



DANIEL ARSHAM
**REMEMBER THE
FUTURE**

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There is an assertive, almost intractable immediacy to the work of Daniel Arsham. It arrests our eyes and confronts our bodies through an array of lifelike forms, elemental materials and architectural interventions. His objects, figures and engineering oddities push into what is purportedly "our" space; implicitly, but insistently demanding attention – even as their intention remains comparatively unclear. And yet it is in this engagement, in the acceptance of Arsham's demure invitation offered in and through his work, that a visceral absence asserts itself as strongly as that which is physically present. Take as an example *Hooded Figure* (2015), where only half of the title's suggested content stands before us. A potent synthesis of 'there' and 'not there' animates this mysteriously draped figure as it stretches the skin of the gallery space – returning the body in/to the otherwise clean geometry of these white walls. And just like the Invisible Man is revealed in movies by tossing a blanket over his elusive body, our cognition of Arsham's cloaked forms

pivots upon the imaginary insertion of the missing body into this visual equation. These ghostly abstractions assume meaning because we sense, rather than see the person they conceal. In turn, the theatrical drapery expands our interpretation of this figure in time, thickening the present with concurrent evocations of both future and past. Pooling fabric and dramatic folds span multiple narratives at once – suggesting a shroud and life lost, at the same time they speak to the fervent anticipation that accompanies a cloaked prize, grandly revealed in a flash of showmanship and spectacle. At this nexus – where both

histories and hunches congregate behind Arsham's veil of suggestion – the artist gives ghosts an unnerving, but ultimately insightful footprint.

From natural disasters to race riots, the aftermath of most life-altering events lingers exponentially longer than the event itself – seeping deep into the intangible tissue known as trauma and trace. In a now well-known flashpoint of Arsham's personal history, we learn that as a child he and his family barely survived Hurricane Andrew as the storm ripped through their Miami home in 1992. Huddled in a closet



Above: Daniel Arsham, *Hollow Figure*, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.

as walls collapsed, windows shattered and insulation swirled like mist, he remembers, "The experience was one of architectural dismemberment – it was quick and violent." And while Arsham is wary of positioning this event as the sole foundation of his structure-bending practice, the wreckage he experienced fundamentally altered the perceived solidity of both the buildings and bodies we live.

Decades later, deep into the evolving legacy of this formative – but now absent moment, he fashions an ongoing series of full-body self-portraits out of crushed glass and marble. Seeking to overcome inherent frailties, fault lines and scars as matter-turned-metaphor, "The glass is really about taking this broken useless material," in the words of Arsham, "and reforming it back into something that has intention and purpose." His ensuing avatars are more meditative than monumental, standing ponderous and bewildered as if they had just emerged from hibernation. They have been made whole and hefty but lack the

corresponding footing – searching for orientation as their plight propels them back to an archetypal quest for the fugitive condition we call reality.

Arsham has playfully described himself as a scientist and pseudo-archaeologist, but his continued production of these pensive surrogates speaks to a philosophical dialogue with the Greek philosopher Plato and his timeless quest for truth. Plato expressed this pursuit in especially visual terms in the now iconic Allegory of the Cave, which describes the perceptual manipulation of woeful captives imprisoned beneath the earth's crust. First told in his seminal treatise, *The Republic* (380 BC), we learn of people who have spent their entire lives in physical and psychological chains: watching the shadows cast from objects parading behind, believing these phantoms to be reality. When one prisoner breaks free and makes his way to the surface, he is blinded by the sun and overcome with a world newly discovered – seeing truth for the first time, but struggling to apprehend its implications. For Plato this was the jagged, but necessary path to



enlightenment: liberating the body from purely sensory perception to embrace the greater truth that can reside only in the mind.

Arsham's figures embody multiple stages of this luminous disorientation, shielding their eyes, gazes averted, exhausted and restless, lost in thought as manifestations of the artist's mind. He encases himself in plaster for 4-5 hours at a time to fashion the molds for these figures, evoking the suffocating darkness and restraints endured by those deep inside the cave. In another twist of Platonic alignment, Arsham himself is almost entirely color blind – turning the absence of chroma in his eyes into a journey across the spectrum of shadow to light. And yet it is in the dawn of the present, in an era where digital shadows have become our presiding "reality" and materiality grows endangered, that Arsham makes a pronounced adjustment to Plato's ideals. His reconstituted figures are less illusory apparitions than touchstones to a physical existence that continues to recede as we advance towards a cloud-based future. These figures are one with shattered glass, geological materials and – as we will now discuss – aging media objects, not as nostalgic soothers, but as catalysts for the 21st century mind to travel backwards and forwards at once.

Ruins and artifacts are the portrait of a past way of life – enduring as evidence of the way mankind shaped apparatuses, and the ways they in turn, shaped us. Over the past year, Arsham and his studio have turned a variety of modern cultural objects – with obsolescence built into their DNA – into crumbling relics "preserved like petrified wood or the figures of Pompeii." From phones, cameras, microphones and VHS tapes to film projectors, tires, keyboards and boomboxes he has produced close to 3,000 calcified effigies of the 20th and

Far Left: Daniel Arsham, *Volcanic Ash Eroded Jetfighter Helmet*, 2015. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.

Left: Daniel Arsham, *Seated Figure*, 2015. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.



Above: Daniel Arsham, *Welcome to the Future*, 2014-2015. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.

21st centuries from earthly substances like volcanic ash, obsidian, carbon dust and rose quartz. And while their accompanying presentation as an archaeological dig may seem slightly premature, there is no question that the physical object has been increasingly cast as abject and that which must be surpassed in the name of progress. Cloud-based technologies, streaming media, virtual identities, e-books, experience economies and the post-nation citizen collectively advance a dematerialized future where the real grows increasingly ethereal. Facing this intangible, but rapidly approaching horizon, Arsham's swelling time capsule takes on the ostensible guise of resistance: obsessively copying (and re-copying) contemporary devices with elemental dust to forge a sanctuary of solid ground.

Is this sublimation of the industrial-media age akin to the way the prisoners of Plato's Cave cavort with shadows, content in their ignorance and complacency? A retreat into the bedrock of earthly matter and the comforts of pop culture would be understandable, but Arsham explains, "I approach projects and spaces in a way that I try not to add anything to them, but instead take

something we already know and make it do something that it shouldn't . . . Remake or reform it, giving it new purpose and possibility." In so doing, he highlights the crucial element of transformation in this casting and collection process - retaining the visual resemblance of flip phones and footballs but stripping them of utility. These objects no longer function as they were originally intended, but as their societal value erodes their currency is reconstituted as these aging pariahs are cast - literally and figuratively - as catalysts of the mind; as the light beyond the Cave. With present purpose evacuated, these nascent relics evoke memories of past uses and projections of what will take their place in the days ahead. Their position in the here and now is nothing more than tentative at best. As such, in this fertile absence that returns Arsham's aforementioned veiled figures to the conversation, the present becomes an open question to ponder and populate. And like his entropic treatment of architecture and its absolutes, this present is never static or stable - providing just enough footing to climb towards the brightness.

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DANIEL ARSHAM

Remember the Future

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Cover: Daniel Arsham, *Standing Figure with Hands Up* (detail), 2015. Courtesy of the Burger Collection Hong Kong.

Inside Front Cover: Daniel Arsham, *Hooded Figure*, 2015. Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.

Inside Back Cover: Daniel Arsham, *Welcome to the Future*, 2014-2015 (detail). Courtesy of the Artist and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.

New York based artist **Daniel Arsham's** multidisciplinary practice challenges the line between art, architecture and performance. Raised in Miami, Arsham attended the Cooper Union in New York City where he received the Gelman Trust Fellowship Award in 2003.

Soon thereafter he was invited to create stage design and tour with legendary choreographer Merce Cunningham's Dance Company leading to ongoing stage design practice and a sustained collaboration with choreographer and former Cunningham dancer, Jonah Boaker.

Arsham founded *Snarkitecture* with partner Alex Mustonen in 2007. This architecture collaboration has included work with fashion brands, interior and architectural design, and a complete line of functional design objects.

In 2014 Arsham's, *Films of the Future* was born. This production company synthesizes all of Arsham's creative output over the last decade and creates a visual setting in which his otherworldly and futuristic artwork might exist.

Arsham's work has been shown at PS1 in New York, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, The Athens Biennale in Athens, Greece, The New Museum In New York, Mills College Art Museum in Oakland, California and Carré d'Art de Nîmes, France among others.