



● Aria Dean

Photography Molly Matalon

By Annie Armstrong

Aria Dean is an art world triple threat: she writes, she curates—Dean served as editor and curator for the New Museum's net art non-profit Rhizome until January of this year—and she makes art of her own. In a practice that spans multiple mediums, Dean investigates the collision of ancient histories and new technologies. In April, she showed drawings and a room-sized sculpture featuring mirrors and television monitors in a dual presentation at Los Angeles's Hammer and Huntington museums. This month, the 27-year-old's latest solo show in New York, "Show Your Work Little Temple," opened at Greene Naftali, her first with the gallery.

"Show Your Work Little Temple" presents two new series of works that reflect Dean's interest in melding the virtual and physical world. Using 3D printing technology to create what she describes as "impossible objects," Dean's sculptures are inky abstractions of digital imagery pulled from CGI websites. The show is tied together by one instantly recognizable motif: a Gorgon mask of the face of Medusa, whose glare, according to Grecian myth, could turn those who look into it into stone—or sculpture, depending on how you look at it.

We sat down with Dean ahead of the opening to discuss materiality, myth-making and Medusa as an artist figure.

ANNIE ARMSTRONG: Walk me through what it was like to create the pieces for this show. There's a lot of different materials at play.

ARIA DEAN: Formally, it's two sculptures that are 3D prints and are coated in a black rubber silicon material. They're combinations of handmade clay objects, 3D scans, and stock photos from CGI websites that I turned into digital assemblages. I worked with a technician to create these virtual objects that couldn't possibly exist in physical space as they are, and don't exist until they are produced, so they're just mental projections made out of a series of ideations and movements.

A lot of the writing and the work that I've done has been, in part, trying to think about the idea of representation of fashion, and how I've never been interested in making figurative work myself. I've found it to be kind of boring and destructive. In abstraction, you lose a lot. I've seen a lot of minimalist, very removed work. I'm trying to work through the things I'm interested in about representation and power. So I was kind of like: "I wanna make these objects that sit right in the middle of abstraction and representation."

ARMSTRONG: You said that figurative art can be destructive. How do you see that happening?

DEAN: I think a lot of the writing and work that I've done has tried to explore the ways that figuration—specifically photographic and film images, and sometimes painting—is on a macro level destructive because of what it tells us about the power of these different mediums. Ultimately, there is a pretty extensive body of work, and school of thought, that have ventured to describe the ways in which the relationship between images and reality isn't representative. Figuration is a tool in terms of artistic practices that gets caught up in that logic.

When I was in school, or earlier on in my career, people always asked, "Why don't you do a performance art piece? That would be a way to talk about your experience and your body." And I wasn't really interested in my experience. I'm interested in structures, and how I sit in those structures. Figuration gets caught up in a conversation I'm not really interested in.

ARMSTRONG: What else inspired the work in this show?

DEAN: I got really obsessed with the idea of compression. Compressing as many reference points as possible into an object, so instead of being like, "Here's an assemblage of these found objects that I'm going to piece together," it's creating a new object out of these different points of reference—and also combining them so they lose their qualities of what makes them themselves. So that was the sculpture part, and then there was an ongoing interest in technology, and how technology interacts with us. I'm never really making stuff that is like, "Here's this thing that's about how technology affects people." But I naturally like to draw on that. I've been very interested in virtuality for a long time, but not in a VR sense—more like what is the texture of a world that has virtual qualities? And I think these objects are also an attempt to live in the entanglement between digital and physical realities a bit, instead of choosing to live in one or the other.

ARMSTRONG: How did you land on sculpture, then, when so much of your work is digital?

DEAN: I've always enjoyed working with materials. Usually, I do a lot of sculpture, but it's always been removed. But I used to do a lot of sculpture that was really hands-on when I was in school, and I think one of the things that drives my practice overall is interesting materials. I got obsessed with two-way mirror glass for two years. And then there was a year of black steel. So with this show, black rubber was something I got really into. In the show, it's a black silicon covering, it's not real rubber. I really like working in real space and having things manifest in "real space." I'm more interested in how things that relate to technology manifest in real space, rather than

having them manifest online. So a lot of the work I've done has necessitated a lot of research into things that are related to technology or social life on the internet.

ARMSTRONG: What drew you to the Gorgon mask?

DEAN: I got really into the Persius and Medusa myth. I've been obsessed with antiquity and Greek mythology during COVID. I was reading a book on sound art, and read a lot about Dionysus and music and tragedy. So, the Persius and Medusa story: Medusa is one of the Gorgons, and she's the only mortal one. So Persius is instructed to go find her and kill her and bring back her head. In the process, he has to not look her in the eyes. And after he kills her, he gives her head to Athena, and puts it on her shield, and she's used as part of Athena's weapon.

I got really interested in this for a number of reasons. One, I read it as an allegory for the act of representation. Medusa is this living entity that turns other entities into stone. She's an artist figure! She can make sculptures with her gaze. But in turn, she's turned into representation when she's killed. So it's kind of this Lacanian bouncing back and forth. With the show, I knew I wanted something with direct force, where my hand is directly present. Because a lot of this stuff is me trying to figure out where the artist sits in the work: I'm in it, but it's not for me. Authorship is very confusing. So I wanted to annotate it with the fact that I came in and I hand carved this thing, and it's not mediated by anything digital, and it's also a part of the architecture because it's part of the wall. What I hope it does is turn the gallery into a scene for this creative and destructive work of representation. In past shows, I've done stuff like that. Once, I had a dummy surveillance camera in the corner. So you're not simply walking in it; you're implicated in the scene. If you latch onto that thread, it can annotate it. Or it can just be another piece of art, if you don't care to follow that thread.

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"Show Your Work Little Temple" is on view at Greene Naftali, 508 West 26th Street, 8th Floor, through June 12, 2021.