Wendy Richmond

Call and Response

Last summer, after spending three years developing a multipart sculpture project, I felt that the work was ready for public exposure. By coincidence, I was losing my studio to a wrecking ball. I packed up the bulk of the work for an upcoming installation and a subsequent exhibition. The rest of the pieces, plus materials and tools, went into storage.

I found myself in a transition phase, and it was unsettling. I was not making work, and I didn't know what I wanted to make next or where I would be making it. On top of that, there was a persistent voice in my head wondering, "Have I finished this body of work?"

As an artist, how do you know when to move on to something new? How do you decide what to leave behind, and what to carry forward? In the past, I've practiced a sort of laissez-faire approach, allowing new ideas to appear on their own timetable. But now, my discomfort required action.

My sculpture project was created in response to the illness and death of two family members. I know that the art I made at that time is complete. But the materials (and the emotions) are still demanding attention, like characters in an unfinished novel. Are there more stories to unearth?

As an artist, how do you know when to move on to something new?

Some of the sculptures resemble fragments of broken statues from an archaeological excavation. They hint at damaged pieces of a puzzle waiting to be restored and reassembled. So I applied for a short residency at the American Academy in Rome, with a proposal to explore the antiquities of ancient Rome and investigate their connections to my own "artifacts." At the Academy, I would be surrounded by artists and scholars, and have access to the extensive library and a studio. All of these factors, I hoped, would help me to move from previous work to the next stage.

I prepared for my two-week residency by planning a daily itinerary of major sites. But soon after I arrived in Rome, I realized that any progress would require a balance between sightseeing and disciplined studio time. What I needed was a routine of "Call and Response."

"Call and Response" is usually used in music, where a phrase is called out and an individual or a chorus responds. Now think of it from an artist's point of view: something calls to you, and you respond by translating that spark of inspiration into physical material.

At the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, I spent an hour viewing the frescoes that had been found and transported from the ancient walls of the Casa di Livia and the Villa Farnesina. I was attracted to the colors and style of painting, but the call came instead from what was missing: the areas of the frescoes that had been lost. I could see where pieces of history had vanished. Later that day, I went to my studio and made a handwritten list of verbs to be used for drawings: erode, cut out, erase, smudge, suppress and so on.

More trips yielded more calls. Some excursions were deliberate: I sought out—and was inspired by—historic artifacts that were preserved and protected in museums. But other experiences were unplanned, like coming upon a garden of broken terracotta urns held together by strips that looked like sutures: fasteners to mend what had come apart. Back in the studio, I ripped pieces of paper and then stitched them up using the needle and thread from my mini sewing kit.

One call was not from what I had seen, but from a vivid description by a fellow artist. An architect described his visit to Cuma Antro della Sibilla, near Naples, and showed me photos of an oculus through which an orb of sunlight poured into the ancient space. In my studio, there was a circular window; every morning, a bright ball of sunlight lit up the wall. My response was not to make anything, but simply to pay attention—to glance up every now and then to see how far the orb had crawled.

None of these exercises was meant to lock down a direction, let alone produce finished pieces. Instead, they offered metaphors for the transition from old work to new.

With only a few days left at the Academy, I finally got to the library. I wanted to check out a book of portraits of Roman emperors to make sketches. The librarian helped me open an account, and slid the keyboard to me to type in a password. But the keys were so well-used that the characters had mostly worn away, and were illegible. (I can't touch type, so she had to enter my password for me.)

I brought the book to my studio, intending to make accurate drawings. But after I completed a few, I rubbed the charcoal until there were only traces. I was starting to decide how much to keep, and how much to leave to memory. ca