

**Daniel ARSHAM**

*Vogue,*

*The Beguiling Appeal of Daniel Arsham's "Time Dilation" and Tara Donovan's  
"Intermediaries"*

*January 2021*

CULTURE

# The Beguiling Appeal of Daniel Arsham's "Time Dilation" and Tara Donovan's "Intermediaries"

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January 15, 2021



At left: Daniel Arsham, *Amethyst Eroded Bust of Lucius Verus en fière Arvale*, 2020. Amethyst, quartz, hydrostone. 105 x 85 x 68 cm | 41 5/16 x 33 7/16 x 26 3/4 in. At right: Tara Donovan, *Stacked Grid*, 2020. Photos: Claire Dorn, courtesy of the artist and Perrotin; © Tara Donovan, courtesy Pace Gallery

This weekend, two distinctly disorienting gallery shows open in New York. They're not the bad kind of disorienting, like what we all experienced last year (although the pandemic and its associated disassociation does come up in one of them); what instead happens in both shows is an *unsticking*, from linear time in Daniel Arsham's "Time Dilation" at Perrotin, and from the stark spatial geometry of the grid in Tara Donovan's "Intermediaries" at Pace. And rather than alienating or dispiriting, they both have the effect of amusing, beguiling, and altogether delighting.

For the fashion crowd, Arsham's name should have a familiar ring to it. Over the years, he has been tapped by Kim Jones for a collaboration with Dior; created sneakers for Adidas; made a series of computer keyboards with Pharrell; and in 2008 he co-founded Snarkitecture, the innovative design firm behind Kith's storefronts in the United States and Tokyo. Arsham was also recently appointed the first-ever creative director of the Cleveland Cavaliers, claiming control over the look of everything from player jerseys to social media graphics. ("I have family in Cleveland, so I've been back twice [since the announcement]—also just to see games," Arsham tells me. "One of my big goals is to expand the idea of the brand into the city itself, and bring it out into an audience beyond just Ohio.")

In his art, which shifted from painting to sculpture not long after he graduated from Cooper Union in 2003, Arsham has often worked with a mind to futurity, considering how modern objects—cars, payphones, boomboxes, basketballs—might look if they were discovered by archaeologists after hundreds of years. Says Peggy Leboeuf, a partner at Perrotin New York (Perrotin has represented Arsham since 2005), "Daniel has always been fascinated with our understanding of time and the timelessness of certain symbols and gestures, which he explores through cultural icons." However eroded or caked with volcanic ash, his forms remained immediately recognizable, clinging simultaneously to contemporaneity, a distant past, and the suggestion of the future.

"Even just out of school, I always wanted my works to be able to float around in time," Arsham says. "So the earliest paintings that I made, they depicted earth and the humanity era, but it could have been the future, or past, or the present."

He returns to that foundational fascination in “Time Dilation,” which takes its name from a scientific phenomenon: Gravitational time dilation is the difference in elapsed time between two objects at different distances from a gravitating mass. (Time on the International Space Station, for example, moves slightly more slowly than it does on earth.) Basically, the title alludes to various experiences of time; an idea that not only resonates with major themes in Arsham’s own work, but with what he observed as a stage designer for Merce Cunningham, the immensely influential choreographer of the avant-garde, in the mid-2000s. “One of his big things in creating an evening of dance was about your experience of time within it—he could stretch and pull that,” Arsham says. “I sat through so many rehearsals and so many different performances of his, and that was one thing that always stuck with me: There were certain occasions where you felt like a 45 minute performance lasted two hours, and other times it went by very quickly.”



Daniel Arsham, *Ash and Pyrite Eroded Bust of Veiled Woman (Aspasia)*, 2020. Volcanic ash, pyrite, selenite, hydrostone. 65 x 30 x 30 cm | 25 9/16 x 11 13/16 x 11 13/16 in. Photo: Claire Dorn. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

The body of work in “Time Dilation” that wrestles with those ideas most strikingly are sculptures that emerged from Arsham’s collaboration with the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (RMN) in Paris. Early last year, he introduced several sculptures, busts, and friezes drawn from classical antiquity and produced in RMN’s casting studio, which has been used to reproduce masterpieces from (and for) major museums since the end of the 19th century. In Arsham’s new works from the RMN molds, tell-tale signs of age and disrepair—jagged edges, broken limbs, the greenish patina of old bronze—are punctuated with quartz, rose quartz, selenite, pyrite, and other minerals, resulting in pieces that attach themselves to a multiplicity timelines. Offering a glimpse into his ideology (and a preview of “Time Dilation”) for his 940,00+ followers on Instagram, Arsham recently posted a picture of his *Eroded Apollo Belvedere*, 2020, noting in the caption: “In much of my work I am interested in engaging in further inquiry into the history of iconic artworks. Although my Apollo appears to be in a state of Erosion or decay, it is made of Crystal which is a material of growth. So the question remains, is it falling apart, or has it been forming together for millennia.”



Daniel Arsham, *Blue Calcite Eroded Ariadne Sleeping, also known as Cleopatra*, 2020. Blue calcite, quartz, hydrostone. 110 x 215 x 90 cm | 43 5/16 x 84 5/8 x 35 7/16 in. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

“The crystal is a super useful material,” Arsham says, “in that the interventions or erosions or decay within the works can appear violent or destructive, but they’re also regenerative—we can almost imagine these things crystallizing and forming back together over millennia. And then when you start to think, *If they have been forming over a long period of time, but the original sculptures are old*...it just puts you in a confusing situation where you can’t actually rectify what’s happening.” Even further complicating the timeline of Arsham’s classical figures is their occasionally murky provenance. Often, he says, “I’m trying to create or select works that have a complex narrative around them. The Apollo, for example, there’s some question as to whether that was actually an original Roman work or whether it was a copy of an earlier Greek work. The Venus of Arles also has a very complex history, because the original was found in pieces. There were no arms on it. The arms were added later, but then they de-restored parts of it that had been repaired, but they left the arms because it was, like, a famous French sculptor who had done them. So there’s all of these ideas present where you can say, okay, these are works from antiquity, but somebody made a decision about them, and by recasting them in this way, it’s furthering this conversation around authenticity, around the history of these works, the past, and the future.” To what era does the work as we’re encountering it now—especially after Arsham’s mineralogical impositions—actually belong?

More than merely enjoying that confusion, Arsham feels it’s one of the things that makes art worth making. “That’s where, as an artist, the viewer should be placed,” he says, “in a location where they’re forced to question something. It’s like magic, right? You’re forced to question your own relationship with objects and the universe.”

Other new works are similarly devised—figures cast in the round from bronze and ash and sprouting the same dazzling formations of crystals—but the iconography is different, culled now from the sprawling Pokémon universe. (The sculptures in this series mark the first major collaboration between the Pokémon Company and a contemporary artist.) Again, Arsham is probing how we understand signs dislodged from their own time, reimagining renderings of Pikachu and Charmander and Jigglypuff as future relics.

“When we look at sculpture from antiquity or the Renaissance or really any period, those were the popular culture of that era,” he says, so now, “I’m trying to think about, how would these things be looked at in the future, especially if you’re not able to understand the context in which we understand them?”



Daniel Arsham in his studio. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

Other entires in “Time Dilation” were more specifically influenced by the pandemic and its concomitant circumstances; both the isolation and, yes, the general slowing-down of things. There are, for instance, the beautiful and bizarre resin works that he also premiered on Instagram—casts of cameras, books, magazines, and other shapes in purples, blues, and pinks. “I have been experimenting with them basically since the summer,” Arsham says. “Typically when I make the larger cast works, we use a resin solution to clean out the molds, and we happened to do that with some translucent resins. I had those on my desk for a little while, watching them catch the light of the sun throughout the day,” he explains, “and at some point, I started to look at them stacked over each other, this literal layering of influence. Then, maybe two or three months ago, I was like, *I’m just gonna take one room of the gallery here and show these new works.*”

Last year's completely disrupted cultural calendar also finally gave him the flexibility to start painting again. Arsham hadn't returned to the medium in a focused way since his days at Cooper Union, in part because he couldn't find the time to finish anything on a major scale. Quarantining with his family on Long Island from March until the end of August presented as good an opportunity as any. "I brought a bunch of paper with me to make drawings, and probably after a month or two, I had done enough. So I brought some canvas out, came back to the city, and got all my paint," Arsham says. Isolation heavily informed what he made: "In every work there's usually one figure, sometimes two or three, and they're in these massive, sublime landscapes. [I was] looking at a lot of 19th-century Romantic painting, and there was this idea that Ludovic [Laugier, the national heritage curator in charge of Greek sculpture in the Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities at the Louvre] reminded me of when I was with him in Paris, which was the Italian tradition called *capriccio*. They would take a sculpture that was at the Vatican and a work from the Louvre and put them in a different location, so there was this sort of fantastical combination of things that could never exist in the same space," Arsham says.



Daniel Arsham, *Cave of the Sublime, Iceland*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. Framed: 227.5 x 318.1 x 13 cm | 89 9/16 x 125 1/4 x 5 1/8 in. Guillaume.Ziccarelli

Inspired by the concept, he created a capriccio with his own work, painting versions of the sculptures appearing in “Time Dilation” into those landscapes. “So you could have a scenario in the exhibition where you’re looking at a sculpture, and then there’s a painting of it where it’s a hundred feet tall,” he says. (The canvases themselves range in size from about 7 x 6 feet to 9 x 7.5; one, comprising four different panels, measures 10.5 x 15 feet.) They represent impossible conversations that make something weird and wonderful out of our material reality.

While what Tara Donovan has installed at Pace’s enormous West 25th Street headquarters can’t very easily be described as a capriccio, it certainly deals in the fantastic. Active since the early 2000s, Donovan is known for large-scale sculptures and installations that have put her in conversation with Light and Space artists like Robert Irwin and James Turrell; often, she has exploited the translucency of materials like drinking cups, plastic straws, and Scotch tape to transformative effect, alternately evoking earth-bound formations like stalagmites or fungal blooms and diaphanous phenomena like fog. “A single drinking straw has a very clear purpose that’s universal, but a million straws— together they become something else entirely,” she explained to the *New York Times* in 2018, before her retrospective exhibition “Tara Donovan: Fieldwork” opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. “They take on ethereal and atmospheric qualities that aren’t present when you’re just observing a single straw.”

With “Intermediaries,” Donovan picks up on that discovery and pares it back a bit. “I don’t know that any of these things are radically different” from what came before, Donovan told me of the new show. After that exhibition in Denver, which went as far back as to “a piece I did in college,” Donovan found herself mulling what, exactly, it was that she was trying to do with her work. And where did that line of inquiry lead? “I think for me, I wanted to get back to the basics,” she says.



Tara Donovan, *Stacked Grid*, 2020. © Tara Donovan, courtesy Pace Gallery

What that meant, in part, was zeroing in on “the grid,” and how she could manipulate it to create forms that seemed to defy the limits of geometry. A fine example can be found in the aptly titled *Stacked Grid*, 2020, a 9 x 9 x 13-foot mass that, in the room, made me think of a shuddering cloud of pixels. (This is *very* much a show that should be seen in person.) The material, PETG—a thin, clear plastic commonly used in water bottles—is constructed in a three-inch by three-inch grid that is layered and stacked,” Donovan explains, “and because it has a flexibility to it, it creates this almost labyrinth of a place.” Between the intricate arrangement of its pieces and its rather nebulous full form, *Stacked Grid* might remind one of a Mondrian like *Composition No. 6*; a composition that, depending on where you’re looking, vacillates between the straight and the soft; the rigorous and the organic. And then there are the “fugitive colors,” as Donovan calls them, created by the interaction of the material with the light—fleeting purples, pinks, and blues that don’t readily appear when a piece of PETG is examined in isolation.

Also heavily involved with the grid are Donovan’s fascinating *Screen Drawings*, 24 in total, that she made by altering the pattern of the weave in metal window screens, covering the screens in ink, and then pressing them onto paper. An “exercise in variation,” as Donovan puts it, the series slyly calls to mind the work of textile artists like Anni Albers, who created their motifs

through interventions to the warp and weft that were sometimes subtle, sometimes quite dramatic.

Other drawings in the show, presented in more public spaces—a hallway, the research library—apply a similar methodology on two vastly different scales: for *Untitled*, 2019 Donovan inked, pressed, and rotated small fiberglass screens, producing 17 sheets measuring 24" x 20" each; while the much larger *Layered Screen Drawings*, 2020—most are either 37" x 45" or 50" x 88"—required the artist and an assistant to physically pull a fiberglass screen out of shape between inking and pressing it. "Depending on the orientation of things, I'm able to get these vastly different surfaces," she says of the latter series, and indeed, while some have the look of blown-up woodgrain, others seem to echo the undulating patterns left on beach sand by the surf. "It's unintentional, but there's a water-like quality to almost all of the works in the show," Donovan observes.



Tara Donovan, *Sphere*, 2020. © Tara Donovan, courtesy Pace Gallery

The remaining works in *Intermediaries* move on from the grid, as such, to another discrete geometrical form—namely, the cylinder or tube. *Sphere*, 2020, is a 6 x 6 x 6-foot orb fashioned from rows of PETG tubing, and to peer through those tubes as a person passes by the other side is to see...well, how to describe it? A blurring, a dissolution—an effect that makes it seem like that

person is trapped inside some kind of snow globe, or perhaps a soap bubble?—and that, again, owes to the material’s transparency. “Because it’s transparent and it’s reflective, it creates all these kinds of optical shifts within it,” says Donovan.

Yet in a show dense with fascinating moments, the room filled with Donovan’s *Apertures*, 2020, feels particularly special. Somewhat evocative of *Transplanted* (2001/2008)—in which she created what looks like a massive slab of volcanic terrain out of ripped-up pieces of tar paper (a roofing material), *Apertures* combines layers of hundreds of thousands of black cocktail straws into some clever cross between painting (chiefly for the impasto-like surface that slight gradations in the lengths of the straws create, and also the fact that all eight of the 6.5 x 6.5-foot works are framed) and sculpture; a distinct topography emerges in each one, activated by the light both on them and within them. (A strip of LED light controlled by a rheostat dimmer lines the interior of each frame.)



Tara Donovan Photo: © William Jess Laird. Courtesy of Pace Gallery

“I feel like almost all of this work falls somewhere between painting, sculpture, architecture, printmaking, drawing—all those words somehow feel interchangeable within all of these things,” Donovan says of “Intermediaries.” “And even though I tend toward a very minimalist aesthetic, they’re so active, and reliant on the viewer to *be* there.” However ambiguous in form, these are creations that demand close engagement—and reward richly for it.

*“Intermediaries” runs at Pace Gallery (540 West 25th Street) from January 15 through March 6. Schedule your visit here.*

*“Time Dilation” runs at Perrotin New York (130 Orchard Street) from January 16 through February 20. Schedule your visit here.*