

# GOLD STAIN DARBY

## Michael Slenske discusses the uses of gold in art, from the Aztec Empire to Chris Burden and beyond.

When New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum installed Maurizio Cattelan's *America*—a working toilet made of eighteen-karat gold—in its fifth-floor public bathroom, the sculpture immediately became a nonpareil conductor for political discourse. The work, which the Italian artist called “one-percent art for the ninety-nine percent,” went operational for museum visitors' use on September 15, 2016, as the presidential campaign between Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton reached peak frenzy. Perhaps foreseeing what then seemed to most an inevitable Clinton victory, the Guggenheim's press release marking the occasion stated that “the aesthetics of this ‘throne’ recall nothing so much as the gilded excess of Trump's real-estate ventures and private residences.” Less than two months later, Trump defeated Clinton to become the forty-fifth president of the United States.

On September 15, 2017, exactly one year after the opening date of *America*, Nancy Spector, the Guggenheim's chief curator, proved undaunted. Having received a request from the Trump team to borrow Vincent van Gogh's *Landscape with Snow* (1888) for the president's and first lady's private quarters (it is not unusual for the White House to ask for such loans, though mostly from Washington museums), Spector doubled down in her e-mailed response: the painting was “prohibited from travel,” she said, but the museum was “fortuitously” able to make the Trumps the “special offer” of a loan of *America*, whose exhibition had closed that same day. “The work beautifully channels the history of 20th-century avant-garde art by referencing Marcel Duchamp's famous urinal of 1917,” Spector wrote. “We would be pleased to help facilitate this loan for the artist should the President and First Lady have any interest in installing it in the White House. It is, of course, extremely valuable and somewhat fragile, but we would provide all the instructions for its installation and care.”

This burn ruffled the feathers of Fox News pundits, who called for Spector's resignation. (This has not happened.) And it skewered the auric style of our gilded-cage POTUS, whose sixty-sixth-floor penthouse in Trump Tower supposedly brims with twenty-four-karat doors, lamps, columns, and moldings, whose private jet is equipped with gold-plated seat belts, and whose Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas sells branded chocolates in the shape of bullion bars wrapped in gold foil. More relevant to us here, the incident added a new luster to the use, value, and perhaps the use value of gold, a mythical element throughout (art) history. The Spanish funded an empire with stolen Incan gold; as US president in 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt made it illegal to hoard gold, part of a plan to devalue the dollar and stimulate the economy; Hitler stashed gold, and the motherlode is believed by some to lie in the wreckage of a shipwrecked Nazi cruise liner off the Baltic coast. Just this February nearly \$50 million worth of recovered ingots and coins from the Gold Rush-era “Ship of Gold” (the *SS Central America*, which sank in a hurricane 160 miles off the coast of South



Carolina in 1857) went on display in Long Beach after years of legal wrangling with the treasure hunter who discovered it. The lengths we'll go to in this primal pursuit of gold, while somewhat manic, make sense: it's running through our veins in trace amounts. Gold is literally, and quite poetically, in our blood.

In short, our obsession with gold has created a legacy that has long been an inspiration for historical museum surveys. “Humans have often been drawn to gold,” says Kim Richter, senior research specialist at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, and the co-curator of *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury and Legacy in the Ancient Americas*. The show opened at the Getty last fall as part of the museum's *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* initiative and traveled in the spring to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. (The Met is itself no stranger to the subject of gold and metalworking in the Americas, having produced the 1985 exhibition *The Art of Precolumbian Gold: The Jan Mitchell Collection*, which led to the museum's acquisition of a rare fifteenth-century Tairona pendant.) “The shine, color, and malleability of gold are appealing and make it the perfect medium for creating objects for ritual and regalia,” Richter continues. “It is also not surprising that many cultures associate its golden color with the sun and

divinity—the Mexicas of the Aztec Empire called it *teocuitlatl* (‘divine excrement’) in their Nahuatl language and believed it was literally divine matter that came from the sun.”

Judging from the number of modernist and contemporary Mexican and Mexico-based artists who have worked with gold, the material appeal of that “divine excrement” hasn't worn off in the region. To wit: one of the literal highlights at the home and architecture studio of Luis Barragán is a panel, gold leafed by Mathias Goeritz, to reflect divine sunshine from a window overlooking the pink foyer. Both the Guadalajara minimalist Jose Dávila and the Vietnamese-born, Mexico City-based conceptualist Danh Vo have found success in museums and the market by gold-leafing Mexican beer boxes. The former employs them as formalist tweaks on Donald Judd stacks, while the latter flattens them to hang on walls, or like flags from the ceiling, embellished with gilded renditions of the stars and stripes, or with calligraphy by Vo's father invoking colonialist overtones of the United States and/or beer brands such as León, Corona, Victoria, and Pacifico. During a recent visit I made to the Kurimanzutto gallery during Mexico City's Zona Maco art fair, José Kuri unveiled a suite of 24k-gold rings that Gabriel Orozco is deriving from his *Samurai Tree* paintings, which themselves are made with tempera and burnished gold leaf.

Elsewhere, Rudolf Stingel used gold-tinted panels in his 2007 installations at the MCA Chicago and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art; Sylvie Fleury has unveiled a series of golden sculptures in the form of an 18K-gold shopping cart, a 24K-gold-plated city trash can, and a ceramic truck tire with luster glaze; and Marc Quinn famously enlisted Kate Moss to pose with her legs behind her head for a fifty-kilo 18K-gold sculpture dubbed *Siren* (2008), which the British Museum exhibited a decade ago alongside some of its classical statues of Greek goddesses. Before these contemporary efforts, Andy Warhol, Yves Klein, James Lee Byars, and many other artists took a shine to gold. Among other gilded works, Byars's sixty-six-foot-tall sculpture *The Golden Tower*, first shown in 1990 at Berlin's Martin Gropius-Bau, made its outdoor debut in the Campo San Vio (next to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection) at the Venice Biennale last year. This spring, as part of its *Stories of Almost Everyone* survey, the

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Kim Richter

Hammer Museum in Los Angeles exhibited *Torture of Metals*, a sculptural installation from Manila-born, LA-based artist Miljohn Ruperto featuring six 3D-printed metal samples in “lesser metals”—mercury, silver, copper, lead, iron, copper, and tin—cast from a naturally occurring gold nugget for a reverse alchemical critique that called into question the perceived (and real) value of this elusive element.

“The most pure food you can get is milk with honey and . . . we try to understand how we cross over into the afterlife by using honey and gold,” argues Gabriel Rico, an ascendant Mexican artist who made his New York debut at Perrotin this fall. We were walking around his sprawling Guadalajara studio compound during the city’s PreMaco weekend (i.e., the weekend before Mexico City’s Zona Maco week) and he was explaining a disarming new sculpture, *Crudelitatem* (*I will say the romans that spread upon the world but it was the world that spread upon the romans*), and its relation to the use of honey to embalm the dead and preserve seeds in ancient Egypt, and also to NASA’s “Golden Record,” which carried sounds of Earth into outer space aboard the *Voyager*, in 1977. Preserving a humanitarian time capsule of its own, Rico’s one-branched, white fiberglass tree captures the lust for life of our current civilization while simultaneously anticipating its greedy death. Ornamented with a glowing 24K ceramic beehive, the barren branch drips golden honey onto a ceramic skull lying beneath it atop a pile of white sand. “This is us without soul, without spirit,” Rico says. “This is us.”

Perhaps it was always thus. On the early-bird side of the Romantic age, William Blake, the poet who reminded us that “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,” added gold and silver to paintings in tempera on mahogany. *The Ghost of a Flea*, based on a vision informing him that the titular insects were inhabited by “bloodthirsty to excess” souls, depicts a man-beast who ogles a blood chalice under the light of golden stars. In the Trump era that image feels fresh again.

In 1968, Marcel Broodthaers founded the *Musée d’Art Moderne—Département des Aigles*, a cross between a museum and a conceptual artwork, at his home in Brussels. Three years later, on the cover of the 1971 catalogue for the Cologne Art Fair, he announced the sale of the museum as a result of “bankruptcy” and attempted to raise funds by producing and selling an edition of one-kilo gold ingots, priced at double the market value of gold and stamped with the institution’s eagle mascot. The project was shown, fittingly, at the old Monnaie de Paris, formerly the French mint, in 2015.

Broodthaers’s bullion has a descendant in Chris Burden’s *Tower of Power* (1985), a ziggurat of 100 stacked one-kilo gold bars surrounded by an army of paper matchstick men. When the work was shown at the New Museum, New York, in Burden’s retrospective there in 2013, the metal alone was worth \$4.4 million and the display was heavily guarded. Halfway up the stairwell connecting the museum’s third and fourth floors is a forty-square-foot, thirty-five-foot-tall nook known as the Shaft Space. Over the past decade this curatorially tricky gallery has been used for a variety of equally tricky site-specific installations—Agathe Snow’s floating column of magnetized rubber handballs (*Master Bait Me*, 2009), for example—but nothing could have prepared the New Museum for the complexity of borrowing and showing Burden’s bounty. That complexity has limited the work’s exhibition history: the only other time *Tower of Power* has

been exhibited was at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut in 1985. Not only did the New Mu have to secure funding, in part from a board member, to borrow the bars, it had to take out a large insurance policy and install an armed guard who watched visitors watching the tower—one person at a time, sans bags and jackets—from behind a Plexiglass window. “It really surprises me that this historical work is not owned by a museum or a private collector,” Lisa Phillips, the museum’s director, said at the time. “It has something to do with the fact that it’s a very big responsibility to insure and maintain, and two, you have to supply the gold, and people see it as a representation of pure value but in fact it is a work of art. What is the value that one can ascribe to the idea? . . . It changes day to day, in this case.”

If Burden was carrying the conceptual torch for Broodthaers, the LA-based artist Henry Vincent may soon carry the baton into the future. Vincent spent the early part of his career acting in the films of Raymond Pettibon and making videos with Jason Rhoades, as well as running a private museum called Art Center Los Angeles. In 2006, though, Vincent took a break and moved to Berlin, where he became friendly with artists such as André Butzer, Jonathan Meese, and Andreas Hofer (aka Andy Hope 1930). He also met Reinald Nohal, co-owner of Berlin’s renowned artist hangout the Paris Bar. Nohal invited the artist to stay at the Bunkhouse, a hotel he owned in Dawson City, the gold-rush town in the Yukon, Canada, where Martin Kippenberger built one of the wooden entrances for his *Subway to Nowhere* installation series. There, in the summer of 2010, Vincent met the seasoned gold prospector Shawn Ryan, and his life and career were forever changed.

“I just wanted to go make art in the wild but then I met Shawn Ryan. He’s a billionaire but he had no teeth at the time and was living in a shack,” recalls Vincent, who has gone back to Dawson City every summer since and started his own prospecting outfit there, O.K. Creek Mining and Exploration, in 2013. The company is supported by shareholders—mostly curators, and collectors such as Beth Rudin DeWoody—who are paid yearly dividends in the actual gold that Vincent has been pulling out of his 22,000-acre plot in the Yukon Territory over the past five years. Part business, part art generator, part critique, the mining outfit is a lifelong Gesamtkunstwerk that could well turn Vincent into what he calls “an industrialist artist” who might buy up the town and turn it into “the next Marfa.” Outside the literal goldmining project—run with a full-time summer crew that resembles a special-forces insurgency team—Vincent makes James Rosenquist-like paintings (with gold-flecked paint) that mash up his Chippewa roots, Disneyana, and modernism; hyperrealist drawings and watercolors of the local flora, fauna, and roughneck mining scene; and a collection of hand-cast gold jewelry depicting erotic encounters and female forms.

“Every single day you hear references to gold, it comes up maybe every two hours, all these terms that are deep in our subconscious: a nugget of information, mining this or that, the motherlode, all this stuff that’s in humans. Why do we look for it? It has no major significance—it’s a conductor but it’s not used for that. Why is it part of our monetary systems? Explain this to me. It has to have some purpose that we don’t know yet that someone dropped down to us way in the future, or maybe in our DNA,” says Vincent. “Gold is the root of all of it—myth, man, evil, art—gold is in everything.”

## GOLD IS THE ROOT OF ALL OF IT—MYTH, MAN, EVIL, ART—GOLD IS IN EVERYTHING.

Henry Vincent

Previous spread:  
Maurizio Cattelan, *AMERICA*, 2016, bowl: 18K gold; pipes and flushmeter: gold plated, 28 ½ × 14 × 27 inches (72.4 × 35.6 × 68.6 cm), installed at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo by Jacopo Zotti. Courtesy Maurizio Cattelan’s Archive.



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Gabriel Rico, *Crudelitatem* (*I will say the romans that spread upon the world but it was the world that spread upon the romans*), 2017, ceramics, gold, fiberglass, marble sand, 53 ½ × 76 ¾ × 39 ¾ inches (135 × 195 × 100 cm)

Octopus Frontlet, c. 300–600 AD, Moche culture, La Mina, Peru, gold, chrysocolla, shells. Museo de la Nación, Lima, Ministerio de Cultura del Perú

Chris Burden, *Tower of Power*, 1985, one-hundred one-kilo (32 oz) pure gold bricks, sixteen matchstick men, vitrine (wood, marble, and glass); gold bricks: 20 × 18 × 18 inches (50.8 × 45.7 × 45.7 cm); Vitrine: 70 × 30 × 30 inches (177.8 × 76.2 × 76.2 cm) © 2018 Chris Burden Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy New Museum. Photo by Benoit Paley.

