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A Part of the Main: Davina Semo at Marlborough Contemporary

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Installation view, "Davina Semo: ALL THE WORLD," 2019, at Marlborough Contemporary. Photograph by Pierre Le Hors, courtesy of the artist and Marlborough.

Davina Semo's solo exhibition at Marlborough Contemporary, "ALL THE WORLD," her third there, marks a shift in tone from her previous work. Although the basic constituents of her sculptures remain much the same—industrial materials, fasti craft, appropriated texts used as all-caps titles—themes of control, eroticism, and violence have been tempered. Expressions of emotion and affection have swelled, and while those elements predate this show, they are given added, moving emphasis.

The show is built around two bodies of work: cast-bronze bells and brightly colored acrylic mirrors, all dated 2019. Three early bells were shown by Semo in Marlborough's upstairs space in the winter of 2016 and 2017, and at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman Gallery in late 2017, though those were smaller and had other differences in their facture and hanging. Semo's use of mirrors goes back to at least 2010, though those pieces often utilized obscurity as a tactic. Rather than those previous black or silver glass mirrors, these are bright pink, yellow, turquoise, reminiscent of mirrors by Sherrie Levine.



Davina Semo, SHE BECAME VERY SENSITIVE TO THE TASTE OF WATER FROM THE TAP, 2019. Acrylic mirror, plywood, ball bearings, hardware, and stainless steel, 72 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches. Photograph by Pierre Le Hors, courtesy of the artist and Marlborough.

The five mirrors, each six-by-five feet, are embedded with two sets of radial ball bearings in overlapping constellations. One set of ball bearings is arranged in a grid; the other set is dispersed across the surface in spay-like disarray, recalling a backpack by Semo that has been repeatedly shot, shown at Marlborough in 2015. The mirrors capture, in subtly warped faces, the reflection of viewers and the bells. This is a lovely curatorial trick, reiterating and altering the perception of the work and the space. And the ball bearings take on multiple readings: the fearlessness of skateboards (they're a part of the wheel system), the suggestion of mass anxiety signified by fidget spinners (they're also a component of those toys), or, evading that dichotomy altogether, the cold reliability of machinery. Such allusions play up or run against the titles, which vary between grim and hopeful.

Semo's bells, ranging from 20 to 33 inches tall, are made with a wax-casting technique that results in a bullet-shaped dome with eroded-looking rifts and drips on their thick walls. They're tall and thin, patinated with a bituminous-colored finish and hung with chains that are powder-coated glossy black. Inside each is a wooden clapper attached to a thick, woven nylon rope. Visitors are encouraged to ring the clapper, but not touch the bronze, which, despite its robust appearance, has a very delicate patina. Each is attached at the ceiling while appearing to be slung through an eye bolt and anchored (save for one) to large bales of recyclable detritus, including aluminum and electronics cables.

Semo addresses both global and local concerns in this work. Close to home, the mirror *SHE BECAME VERY SENSITIVE TO THE TASTE OF WATER FROM THE TAP* reads, in its blue surface and epidemiologic red and black ball bearings, as an allusion to the ongoing Flint water crisis. A pink mirror is similarly dire, called *IN THE REGION WHERE HE LIVED THERE WERE NO PLANTS AT ALL*. Most frighteningly and directly, a bell in the center of the gallery held by two massive, stacked bales is called "*BECAUSE WE ARE FACING AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT AND THERE IS NO TIME TO CONTINUE DOWN THIS ROAD OF MADNESS,*" *SHE SAID*, a quote from 16-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (Part of the horror here is the scale: those enormous bales were selected from among God only knows how many others, impressing on viewers a fraction of the resources used and wasted by people, which is an existential crisis.) Another bell, nearer to the entrance, is titled "*IT IS HARD,*" *SHE SAID*, "*TO IMAGINE THE WORLD AS IT WAS*".



Davina Semo, "IT IS HARD, SHE SAID, "TO IMAGINE THE WORLD AS IT WAS," 2019. Patinated cast bronze bell, whipped nylon line, wooden clapper, powder-coated chain, aluminum bale (TABOO), and hardware, overall dimensions variable. Photograph by Pierre Le Hors, courtesy of Marlborough.

The anchoring bale of that latter piece includes reptilian-looking metal scraps that resemble works in Genesis Breyer P-Orridge's show of erotic and mystical sculptures in Marlborough's viewing room, called "Towards an End to Biological Perception," organized by Leo Fitzpatrick. The crushed aluminum, in places, looks like the snake-skin dominatrix shoe in P-Orridge's *Shoe Horn #9* (2016). There are echoes, too, between Semo's work and P-Orridge's use of snake fetishes made of curled iron, scaly dessicated fishes, or, for example, the mirrors in *No Mercy* (2019).

The one bell not attached to a bale is instead connected to a slab of rolled steel, with the words "ALL THE WORLD" (the work's title) embossed on it in welded block letters. Bells serve for warning and mourning. Lament and alarm for the world as it is or was runs through several of the sculptures, ringing with the kind of sentiment found in John Donne's famous "No Man is an Island," apt for the moment in all sorts of ways, including the analogizing of coastal erosion and human suffering on both grand and individual scales:

No man is an island
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

Mourning and heartache are, almost certainly, impossible without the kind of compassion and love Donne expresses. Despite the distress found in works here, the exhibition is nonetheless suffused with love and reassurance—something like courage and hope when held against existential threat. A bell closest to the entrance is reassuringly titled *SHE CAN SQUEEZE HIS HAND WHEN PEOPLE ASK HER QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE*. A mirror is called *SHE LOOKED UP AT HIM, DIRECTLY, WITH TOTAL ATTENTION*.

Bells also ring for celebration and contemplation. Among the people I saw tolling them, one of the gallery's preparators was rolling the clapper gently around the lip of the bell, like a meditative singing bowl, making it hum. It's hard to know how to address the beautiful and the horrible on Earth side by side, except perhaps to face what is awful, and to cultivate what is not.