, realistic and abstract image, matter and digital description.