

Galerie

Davina Semo: "Artist Davina Semo's Bells Are a Call to Action in the Wake of the Global Pandemic"

By Lucy Rees

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San Francisco artist Davina Semo is obsessed with bells. For the past four years, she has been exploring how the ancient device can be an expression of liberty, a call to action, or a warning sound. Now in the wake of the global pandemic, her work is taking on a newfound poignancy.



Concept rendering of detail from "Davina Semo: Reverberation," to be on view at Brooklyn Bridge Park Pier 1.

Photo: Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Semo was commissioned by the Public Art Fund for what will be her most ambitious exhibition to date. She created five large-scale, fluorescent orange-pink bells, each one riddled with perforations that result in a collective harmony of different pitches—not unlike the cacophony that rang through New York’s neighborhoods every evening to honor health-care workers. The symphonic sculpture will be installed this summer at Brooklyn Bridge Park’s Pier 1.

“I didn’t predict a pandemic, but my goal was always to wake people up,” says Semo from her studio, where she has been working in isolation for the past few months. With a keen interest in politics and social affairs, Semo is motivated to spotlight pressing issues like climate change, inequality, and the fact that the COVID-19 crisis has so many people living on the edge. “They were things that seemed untenable, but during this time, the mainstream media is talking about them. It feels like there’s a possibility for change.”



Left: Davina Semo, *Messenger*, 2019. | Right: Davina Semo, *Dreamer*, 2019.

Left Photo: Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery | Right Photo: Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery and Marlborough

A trained sculptor who shows with San Francisco’s Jessica Silverman Gallery, Semo follows a unique process that involves a labor-intensive lost-wax method. She first sculpts a wax model, which is used to create a one-of-a-kind mold, then punctures it with a set of drilled holes, bringing light to the object’s interior and altering each bell’s appearance. “It’s a really meditative process,” she says. “Making the wax is a dance with the material.”

Experimenting with the different sounds was another important component of her work. “It’s an incredible experience when you ring a big bell and you feel it reverberate.”

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Inside Davina Semo's recent exhibition, "Precarious Hardware," at Jessica Silverman Gallery.
Photo: John Wilson White, Courtesy of the Artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

With a penchant for heavy materials, Semo also creates brightly colored wall works—some are made with warped acrylic mirrors shot through with ball bearings to create a constellation effect; others utilize a curtain of painted chains. "There tends to be an industrial tone to the things I make, and I think that is about me wanting to be part of a powerful conversation," says the artist. "I don't think that soft things aren't powerful, but I think I have a bit of that teenage rage still, a desire for change."



A detail from Davina Semo's recent exhibition, "Precarious Hardware," at Jessica Silverman Gallery.
Photo: John Wilson White, Courtesy of the Artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

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