

**Daniel ARSHAM**

*Art & Object,*

*Fictional Archeology: An Interview with Daniel Arsham*

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# Fictional Archeology: An Interview with Daniel Arsham



PHOTO BY GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN. ©2021 POKEMON. ©1995-2021 NINTENDO/CREATURES INC./GAME FREAK INC.

Daniel Arsham, *Amethyst Crystallized Large Gengar*, 2020. Amethyst, selenite, hydrostone. 48 x 46 x 44 in.

Celebrated for his stylish sculptures of decaying technological devices and crumbling cultural artifacts, Daniel Arsham makes art that looks as though it was just discovered in an archeological dig. Fresh off a successful design collaboration with Dior and recently named creative director of the Cleveland Cavaliers, the talented artist and designer took time out of a busy schedule to talk about his concept for fictional archeology, which is on prominent display in his current solo show, *Time Dilation*, at Perrotin New York, along with his collaboration with Pokémon, that's also part of the exhibition, and his other recent projects.

Paul Laster: What's your concept for fictional archeology and how is it expressed in this show?

Daniel Arsham: All of the works in the show, and—in fact—all of the pieces I've been making for the past few years related to fictional archeology are objects in a state of decay. It's a post-apocalyptic scenario, but another way to read them is that it's inevitable, right? Everything that exists today will become a relic—an archeological object—in the future. The idea of fictional archeology allows us to view those things with a perspective of time, to view them from some future era. For my current exhibition, *Time Dilation* at Perrotin New York, the future time is 3021, a thousand years from now.



PHOTO BY GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN.

Installation view of *Daniel Arsham - Time Dilation* at Perrotin New York, 2021.

PL: How did you get access to utilize some of the most famous historical statues in the Louvre to make many of the sculptures in your show?

DA: Since the nineteenth century, the French have been making molds of the statues from the collection of the Louvre and other national institutions. They are all housed in a massive warehouse about forty-five minutes outside of Paris. Originally, they were made to create plaster casts that would then be shipped to other places in the world—exporting French culture, if you will—but more recently they've been used for conservation and curatorial practice. I happened to visit the place where they are stored in preparation for a museum exhibition that I'm currently having at the Musée Guimet in Paris, which opened last year. Through some difficulty, I managed to convince both the director of that institution, as well as the curators at the Louvre, to allow me to use the molds to create new works from them.

PL: Are you creating ruins of ruins with your altered castings of these maturing masterpieces from the ancient past?

DA: Although my versions appear to be in a state of decay, they are made with materials that feature embedded elements, such as crystals and volcanic ash, which are components that we associate with a long geological time frame, things that develop over millennia. Thus, there are two potential readings of the work: one is that they are falling apart and the other is that they're growing together to a state of completion.



PHOTO BY CLAIRE DORN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN.

*Blue Calcite Eroded Bust of Laocoön*, 2020 Blue calcite, quartz, hydrostone.

PL: What led you to also feature these antiquities in a new series of paintings?

DA: I had the idea to paint some of the statues in the exhibition, as well as some of my other sculptures, in imaginary valleys and cavernous realms. I envisioned them as futuristic sites, where people might stumble upon sculptures from the past, icons of another era. I created scenarios with unlikely juxtapositions of statues, rendered in various scales, to reference a seventeenth century style of Italian painting called capriccio.

PL: What was your motivation for returning to painting after years of making sculpture?

DA: My practice began with painting and my first exhibitions were primarily painting shows. The earliest paintings were gouache on mylar. They depicted architectural structures in natural

settings, where there might be a modernist building inside a cave or a geometric monument deep within a forest. I stayed away from painting for a number of years, but the pandemic brought me back to it. It gave me the opportunity—if not a forced one—to return to painting when we went into quarantine. I wasn't able to work out of the studio and found myself at home with a lot of time on my hands. I initially made some drawings, but by spring of last year I was painting again.

PL: How did the collaboration with Pokémon come about and how have you tried to place its family of characters within your body of work and the context of the show?

DA: After I had made a work cast from Pikachu, one of the fictional Pokémon creatures, the Pokémon company in Japan reached out to me. They wanted to know if I would be interested in creating new works based on the Pokémon universe. Part of the thinking for this show is that the statues from past periods that I've been using were pop culture icons in their times. And when we consider the most universal characters today, Pokémon is certainly up there as a global icon. Part of the drive with this exhibition is to not only allow time to collapse between the two—between works based on Greco-Roman statues and Pokémon characters—but to also collapse cultural associations related to those disparate things into a singular universe.



PHOTO BY GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN. ©2021 POKEMON. ©1995-2021 NINTENDO/CREATURES INC./GAME FREAK INC.

Daniel Arsham, *Blue Calcite Crystallized Poliwhirl*, 2020. Blue calcite, quartz, hydrostone. 20 x 30 x 18 in.

PL: Did you also design the pedestals for the sculptures and the presentation of the whole exhibition, which is quite dynamically displayed?

DA: Yes, I try to consider the total experience, everything from the way that the lighting feels to look of the pedestals for every exhibition.

PL: The installation of cast resin objects, which presents colorful, translucent copies of magazines, cameras, toys, videotapes, and boomboxes layered in lightboxes and backlit pedestals, is striking in the way it offers a hyperreal look at twenty-first century commodities. What was the point of departure for these experimental forms and how did the initial idea evolve into the finished presentation?

DA: There are two things to unpack here, one is around the materiality of the works, this translucent resin. I had made other pieces in resin in the past, but nothing quite like these works. Typically, we'll use resin in the studio as a means to clean out the casting molds that I'm using. In the process of doing the cleaning, I kept some of the throwaways. The translucent resin captured the original form of the molds, such as a magazine from a previous plaster-cast piece. The other part to consider is the conceptual nature of these works. They function around a kind of layering—not only a conceptual layering of ideas, but a physical layering of forms. Because of the translucency of the works, you can stack these objects on top of each other and still perceive what they are. They have multiple reference points. There's a magazine mixed with a keyboard mixed with a Yankee's hat. Seeing through the overlapping objects, there's a form of blending into one image, and there's a collapse within that vision, as well.

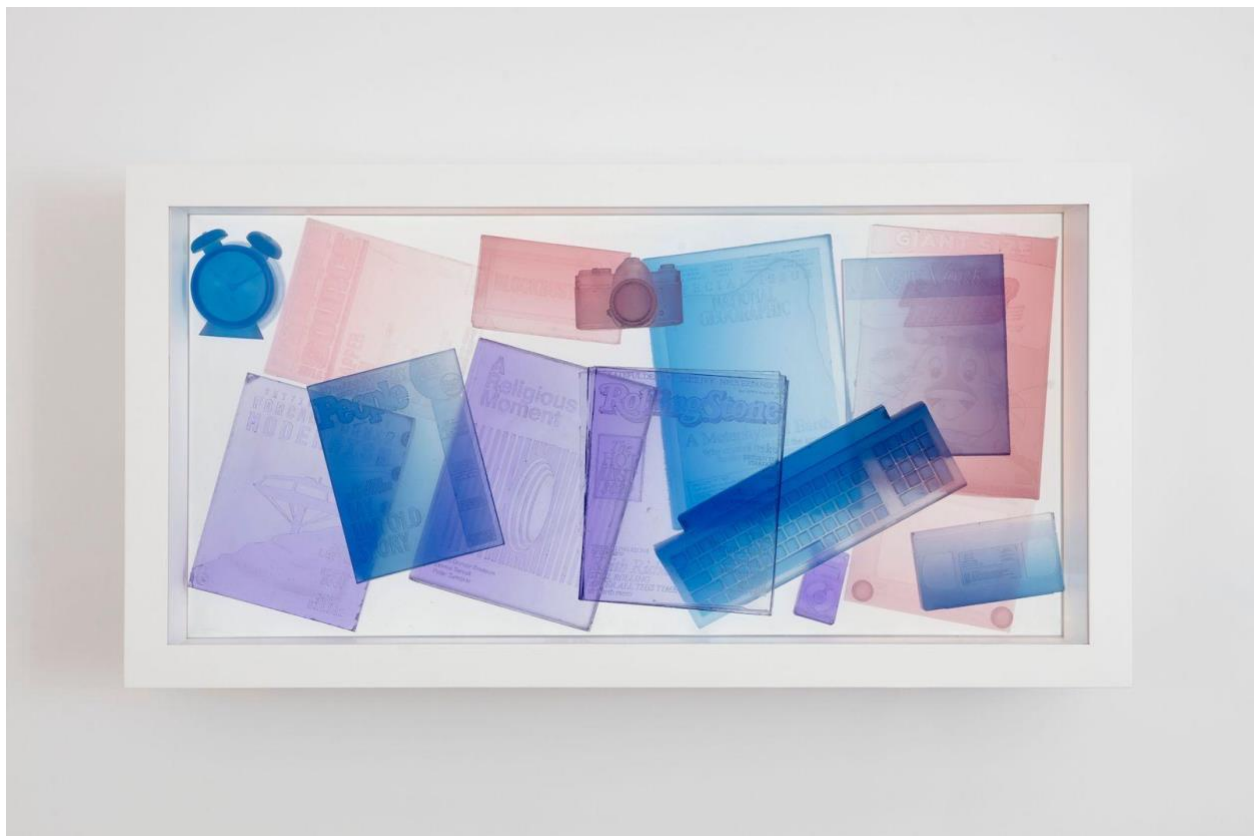


PHOTO BY GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Daniel Arsham, *Untitled*, 2020 Resin, LED backlight 25 1/8 x 49 1/2 x 8 5/8 in.

PL: One of the resin cast objects is a basketball, which is an object that can repeatedly be found in your work. What was the reasoning behind your first employing a basketball in your art and how many different ways has the ball and related sports objects, such as a jersey or a team cap, made appearances in your work?

DA: I've always been a fan of basketball and have followed the game since I was a kid. When I was considering a body of work around fictional archeology, I looked for markers of universal meaning. I picked things that could be found here, in Japan, South America, or really anywhere in the world. I wanted objects that everyone could understand in the same way, and a basketball is certainly one of those forms. I've made a number of works based on basketballs. The sport has always been a huge part of my universe, and it's increased dramatically since I was appointed creative director of the Cleveland Cavaliers last fall. It opens a whole new universe for me.

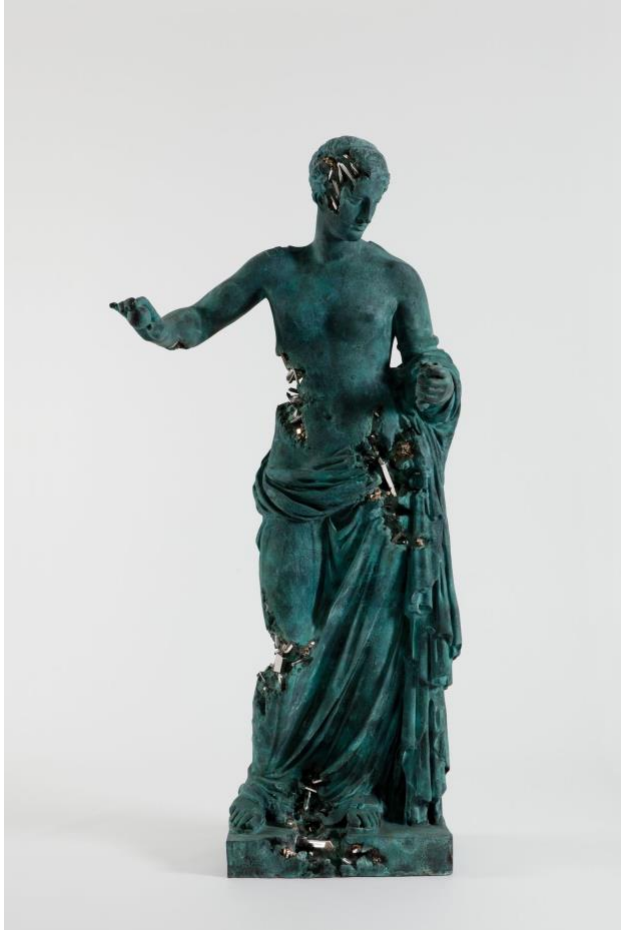


PHOTO BY GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN.

**Daniel Arsham, *Bronze Eroded Venus of Arles*, 2020. Bronze, patina, polished stainless steel. 102 3/8 x 50 3/8 x 36 5/8 in.**

PL: What will you be doing in this new role with the Cleveland Cavaliers?

DA: This position of creative director for a team hadn't really existed in the NBA. It's a completely new position. Basically, I'm responsible for every outward facing thing that our team is doing, from the jerseys to everything you see on court. The job is storytelling, not only about our team—the Cavs and the Cavs history—but about Cleveland, too. We're looking at all types of ways to tell that story. We're obviously living in the unique moment of not having that many fans in the arena, but we're looking forward to coming out of it. And, we're especially looking forward to February 2022, when the NBA All-Star Game will be in Cleveland. It's going to be huge for the team and the city, as well.

PL: While this position with the Cavs is new, collaboration with brands is something you've been successfully doing for years. What are some of your favorite collaborative projects and how do these opportunities inspire your own art and design practices?

DA: The collaborations have to make sense within my own universe. Some have been things that I liked in advance or was engaged with before the collaboration began. One of my favorites is an ongoing project and collaboration with Porsche. I've been a fan of Porsche cars since I was a teenager, when I made drawings of them. To be able to engage with that history, to be able to create artworks as vehicles with them has been a lifetime dream, a big goal. However, all of the collaborations that I've done have functioned like that in some way. One of the big draws for me—in addition to the joy of being able to enter these brands' universes—is relishing the reach that they have. Artists—and the art world in general—exist in a somewhat close-knit universe. Not everyone is part of that world, nor do they feel comfortable going to galleries and museums, or they don't live in a city where art is so prominent. The collaborations I've done have brought my work to audiences that are not traditional art audiences, and that's been beneficial for me and my work.

PL: Your recent collaboration with Dior Homme was huge, from the design of clothing and accessories to the tent and stage for the Paris runway show last year. Did it start with one idea that grew into many different pieces?

DA: I had an in-depth collaboration with Dior Homme creative director Kim Jones. It involved heavy amounts of research at the Dior archive in Paris. He and I spent a lot of time looking at pieces that had been produced in the past, whether it was during the original Christian Dior era or from the more recent John Galliano era. I'm obviously not a clothing designer, so I worked closely with Kim, which was more like me throwing him ideas. A lot of it was about distilling down ideas, revisiting the origins of the house, and then introducing new materials and new techniques into the mix. It was a fascinating project for me in every way.

PL: You may not be a clothing designer, but you are a partner in the design firm Snarkitecture and you recently launched a line of furniture under the name Objects for Living. What types of challenges do these pursuits represent to you as an artist?

DA: The design studio Snarkitecture, which I co-founded with architect Alex Mustonen, began as a way to realize some of the larger projects that I had in mind—projects that needed a design language or design architect to implement. Since that time the practice has grown; it has its own life and its own voice now. We've done everything from interactive installations and furnishings to designing all of the Kith stores globally. The first furniture designs for Objects for Living were done in collaboration with the New York design gallery Friedman Benda for presentation at DesignMiami/ in 2019. The pieces are functional objects that I originally created for my studio and home, a Norman Jaffe-designed house from 1970 that's on the East End of Long Island. Marc Benda, a friend and longtime collector of my work, happened to see some of the pieces and suggested we produce a limited-edition furniture line, which I'm continuing to develop now.