

**PLATFORM 27**

**rachel mica weiss**







Cover and inside cover; Installation view of Rachel Mica Weiss, *The Wild Within*, 2020, cast concrete, pigment, powder coated steel, quarried obsidian, 78 x 124 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the Artist. Photographs by Julia Featheringill Photography.

## PLATFORM 27 Rachel Mica Weiss: *The Wild Within*

### Slipping from Nightmare into Fantasy

A twisted concrete slab evokes a recumbent human figure, lifting its torso and bending at the knees, while fiery splashes of pink, black, and orange suggest a geological event. An obsidian stone rides the wave, as if thrown back into the lava from which it formed. Commissioned for deCordova's Sculpture Park, *The Wild Within* emerged from Rachel Mica Weiss's fascination with historical representations of women by male artists. Weiss responds here specifically to Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* (1781), which has puzzled viewers ever since its debut at the Royal Academy of London (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> A woman in a white nightgown occupies much of the painting, her toe pointed, arms flung overhead, eyes closed, and mouth ajar. An imp crouches on her stomach while a literal "night mare" pokes its head through some red drapery. The painting gives form to an interpretation of nightmares from the Middle Ages according to which an incubus, or small demon personifying unwanted dreams, descends upon people in their sleep, particularly women.<sup>2</sup>

Through Weiss's innovative and laborious process of casting concrete, she abstracts Fuseli's composition into a sinuous rectangle and renders the incubus as a rock, recalling the



Fig. 1: Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas, 40  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 50  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 13  $\frac{1}{16}$  inches (unframed). Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Bert L. Smokler and Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence A. Fleischman, 55.5.A.

holed stones used to ward off nightmares and witches during sleep. While Fuseli depicted a passive woman splayed on her bed, Weiss's variation on the theme wraps and caresses the dream.

Weiss's project of imbuing this figure with the agency it was previously denied finds a parallel in Paul Tran's 2018 poem, "The Nightmare: Oil on Canvas, Henry Fuseli, 1781:"

Too hot to  
rest, I toss  
my arms off  
the bed. My night-  
gown wet with  
sweat. I feel you  
— a sack of  
scavenged skulls  
on my chest  
— sipping  
the salt from  
my breasts. Imp.  
Incubus. Im-  
pulse. You and  
me like a mare  
that must be  
broken in  
by breaking in-  
to. Tamed is  
how fire is

by giving itself  
something to destroy:  
it destroys it-  
self. But who  
can deter-  
mine what's inside  
another?  
What is risked  
When we enter ...  
Caliper. Forceps.  
Scalpel. Oculus.  
Perhaps you're  
the wilderness  
that waits with-  
in me. Perhaps an  
other mystery, I  
open beneath  
you. Yoked. Harnessed.  
Paralyzed.  
At once a-  
wake and a-  
sleep. I nay.  
I knock  
over the kerosene  
lamp. Light of

the rational  
mind snuffed. Shadow  
of shadows.  
Because I can't  
see, I sense.  
Your thumb  
thrumming  
my mouth. A  
command. Arch-  
angel. Vision  
of invasion.  
Insemination.  
My horse  
heart beating  
with yours.<sup>3</sup>

Tran expresses a world of physical pleasure and psychological sensation—answering the demon's perverted glare with a fantasy of their own, overriding Fuseli's malevolent scenario with one of reciprocal action. Tran's dream informs their reality through feelings rather than vision: "Because I can't / see, I sense." Like Fuseli and Tran, Weiss invites her viewers into an allegorical space,



distilling a psychologically loaded concept into elemental forms: steel prism, concrete slab, and jagged rock.

### Bending Concrete to Her Will

Weiss's casting process entails physical force, meticulous engineering, and a degree of chance. Weiss refers to her concrete slabs as "Folds," each taking on an emphatic mood and posture: slouching, panting, leaning, and other contortions (Fig. 2). In emulating the pose and proportions of Weiss's body, they could be considered self-portraits, but they remain abstract enough to invite a range of associations.

At ten feet in length, *The Wild Within* is Weiss's largest Fold to date. She worked with a filmic special effects team to construct a rectangular urethane mold and an undulating structure to support it. After packing the mold with two thousand pounds of wet, pigmented concrete, she enlisted foam blocks, wooden scraps, and ratchet straps to force the piece into its final position, leaving her and her assistants sore for days (Fig. 3). After de-molding, Weiss spent hours sanding away shards and clumps to achieve a marbled finish. By reworking her materials into barely recognizable forms and displaying them on semi-reflective steel plinths, Weiss makes a boulder and hulking slab of concrete appear to float, as if the nightmare

is levitating or magnetically repelled, rather than crouching menacingly.



Fig. 2: Rachel Mica Weiss, *The Exchange*, 2018, cast concrete, marble, pigment, 60 × 70 × 13 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph by Paula Abreu Pita.

Weiss's interest in the psychology of perception and her marriage of industrial fabrication with artisanal craft echo Minimalist and Post-Minimalist precursors such as Eva Hesse and Richard Serra. *The Wild Within* rewards viewers for circling it and noticing their body in relation to the sculpture's heft and the towering trees that frame it. Weiss veers away from total abstraction, however, folding in subtle revisions to the gendered history of representation.



Fig. 3: Rachel Mica Weiss applying pigment to the urethane master mold in the studio of Visionary Effects, Pittsburgh, 2020. Courtesy of the Artist.

### Sensuous Sculpture without Sexualization

It is hard to find examples of nude figurative sculpture in any period that are not idealized and sexualized. Art historian Alex Potts emphasizes, “An ideal nude, whatever its gender, was required at some level to be sensually beautiful. It had to exploit the

sensual charge of the naked body.”<sup>4</sup> This is especially true for representations of women by male artists. But what if sculpture could exploit that sensual charge without a clearly defined nude body? The formal elegance of *The Wild Within* plays into conventions of sculptural beauty, from balanced composition to immaculate surfaces. Unlike Fuseli’s painting, however, it denies the viewer an anatomically recognizable body. It engenders a type of desire that is aesthetic rather than erotic.

Weiss studied numerous examples of male artists depicting women as captive and available, including the nineteenth-century orientalist fantasy of the odalisque, representing a harem sex worker. In response to the custom of male painters and sculptors sexualizing their sitters’ bodies, Weiss obscured potential triggers of sexual desire, such as a defined crotch or breasts. The pronounced abdomens and breasts on sculptures of reclining women by modernists such as Henry Moore contrast sharply with the absence of sexed body parts in *The Wild Within* (Fig. 4).

Weiss’s sculpture offers a bold alternative to such precursors as she revises historical codes of gendered representation even while partly working within them. “We can’t change the past,” she says, “but if I can rescue any of the women sitters from the power dynamics of modeling for a male artist alone



**Fig. 4:** Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure: Right Angles*, 1981, bronze, overall:  $4\frac{7}{8} \times 7\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts, Gift of Jeffrey H. Loria in honor of Julie Lavin (Class of 1986). Photograph by Laura Shea, 2005.23.3 © The Henry Moore Foundation. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2020 / [www.henry-moore.org](http://www.henry-moore.org)

in his studio, and return some of her strength to her through a sculpture, I will."<sup>5</sup> After spending time with *The Wild Within*, previous associations one may have held with concrete, steel, and masculinity, or suggestive posing and femininity, start to

seem arbitrary and ideological. Weiss's sculpture reworks the cultural signifiers of gender, offering instead a fresh slate for dreams of a fluid and emancipated reality.

Sam Adams, Koch Curatorial Fellow

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1: Swiss-born British painter Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) was among the most celebrated artists in London from 1777, when he first exhibited at the Royal Academy, until his death in 1825. *The Nightmare* was an immediate sensation upon its showing in 1782 with reproductions circulating internationally, including one that Sigmund Freud kept in his Vienna office. See *Andrei Pop, Antiquity, Theatre, and the Painting of Henry Fuseli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 86.
- 2: See John Moffitt, "A Pictorial Counterpart to 'Gothick' Literature: Fuseli's *The Nightmare*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 35.1 (March 2002): 173-196.
- 3: Paul Tran's "The Nightmare: Oil on Canvas, Henry Fuseli, 1781" published in *Poetry* 213.3 (December 2018): 291-292, is reprinted here with Tran's permission. The sculpture's title, *The Wild Within*, is an adaptation of the line, "Perhaps you're / the wilderness / that waits with- / in me."
- 4: Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 114.
- 5: Conversation with the artist, May 28, 2020.

## BIOGRAPHY

Rachel Mica Weiss (b. 1986 in Rockville, Maryland) is based in Brooklyn, NY and Pittsburgh, PA. She earned a BA in psychology from Oberlin College in 2008 and an MFA in sculpture from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2012, with additional studies at Village des Arts in Dakar, Senegal, Maryland Institute College of Art, and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, ME. Weiss has created public artworks for the US Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Airbnb, Seattle, WA; and The Pittsburgh International Airport, among other venues. Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA; Lux Art Institute, San Diego, CA; LMAK Gallery, New York, NY; Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA; Fridman Gallery, New York, NY; and the San Francisco Arts Commission, San Francisco, CA.

## RELATED PROGRAMMING

deCordova Live: A Lunchtime Conversation with Rachel Mica Weiss  
Thursday, July 23, 12-1 pm

Join remotely as Weiss discusses what went into making *The Wild Within* and responds to questions from the audience. Registration required for Zoom link.

## PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova's unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary sculpture.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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51 Sandy Pond Road  
Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773  
781.259.8355 | [decordova.org](http://decordova.org)