

Interview

Davina Semo's Survival Instincts

By Molly Elizalde

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Artist Davina Semo doesn't need soft art. She needs strong art that resembles the world we see around us and the world each of us experiences in our own consciousness—how what we see bleeds into our thoughts, into what it means to be human. Her art forms a narrative where the industrial materials, the anecdotal titles, and the handmade quality meet.

Through February 15, her works, which include concrete slabs with transferred spray paint, etched one-way mirrors, and steel cages and chains, will be on view at Marlborough Chelsea.

"With a lot of the pieces, I like how the material dictates what it is. I'm sure you could make it perfect, but that's really not the point," Semo says. The point is that each final product—its formal qualities and its title—comes about because of her intuitive decisions, what she feels in the moment and how the materials respond. In this way, the materials, which could be read as industrial and cold, become colored with ambient dispositions.

"Our relationship to industrial things is very strange," Semo, who lives and works in Bushwick, says. She spends her life around what is considered industrial, but that life is populated with friends and personal spaces that form a comfortable, warm environment. Her art exudes a personal quality beyond the rough material—it is not the scrap metal and debris on the side of the street, but a representation of the transient moods of daily life.

With titles drawn from text messages, literature, sports commentary, and overheard conversations taken out of context, her work is marked by our own stories of the life surrounding these abandoned objects. Even the way her new exhibition, "Ruder Forms Survive," is configured—the concrete works propped up on the floor, lined up to

block direct access into the larger gallery; the low-hanging lights that reduce the scale of each room; and the etched mirrors set up to reflect the other works—represents the mental separation we have from others and our perception of the contemporary landscape.

We met with Semo at Marlborough Chelsea as she put the finishing touches on the show.

MOLLY ELIZALDE: You've referred to your work as "useless" and "intact" when explaining the narrative behind certain pieces, that the material is useless but you can still glean something of where it came from, that it's left behind but it still has some sort of meaning to what it was before. Can you explain how that relates to sculpture and sculpture-making for you?

DAVINA SEMO: I like making things that don't need me around. When I first started making the concrete pieces and people saw them in my studio, they'd be like, "Where did you find that?" And I was like, "I didn't. I made it here." And they're like, "Yeah, but where did you find it?" And I was like, "No, I made the whole thing here." And they're like, "But it looks like it was outside." And I'm like, "Well, that's cool." Because it's such a meticulous process, in a way. I mean, I don't always know what's going to happen at all. I make the molds in a pretty intuitive way. I paint the mold and then it transfers, so I don't always know what's going to happen. There is a quality of it that ends up being a little bit like a found thing, because the material adds a lot on its own. I'm not exactly controlling it—I don't know how I even could.

I've had that orange chain [I WILL BE HARD AND HARD. MY FACE WILL TURN RAIN LIKE THE STONES] on my friend's roof since the beginning of the summer so that the color could fade. It's multi-tone, but it was all orange. And the reason I thought of that is because there's this gas station on 10th Avenue right where you come off the West Side Highway and the chains hang down so trucks know how high they're going to be able to go through. They've been there for a long time because they're a really light salmon color. I thought that they were so pretty. We bought chains from the same place so I thought they're going to fade beautifully, so that's how I even thought about bleaching them. So now every time I go by there I'm like, "That's a sculpture." But it's just in the city.

My studio's in Bushwick, and there's just a lot of weird things around that no one wants to throw away because they're too heavy. My work doesn't look the same as these, but I like that they could be there and you wouldn't notice it. It's useless in the same way that a lot of other stuff—I think a lot of people think that with concrete, especially slabs, there would have to be a reason you would go through with the effort to make it, like people do it for construction or to make a countertop. It's kind of nice getting to just think about it formally. It doesn't have to do—

ELIZALDE: Have a function.

SEMO: —anything else.

ELIZALDE: Well, it does have a function.

SEMO: Yeah, but it can have more of a function for a person. For the narrative, I just like combining ideas, things that you feel during the day and that you experience with the things you see in the city. Not just the city, though—it's not specific to the city.

ELIZALDE: Specific to a mindscape.

SEMO: Yeah. I put this piece [I WORKED MY PARTNERS HARD; THAT'S WHY THEY LIKED ME SO MUCH] in front partially because I loved how it came out, but I also gave it a title I liked. And this one, those voids to me, the pieces in the wall [SINCE TRUST IS AN ATTACHMENT TO SOMETHING THAT IS NOT KNOWN and MAYBE IT'S JUST THAT WHEN THINGS ARE GONE THEY AINT COMIN BACK] are the same idea of being in your mind and having an object that doesn't require anything of you. You can just look at it. I like how this one [SINCE TRUST IS AN

ATTACHMENT TO SOMETHING THAT IS NOT KNOWN] will reflect light a little, so it's in the very beginning of the show. But the last one [MAYBE IT'S JUST THAT WHEN THINGS ARE GONE THEY AINT COMIN BACK] is black and it will just absorb light. But they both have a feeling behind them.

To me, the titles give the piece a feeling besides what it comes across as. Basically, I hate when you go see an art show and you completely miss it if you don't know the story. I don't like that at all. When I was younger, I wouldn't necessarily give something a title like this; I would just put it on the wall.

ELIZALDE: It leaves people a little unguided.

SEMO: Yeah. I like to make things, but that's not all I'm going for in objects. I think it's really nice to be able to go back through the show. Let's say you just walk through, I think you would get a pretty accurate mood of the work. Then you could read about it and be like, "Oh, it's not cold, industrial." I see art and the rest of the world as being the same. But I think for some reason—like with my family—they'd go into an art show and be like, "What the hell's going on in here?" When you walk through the actual pieces [in my show], at least there's a recognition of materials. Like the scaffoldings [THEY SEEM TO COME TO ME ASKING TO BE BROKEN], I fell in love with them because they're making sculptures all over the city.

ELIZALDE: Can you talk a little bit more about the titling process? You title after the work is finished, but what about the process of making the work leads to the title?

SEMO: I love pieces where people will cut out a newspaper and have the newspaper either glued to a piece of paper or in a frame or on the wall. I love that about the New York Post: their headlines are ridiculous—just having these huge crazy words on the front of the paper that everyone's going to read. It's funny in a way. It's maybe not what you would think they would do.

ELIZALDE: Yeah. It's weirdly informal, but presented as if it is formal.

SEMO: Yeah. And I like how you can surreptitiously change headlines and when you look at it again, you're like, "What's going on here?" Then, a lot of times someone writes you a text message and it's meaning to just be nice, but it's not what you wanted to hear. It's just this weird, like, that's what it is to be a person: you're in your own day.

You're just in different worlds, because we're not all sharing the same consciousness. So, I'll write those things down and keep them in a document. Or if someone writes me an email and there's something about it that's weird, I'll copy and paste it. Or if I'm reading a book, I'll underline parts of it that stand out to me as interesting out of context. I've been doing that for a long time. Also, I usually change around a lot of the words so the pronouns or the way the sentence [reads] is more centered around my experience and my perspective. A lot of times the things I'll write down have a male pronoun, and I'm not going to make this title about another dude. So [they become] "She this" or "She that." Most of the people who see the show don't know me, so if they went to see the show, I like the idea that they could think—just because of the heaviness of the work, or I don't know what the real reason is, but a lot of times people ask me about it being masculine—so I started to really push—

ELIZALDE: Feminine.

SEMO: Yeah. The feminine titles and making feminine as a word—I'm not trying to change the meaning of the word but to do my part to be like, "We're all the same." [laughs]

ELIZALDE: Yeah. But also human consciousness—the way your work deals with it—isn't gendered.

SEMO: Exactly. It's the idea of being accommodating; I try to just make it straightforward. But, yeah, I title them after because I never know what they're going to look like, so I can't tell what the mood is going to be. Also, I'm not going to be here. I'm not an actor or a performer.

ELIZALDE: You're not here to interact with viewers.

SEMO: Exactly. So, once I started picking what was going to be in the show, I printed it all out with just the titles and without the images and just read them all together and tried to make sure there wasn't... Because I feel like I have the same idea every day, in the sense that I don't have a different idea for every artwork. For me, it's all intuitively happening.

ELIZALDE: It comes about from—

SEMO: From inside. Yeah. I want the titles to be able to speak for the work. I think, in a way, they do it better than I can.

This is definitely the biggest show I've made so far. I'm very excited about getting to show all the work together. I've been wanting to install the mirrors [HE SAW HER SMILE AND TOOK IT FOR ENCOURAGEMENT, ALWAYS HER EYES SEEMED TO BE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING THAT WASN'T THERE, and PASSING THROUGH BUSTED TIRES AND CASTOFF SCRAP METAL RUSTING IN THE WEEDS AND BOTTOMLESS BUCKETS AND BROKEN SLABS OF CONCRETE] like that for a long time, like a fence, like really low. So with these, even though they're five feet tall, they're so low that actually even if you're my height and you stand right at it, you're not seeing your face. And you can see the other work in it too, so it can look more city-ish. It's not specific to the city, but I wanted to have those black squares across from it so that you could see it as part of the environment you're in.

ELIZALDE: I was interested in that idea—you have a lot of Xs, and the mirrors are representing fences—I was interested in that idea of a blockage or some sort of separation and what that means to the narrative of urban life that you're telling.

SEMO: Also, I've never installed the concrete pieces next to each other either, the way they are in the gallery and I wanted to start making that connection clearer, making it so you can't just walk in the room the way you normally do.

ELIZALDE: The way it's set up, the way you have to walk around them, the concrete pieces are representing separation. SEMO: Yeah. It's not something you think about, but it's something you're always doing in terms of moving around.

ELIZALDE: How did the title of the show, "Ruder Forms Survive," come about in relation to the fact that all the works are together and they can speak in a cumulative way?

SEMO: The title is a sentence that's in this Cormac McCarthy book Suttree. I was reading it in the fall and it really stuck out to me; it just seemed perfect. No one's asked me in a while, "Oh, where'd you find that"—with the concrete, especially. But, I think even the stainless steel cages, in a certain way, you could think that I found that, that they were repurposed from some industrial thing. "Ruder Forms Survive"—I like how it makes the sentence an object because you're not used to hearing the word "ruder," so you would read it twice and then "forms," in this context sounds like it's talking about sculpture. I feel like that's how I started making these things; I wanted things that were real, that were material—not as vulnerable as a drawing on a napkin.

ELIZALDE: Not just art objects.

SEMO: Yeah. They'll survive probably longer than I will. You could fuck with them, but you're not really going to ruin them. I like that feeling when you have a person who's like, "You can do anything to me, you're not going to hurt me." They're just totally a rock for you. And that's how [the work] is for me. I feel like I can't mess it up because it's already strong, it's strong in and of itself. There's a certain roughness to the work that I think makes sense in that title. It was an intuitive decision.