



Davina Semo: Call and Response

BY KIM BEIL

Davina Semo is folded over her laptop, head in her hands, elbows on the table. She makes eye contact with the camera, with me, and we both laugh. There's really nothing else we can do. We both have the lights on—she in her studio in San Francisco, me in my home a few miles away. It's afternoon, but

dark as night outside. The air is thick with wildfire smoke and falling ash. Yesterday we were in frantic conversation by text, scheduling and re-scheduling our planned studio visit. It was already fraught with the challenges of Covid-19, but then high-altitude smoke from fires in Oregon began drifting down the coast. The sun, a bright safety orange in a dull gray sky, visibly confirmed that the Air Quality Index was in the red zone. We deferred a day, since we'd planned to talk outside after looking at work in the studio.

We awoke the next day, as did the whole of the Bay Area, to an apocalyptic scenario. The sky was still black at 7 a.m., the sun entirely obscured by smoke. Eventually the day dawned around 10 a.m. with a violent orange glow. Streetlights stayed on all day. Even the warm golden cast of tungsten lights seemed cool compared to the smoldering sky.

Semo is one of those people who saw this coming. Maybe not this strange scenography exactly, but her work has long carried the sound—and feel—of alarm. Much of her work can be read as a warning about coming climate catastrophes. She admits, "People are always telling me, 'Don't worry about climate change. Don't worry about the planet.' They say, 'It's not going to happen in your lifetime.' And I tell them, 'You're just wrong.'" We both sigh and

look out our respective windows at the inferno.

In late August 2020, Semo's *Reverberation* was installed along the waterfront at Brooklyn Bridge Park by the Public Art Fund. The installation consists of a series of five nearly four-foot-tall bronze bells, finished in luminescent orange and hanging from gray rectangular supports. The bells are meant to be rung by passersby. Each bell has a name—"Mother," "Listener," "Dreamer," "Singer," "Reflector"—and a unique voice, created by subtle differences in their construction. Bells, which often signaled the center of a town, have myriad historical associations, although they are less present in contemporary life. They called people together, they communicated warnings, and they could also be celebratory when played in unison.

Bells are a new addition to Semo's sculptural practice, and the enthusiasm she has for them is palpable, even over Zoom on an otherwise horrible day. She logs on to our call with her smartphone to better tour me through her space. My Zoom screen becomes an avant-garde film, dominated by a split perspective and Semo's handheld camera as she walks her studio end to end. In one Zoom window, I see the large conical shapes of bells rendered in wax standing on worktables. In the other, I watch as she

ABOVE:

Reverberation,
2020.

Patinated cast bronze bells, UV-protected, 2-stage catalyzed urethane automotive finish, galvanized steel chain and hardware, and clapper, installation view.

OPPOSITE:

Installation view of "Precarious Hardware," Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, 2019.

steps over extension cords, past artwork propped against the walls, past piles of newspaper, past the window glowing an ominous orange behind security bars. Semo arrives at one of the chocolate-brown shapes cradled in pink foam, picks it up, and displays it for the other camera; the object is as large as a paper

bag of groceries, and she turns it upside down lengthwise, so I can see inside. She shapes the bells in this brown wax and makes a plaster mold, which is then used by a foundry to cast the bells in bronze.

“I got lucky with the first bells I made. I was making educated guesses about how to shape

them. The profile of the bell is partially where the sound comes from. But it’s also about the thickness in relation to the shape,” Semo says as she points to the bottom edge of the bell. “There’s really no right or wrong, though. It’s always a surprise when something’s cast.” She’s waiting for this bell to return



THIS PAGE,
LEFT TO RIGHT:

Muse,
2019.

Patinated cast bronze,
powder-coated chain,
and hardware, trunk:
81 x 18.9 x 14.2 in.

Protector,
2019.

Patinated cast bronze
bell, whipped nylon
line, wooden clapper,
powder-coated chain,
and hardware, bell:
20 x 12.5 in. diameter.

OPPOSITE:
Stream,
2019.

Acrylic mirror, plywood,
ball bearings, hardware,
and stainless steel,
72.5 x 48.5 in.



from the foundry before she casts others, so she can get a sense of how the new shape sounds. She recalls, “When I started working on the bells, immediately it felt like something I could work on for the rest of my life and keep learning more. There are people who make only bells, and they’ve been doing it their whole lives. They learn how to listen to things they didn’t understand before.” This fascination with learning new processes and new materials is central to Semo’s practice, and the evidence of it is all over her studio—and in her multifaceted exhibitions.

The handheld camera ferries me across the studio again. Semo says, “I’ve been thinking more about natural shapes. I got

this gourd recently.” She holds it up to show me: two pale-yellow, intertwining stems, like a pair of apostrophes. “It’s actually two gourds grown together. I think they could be really beautiful bells if they were much larger and the bottoms were cut off. And I have a lot of bird nests like these.” She picks up a woven, teardrop-shaped nest, about the length of her arm. “It’d be so interesting to hear what they sound like, if they were cast.” Semo’s eager display of all these objects, the way she holds them and outlines their forms, attests to the curiosity about materials and process that motivates her practice and animates all of her work.

Since lockdown started in March 2020, Semo has been

experimenting with printmaking. Her materials are visible to me as we march through the studio. She carves shapes with a drill bit into pink polystyrene, which she's using as a printing plate. At first she was printing on paper and using newspaper as a test surface, but then she was attracted to the way the shapes screened out or highlighted different parts of the text. She pulls open the drawers of a flat file, revealing dozens of prints and a time capsule of news stories from the past six months. Semo doesn't even need to collage parts of the newspaper like Martha Rosler or Robert Heineken to highlight the shockingly disjunctive headlines that have become standard fare.

I remind her of a public conversation she had with the art historian Marci Kwon, who described Semo's work as having a protective element. They were discussing "Precarious Hardware," a 2019 show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco. Two works in that exhibition, *Exotica* and *Muse* (both 2019), were cast from silk floss trees, whose distinctive trunks are decorated with formidable quarter-size thorns. Semo cast the trees and their meager root systems in black patinated bronze. The tree's protective bark was almost the inverse of several wall works included in the show, which Semo refers to as

her "bearings" works. Large acrylic mirrors, as tall as six feet, feature inlaid ball bearings, some in regular patterns, others randomly distributed, like scattershot. Semo says that she also thinks of these as shields. The arrangement of the bearings reads as decorative in some; but in others, it resembles evidence or battle scars. Acrylic has taken on a new significance in the midst of a global pandemic. We see it everywhere, as clear shields protect essential workers from the public, whether at the grocery store or the doctor's office. In this context, Semo's acrylic wall works suggest protection in a new way and from a new threat.

She tells me that recently she's been thinking of the bells as protective objects, too: "They're like a protective shell around the space they create. They're forming an interior space." I see that the forms she collects from nature are also protective: gourds protect seeds, nests protect fledglings. Semo continues: "I've been thinking a lot about the interior space of the bells being a way of thinking about interior space, both interior space in general and the interior space in your mind."

I'm reminded of an idea, shared with me by the sound artist Chris Kallmyer: music is the only art form that enters the body. At first the skeptic in me resisted—doesn't light enter the

eyes, too? But eventually I was convinced. As soundwaves, music literally moves its listener's eardrums. You can plug your ears, but your body still senses the sound. Semo's call to action moves us viscerally. We can extend this to other aesthetic encounters, too, I think. When we are moved aesthetically, we find something

outside ourselves and we take it in, whether through sound or sight or even thought, and it changes us. Art can rearrange our being. Semo's work is a step toward rearranging our ways of being in and with the world. ■■■

Reverberation is on view at Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York through April 18, 2021.

