



"DAVINA SEMO"

By Christine Lin

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*Davina Semo in her studio, courtesy of the artist. Photo: Ryan Firpo*

*"I have always been attracted to, and in awe of, art and artists. For me, there was never any question or anything else or any plan B."*

— Davina Semo

To step into an installation of Davina Semo's bells is to enter a sculptural soundscape—one that pulses with tension between solidity and resonance, austerity and sensuality. Her sculptural bells—cast in bronze—are architectural in scale and deeply acoustic in nature, engaging the body as much as the eye. Since her first solo show in New York over a decade ago, the San Francisco-based Semo has garnered attention for her ability to fuse raw materials with emotional precision, presenting work in public spaces like Brooklyn Bridge Park and settings such as Jessica Silverman and SCAD Museum of Art.

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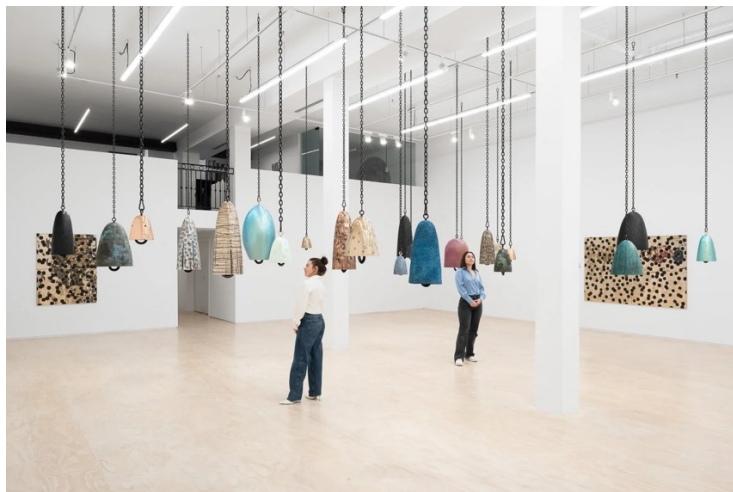
The bell has become a central form in her practice—not only for its cultural and spiritual symbolism, but also for its formal complexity. In conversation, Semo revealed the exhaustive process behind each piece: from layering beeswax by hand for lost-wax casting, 3D-printing molds, experimenting with automotive paint, and fine-tuning clappers for optimal resonance. Each bell becomes a study in symmetry and thickness, tactility and sound. Some bells are inspired by silk floss trees; others by knit patterns in cotton. These material experiments are not incidental—they reflect an intuitive inquiry into how emotion, memory, and vibration can cohere in physical form.

Despite their material weight, Semo's sculptures are not declarations. They're invitations. She speaks about abstraction as a form of generosity—one that resists fixed interpretation and instead opens a space for individual encounter. While earlier works leaned into black patina and deep texture, her recent bells have expanded into embracing color, softness, and even joy. In a world increasingly saturated with urgency, Semo's work offers slowness and resonance—asking us not only to see, but to listen.

CL: What early experiences shaped your sense of self as a creative person?

DS: An early memory surfaced recently from elementary school, of a private discovery. I remember rubbing Elmer's glue in my left palm. My right index finger working steadily, in its spiral work. I had a methodology. Waiting and blowing on the glue for long enough, observing the material harden, and tapping the glue to confirm it had dried. I would make a small hole in the center of my palm, and peel outwards while pushing down. Pushing down into the glue to get it to roll. Rolling outwards in all directions, until the circle detached from my hand completely, and I could start making another.

I remember clutching my journal as a young person, taking refuge in the blank pages, being able to write my feelings in as many directions as they could run. I remember finding this same sense of comfort in my studio spaces over the years, no matter how small or make-shift—the studio has always held me and my energy, fortified me for the rest of my life. I return to my studio day after day, to my journal, to my creative work. This has always been my way.



Davina Semo's solo exhibition "A Serious Celebration" at Jessica Silverman Gallery, courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Photo: Phillip Maisel

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CL: What part of your personal history do you feel most informs your work today?

DS: I am attentive to an interior presence. As a younger person, my intelligence was sharpened through extreme sensitivity to the world around me. My inner world has always been my refuge. There is an intimacy to my studio work, and an isolation as well. This experience of distance between my self and the outside world has informed my perspective.

I have always had interests which required me to learn things myself, and to seek out teachers in unlikely places. I have always had a sense of being on my own journey, trying to find my way without a guide or a role model. I have always been attracted to, and in awe of, art and artists. For me, there was never any question or anything else or any plan B.

CL: What do you hope people feel or understand when they experience your work?

DS: With the bells and reliefs I am creating now, I hope for people to feel that they are in the presence of an object made with a sense of care, wonder, and specificity. I want people to experience a sense of reflection and mystery.

A bell is a tangible object with invisible effect—profoundly psychological, profoundly intimate. I like to imagine that a bell alters the room, charges it with meaning. Primarily, I am a sculptor, and my interest lies in making objects. The more I worked with the form of the bell, in a quiet space, I understood that a bell is more than a sculpture—it is a vessel of sound. Sound, for our eyes, is invisible. The form and movement of light are things we experience with our eyes, but the sound calls to us from another place. I am interested in the power of the bell's sound and vibration, its voice as an instrument. The historically known healing qualities of vibration for the body. The reverberation, as a literal expression of moving energy outwards. There are many tones bells can project. But the resonance of a bell is ominous. Is intense. Is raw. Is serious. It is beautiful, and serious. My ability to hear sharpens as I silence the sounds around me, the external noise, the sounds of the city, the notifications on my phone. The ringing of the bell cuts through, announces itself, vibrates inside a primal place.

There are metaphorical aspects to the bell that excite me intellectually and psychologically, and I hope for some of these associations to be felt by people who encounter my work. I imagine the bell as a metaphorical body—and the allure when one is struck. I imagine the interior space created and held by the bell, as a metaphoric space for thought; the bell acts in that way as an armor or protective vessel around this tender space.

CL: Are there materials or forms that feel especially personal or symbolic to you?

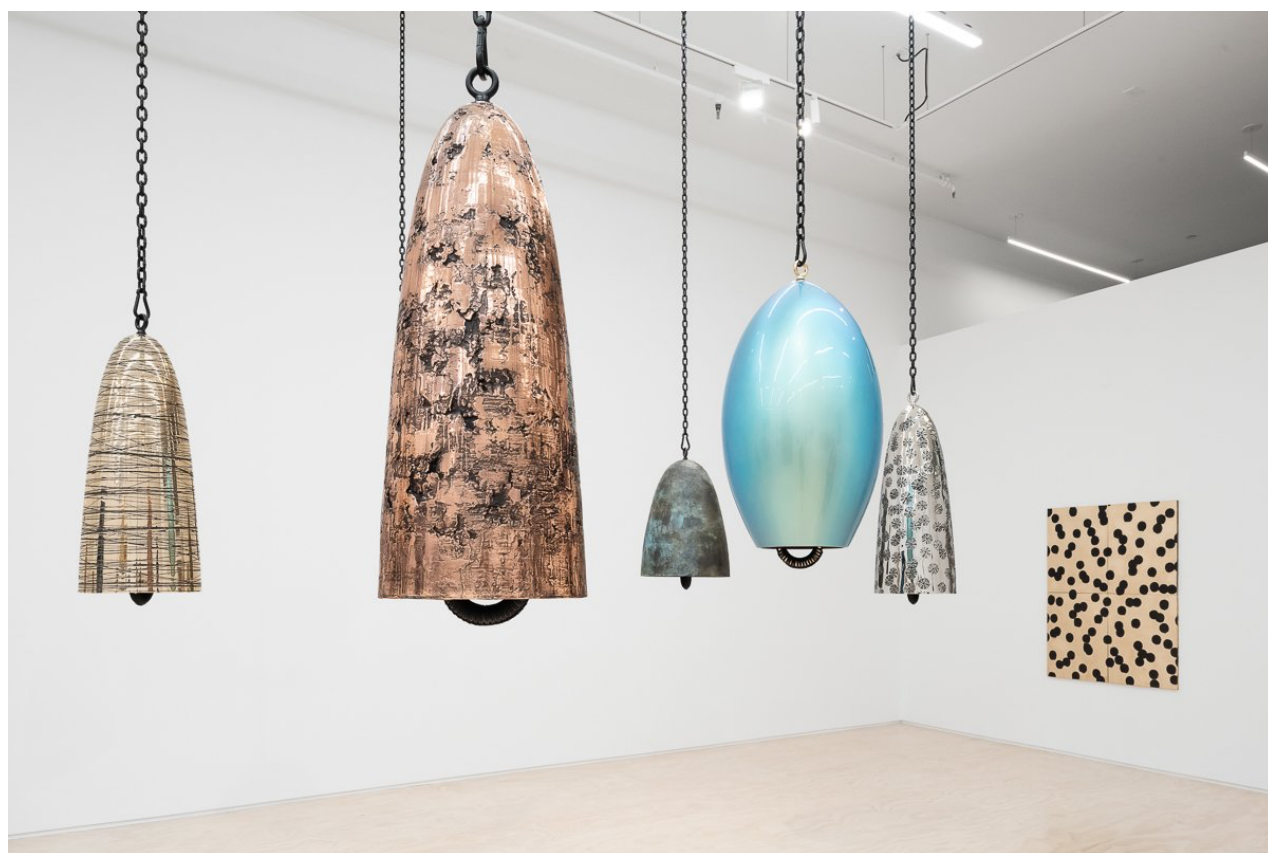
DS: This is a very big question for me! My entire creative world is engaged with materials and forms. At this time, materially, I am most engaged with cast bronze, beeswax, and natural materials, but that is leaving a lot out of my answer. As for form, I am most engaged now with the form of a bell.

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What I picture first, is seeing the profile of a bell hanging in the distance. The experience of the approach, and walking around a bell, and how as I walk around a bell, I am always chasing the light, and chasing the edge. I walk around to see the other side, but every side is facing me, there is no front or back, there is a symmetry to the form, there is a bending of the light, there is a circle that doesn't end. I dream of circles collapsing into each other, another circle, and of them rising up, into smaller and smaller circles, forming the body of a bell. The cross section one way is a circle. The cross section another way is an archway, a door, a passageway. There is an architecture to the form.

A bell is hanging in the air. Its bronze body carries a long vibration. Its shell is porous and sensitive to the weather. Its surface reflects and bends available light and surroundings. Like my bronze reliefs, the surfaces of the bells allow for light to flow and move, and this dance of light obscures the weight and intensity of the sculpture, allowing it some apparent weightlessness. The heavy bell that appears weightless as it gently sways in the air. This precarious position of being "in the air" is the natural state for a bell. Across many years, my work has been consistently heavy. There is something about the material weight that must operate on a metaphoric level for me. I try to understand my body and strength in relation to my work.



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CL: How has your work changed as your sense of self has changed?

DS: Across many years, my work has existed along spectrums of heavy/delicate, beautiful/rough, introvert/extrovert, darkness/light (literally and emotionally); there's always something rough about what I find beautiful, there's always something heavy about what I find delicate.

CL: What's something you've let go of creatively, and what's taken its place?

DS: I have let go of multitasking and embraced the dedication of doing one thing at a time.



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CL: As a designer, my goal is to unify objects and context—the form and the field. I'm curious how context influences your work.

DS: When I prepare an exhibition, I think about the work itself, and the exhibition at large; I consider the sculptures in relation to one another, and in terms of how they come together to tell a kind of abstract story. The life of a sculpture is long though, and it lives on after an exhibition. As an artist, I often don't have control over the context in which my work ends up. I rely to a large extent on my gallery to help ensure the final home for my work is a good fit. I am lucky that everyone at my gallery works so hard, and that so many collectors and institutions really care about objects and context. Most of the time, I am surprised by how beautifully and carefully my work is chosen and installed.

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One exception to this, is that when I work on a commission, I usually have the opportunity to consider the context in which my work will live, and to be intentional with my choices in that way. There are times when unity might be the goal, and times in which having my work stand out from the environment is desired.

CL: Where is your curiosity currently taking you?

DS: I recently opened a large exhibition for the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, on the heels of another large exhibition at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco. Before getting into new projects in 2026, I am taking time to reflect on the works I've made, and to dive deeper into research and experimentation for new textures, profiles (sounds), and forms.

*Davina is represented by Jessica Silverman*



Inside Davina Semo's Studio. Photo: Christine Lin

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Inside from Davina Semo's Studio. Photo courtesy of artist.



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