

In the Studio With Robert Lazzarini, Master of Sculptural Illusions



Photo © Kristine Larsen

Robert Lazzarini in his Brooklyn studio

made in editions of three or six; the fence will be his first one-off piece.

The relationship with Marlborough provides new financial support. "This could be a paradigm shift," acknowledges Lazzarini, "allowing me to do much more ambitious things." In almost every case, the studio needs to enlist outside specialists to finalize the sculptures. "It doesn't get done A to Z here," he explains. "You do a portion, it gets sent out, it comes back, it gets sent out—then everything's assembled and finished. It's pretty much equal parts digital, industrial, and handmade." Every new sculpture presents new hurdles. Plans for a series of broken liquor bottle sculptures to be cast in glass were set aside after proving too difficult to realize, even though the studio sought technical advice from both MIT experts and Dale Chihuly's team. Because each sculpture requires a unique set of materials, the studio never settles into a production-line routine.

For the November show, the studio is working with multiple foundries for various works as well as a neon fabricator for a recession-era-worthy Cash for Gold sign. Is there a part of Lazzarini that thrives on this stream of logistical challenges and material obstacles? "No," he says firmly. "It's hell. It keeps me up at night. I'm obsessive-compulsive, so these things haunt me. Until they're figured out and done, there's no sleep."

Lazzarini shies away from detailing the technical minutiae of how the works are produced. He'd prefer not to talk about specific software, for instance, and is more interested in discussing how his sculptures are perceived within the exhibition space. "I'm specifically dealing with mathematical distortions, wherein if you augment one part, you affect the whole," he explained to Aldrich director Harry Philbrick in a 2009 interview. "I start off with a nonverbal sense of what it should be, and then I slowly shape it, and it becomes more verbal and more numerical until it becomes the final design, which is made up of extremely specific numbers."

Despite its complex algorithmic basis, however, Lazzarini's work is immediately accessible. "In terms of subject matter, it's representational, so people think it's a type of Pop art. In some ways it is, but I think it really hinges more profoundly on the aftermath of Minimalism. Phenomenology is a really big part of my work. The object expanding and contracting — it's not dissimilar to Tony Smith's *Amaryllis*. You walk around that and it almost unfolds as four separate and distinct sculptures." For Lazzarini, shaping the viewer's physical experience of each piece extends to the gallery space itself, which is typically altered by the addition of canted or fragmented walls that disrupt the right-angled white cube and give the overall installation what the artist considers a collage effect. The idea harks back to Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist Lazzarini admires, although in this case the sense of spatial disorientation is achieved through a fabricated environment.

The result is a kind of mobilization of perception, whether it arises from distorted signage (which Lazzarini compares to Richard Tuttle's alphabetic experiments) or from the mathematically altered form of a recognizable object whose appearance shifts, stretches, and flattens as a viewer moves around the piece. "One of the main problems of sculpture for me is its static nature," he says. "This kind of animation, for lack of a better word, [gives] the sensation that there's activity where there really isn't. It relates back to corporeally navigating something to understand it."

Even in the throes of preparing for the new show, Lazzarini is looking ahead to his next project. He was brainstorming about a body of work that will expand the ideas he's working through now with the busted safe, broken door, and shot-up signs, and it will arise from the conceit of the junkyard.

by Scott Indrisek, Art+Auction

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ago was maybe eight sculptures per year," he says. "We'll probably produce over 100 things this year, and one of those is *chain-link fence*. That's a big shift." Most of Lazzarini's sculptures are

In response, Lazzarini has expanded his studio operations, trying to manage his self-confessed OCD tendencies and comfortably outsource more elements of the process. "My output four years

"Waste and usage will be some of the springboards for that work, along with the notion of rust as the blood of the object," he says. No doubt this work will present a fresh set of fabrication challenges — not to mention the opportunity for research trips to the junkyards of New Jersey.

Lazzarini is also returning to one of his earliest inspirations: a pair of ancient Greek funerary lions in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, which he first saw in a publication at the Metropolitan Museum shop nearly two decades ago. The life-size marble statues became an enduring obsession. The artist initially tried to sculpt them, going so far as to adopt a boxer from a dog pound because the lions, says Lazzarini, "looked like large dogs with tucked waists." In 2005 he presented drawings of the statues in an exhibition at Davidson College in North Carolina. (Drawing has since largely disappeared from Lazzarini's practice, though he says that his use of signage partly fills the role once played by drawing.) Now he's ready to take on the leonine subject with the full Lazzarini process, employing three-dimensional scans of the original statues to create distorted cousins via digital modeling. His sculptural creatures will be on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum in fall 2013, displayed in the same building as the originals but ideally, he says, located as far away as possible from their forebears. "I'm excited to revisit them," Lazzarini admits. "It's bittersweet, though — delayed gratification."

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