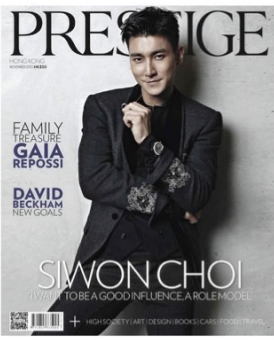


PRESSBOOK

Daniel ARSHAM

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Selective Memory

Sculpture, filmmaking and experimental architecture are just a few of the weapons in DANIEL ARSHAM's artistic arsenal, reports PAYAL UTTAM

"HONG KONG FEELS like the future to me," says American artist Daniel Arsham in Galerie Perrotin, gazing at the city below. Things like elevated walkways are what people dreamed of in New York at the turn of the last century and it never happened. Here it's real. An impish figure dressed head to toe in black with thin Harry Potter-like glasses, a baseball hat and spiky sneakers, the 35-year old sculptor has just landed in the city for the opening of his solo show *Fictional Archeology*.

Surrounding us are haunting figures and body parts inspired by classical sculptures and the poignant casts of ancient Pompeian victims buried by the eruption of Vesuvius. Arsham, however, presents the bodies in contemporary dress. In one corner

stands a fragmented hipster-like figure in torn skinny jeans, a shirt and boots. Disturbingly, her torso has a gaping hole from which jagged selenite crystals emerge. Similarly, an eroded grey arm made from volcanic ash emerges from the wall clutching a basketball.

"A lot of these works appear like they're in a state between construction and destruction – you can't tell whether they are growing or falling apart," says Arsham. "I took objects from contemporary life and remade them with materials that had an idea about time or geology." On a marble pedestal lies a pile of debris: Polaroid cameras, a Nike Air sneaker and dismembered hands made in chalk, which viewers can use to draw on a large black wall, eventually reducing the items to dust. The works evoke ruins that have been excavated after years of being buried underground. Walking through the gallery feels like being transported to an imaginary future and gazing back into a distant past that is in fact our present society.

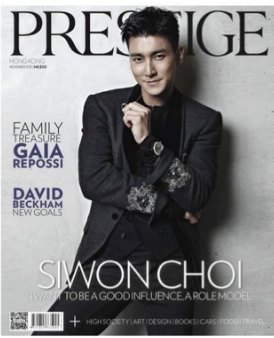
While Arsham is fast gaining recognition for his sculpture – exhibiting in museums ranging from New York's New Museum to Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art – he has a following that reaches far beyond the art world. A favourite among celebrities, he's made a name for himself as a filmmaker and for his experimental architecture practice. *Snarkitecture*, whose projects have ranged from designing a runway for Public School to a window installation for Calvin Klein.

He counts the likes of designer Hedi Slimane, artist JR and actress Juliette Lewis as his fans, among other big names. Styled black-and-white photographs of him with his friends James Franco, Usher and Pharrell Williams regularly

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crop up on his Instagram page, which has 200,000 followers. They often collaborate too – he's made a keyboard from volcanic ash with Pharrell and cast the rapper's body in shattered glass, while Franco and Lewis star in his films.

"In the art universe, I've never quite been..." he pauses. "I don't know if I'm accepted or defined as an artist. It's sort of like by doing all these [different] things I become nothing, but I don't do them to be something, I'm doing them because I'm curious."

Since early in his career, Arsham has forged an independent path. After graduating from Cooper Union in New York City, he moved

to Miami, where he set up his own DIY exhibition space in a 1930s bungalow-style house with friends, called The House. "I won a grant with \$15,000 and I put all that money into that space." The risk paid off: it was a time when Miami's art scene was exploding; with the arrival of Art Basel in the city came dealers, including Emmanuel Perrotin, whom he first met there.

The first big break came around mid-2000 when he got a phone call from the legendary dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. He had seen the young graduate's painting in a museum and asked if he would like to work on a set design for an upcoming production in Miami. Arsham said yes.

"The way that Merce worked was very unique and bizarre – it was based on John Cage's idea of chance, so he would create his choreography, the musician would create the score and an artist would make a stage design, but none of them knew what the other one was doing." Arsham worked with him until Cunningham's death in 2009. "When I first met him he was 84 and I was 24, so there was a 60-year gap, and looking back on it now he certainly put a lot of trust in a 24-year-old who had zero experience," he muses. Over the years he also became known for

sculptures that toy with architecture and the perception of space. He began acting as his own model, covering himself in plaster for hours to make a cast of his body. He then went on to create ghost-like sculptures of figures shrouded in cloth bursting forth from a wall or striding forward in space. Throughout his oeuvre the works are largely monochrome, as Arsham is severely colour blind. "Colour supposedly is not true for me. When I'm viewing it it's not consistent," he explains.

In the summer of 2011, he travelled to Easter Island, where he spent time with archaeologists and created paintings and drawings for a Louis Vuitton travel book. After the trip, he became fascinated by the idea of the mystery and storytelling that surrounds archaeology. He began turning contemporary items into relic-like objects, making eroded mobile phones and cameras in a similar vein to the

THIS PAGE: COURTESY GALLERY PERROTIN, OPPOSITE: JAMES LAW

works on view at Perrotin.

After a series of exhibitions across Asia in 2013, many people began to ask what kind of world did he imagine these objects exist in? "A lot of people felt it was post-apocalyptic and negative, which really wasn't my intention, my feeling," he says. "Time will go on and these objects [around us] will age. It doesn't mean that the world will be consumed by this ash cloud."

Yet these apocalyptic conversations lingered in his mind. "So I wrote a treatment of an idea," he says. "I happen to know a producer, Jane Rosenthal, who is the head of Tribeca films. I showed it to her and she said, 'You should really make this into something.'" The seed was planted for a nine-part science-fiction film series titled

Future Relic that depicts a future civilisation and explores the reverberations of a major ecological transformation of the Earth. "I started out by making a short to see how it felt and the response to that was amazing," says Arsham.

Beginning with just one lone character in desolate landscapes, his films grew more elaborate over time. The second chapter of the series starred James Franco, who spends his days cooped up indexing and examining contemporary paraphernalia from a past civilisation. Arsham used his petrified eroded sculptures as props. For the third chapter, he cast Juliette Lewis, who plays the role of a woman searching for her scientist father. They shot in the eerie interiors of an abandoned laboratory. "It was the original Bell Lab, which was this amazing massive research facility designed by Eero Saarinen in the '60s," he says. "It looks like the '60s version of the future, so it still feels very contemporary now."

While Arsham began working with actors who

are friends or acquaintances, he is now broadening his reach. "Now that the film has gotten some legs to it, I'm able to actually reach out to people," he explains. "We have a new actor in a section we shot last week, Mahershala Ali, he plays Remy Danton in *House of Cards* – he's amazing." His next film, *Future Relic 04*, is going to premier in Miami during Art Basel, where he will also be exhibiting one of his film sets.

Alongside making films, Arsham has continued to engage with the world of dance. Collaborating with choreographer and former Merce Cunningham Dance Company dancer Jonah Bokaer, he has disrupted the austere environment of the white-cube gallery by introducing dynamic dance performances that activate his sculptural work. "It's often been me trying to push art audiences to see dance," he explains. "I hate normally being forced to pay attention to things in galleries, especially performance art, so the dances are really short... I think it allows audiences who are not familiar with that kind of world to engage with it without it being oppressive."

Recently, his experimental architecture practice, *Snarkitecture*, poured 750,000 recyclable white plastic balls into the Great Hall of the National Building Museum in Washington, DC for an installation titled *The Beach*, transforming the space into a giant playpen for adults. "The response to that was unbelievable," he says. "It's about play; it's a familiar thing to jump into that." But Arsham adds that the scenario was transformed by sucking out the colours you normally see in a children's ball pit and using the balls to represent water, adding mirrors and creating a pier that people could jump off. In many senses, Arsham's practice is similar. Refusing to be boxed into a single discipline, he continues to play with new ideas in multiple fields, unafraid to leap into the unknown. ■



ABOVE: THE DIVING GAIA, REVISITED. OPPOSITE: DANIEL ARSHAM AND JAMES FRANCO DURING THE FILMING OF *FUTURE RELIC 02*