Liz Glynn’s work is engaged with the relationship between objects and narratives and how these narratives reflect politics and power dynamics. She studies the material cultures of the past to consider the ways in which objects embody, preserve, or challenge values and social systems, and she focuses on material artifacts to emphasize the fragmentary nature of our historical narratives. Thus, sculpture for Glynn is a mode of cultural production that always occurs within a historical, political, and social context. More so than most contemporary sculpture, one is inclined to think of Glynn’s objects as artifacts in the way that they embody or reflect the conditions in which they are made. They exist as products of her labor, but also as prompts and sometimes even as touchstones. They reference history and mimic historical artifacts, yet, through their humble materials and imperfect artisanship, question their own authenticity and ultimately the narratives that they denote.

The historical referent for RANSOM ROOM is the Inca emperor Atahualpa’s attempt to persuade the conquistador Francisco Pizarro to spare him by offering roomfuls of gold and silver.1 When the show opened at SculptureCenter, visitors found the ground-floor rear gallery resized to become a 17-by-22-foot stucco room staged as a storied palace in Cuzco, with a replica of a fountain, stucco corn stalks punctuated with golden maize, and walls lined with golden wax panels. Over several weeks, wax objects coated in mica—vessels, cups, plates—accumulated, having been cast and hand-carried by the artist in plastic granny bags from various studio locations in New York until the room was filled. During the final week of the exhibition, the collected objects were melted down into ingots that were then displayed on pallets.

RANSOM ROOM succeeds a series of previous works by the artist that consider how and why objects accrue value, what types of value an object holds, and the ways in which history, ritual, politics, and human nature shape and modify the meaning and assessment of an object or artifact. In the information age, where exchange value is represented by zeros and ones and is only sometimes tethered to the physical world, Glynn consistently returns to materials and their transmutation to consider human history and behavior.

Reproduction and reconstruction are recurrent themes in Glynn’s projects. In fact, RANSOM ROOM is not the first time Glynn has created surrogates for historical artifacts. For No Second Troy, 2012, she made two copies of a nineteenth-century collection of artifacts known as the Gold of Troy—one of recycled trash and the other of gold-plated bronze and copper. The collection she reproduced had come to light in the 1870s, when Heinrich Schliemann, an entrepreneur turned amateur archaeologist, claimed to have discovered the lost treasure of Homer’s King Priam of Troy. Schliemann smuggled his find out of Anatolia (now Turkey) and subsequently sold most of the collection to the Royal Museums of Berlin. Though the Germans hid the collection during World War II in a flak tower inside the Berlin Zoological Gardens, in 1945 it was discovered and plundered by the Soviet Army.2 The artifacts, which subsequent study revealed to predate Schliemann’s estimate by several hundred years, now
The Undercover Man

Rossella Biscotti: question the show raises, however, is whether replicas diminished the aura of the original or enhanced its value.

A recent exhibition of ancient sculpture titled *Serial Classic* (2015), held at the newly opened Fondazione Prada in Milan, probed the notion of the unique original and its significance. The curators argue that we misunderstand classical Greek sculptures when we think of them as original masterpieces, valued for their artistic genius, and of Roman copies as their imitations. Rather, Greek sculptures were functional and symbolic objects meant to celebrate the values of the culture, specifically the self-governed polis. By the classical period, cast bronze had become a favored material, and, of course, casting allows for multiple copies. There is evidence that there were multiple copies, or versions, of some of the best-known Greek “originals.” Perhaps the most interesting question the show raises, however, is whether replicas diminished the aura of the original or enhanced its value through simulation and ubiquity. The Fondazione Prada seems a particularly apt place to consider this idea, as luxury brands trade on a simultaneous scarcity and pervasiveness within certain social formations. Do imitation Canal Street watches devalue the highly crafted version or make it all the more desirable?

Not coincidentally, Glynn used modest plastic granny bags to carry her ransom from the casting sites to the gallery, by subway and on foot. These are the ubiquitous bags one sees in Chinatown or at tourist locations, most often used by elderly people to transport provisions or by street vendors selling counterfeit handbags. This is a far cry from the art handlers’ archival bubble wrap and wooden crates. When and how does an object warrant such handling? Which of the items that surround us will be preserved to tell a story?

These are important questions for the history of sculpture. As the vast majority of Greek sculptures were later melted down for their bronze, Roman copies preserved the legacy of the lost originals; in fact, the history of ancient Western sculpture is based on what we know from copies rather than originals. In 2014, Glynn explored the line between counterfeiting and copying-as-conservation in a performance at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) titled *The Myth of Permanent Material. Part of a performance series Glynn conceived in response to monumental sculptures in LACMA’s collection, The Myth of Permanent Material* put forward the possibility of refabricating a 1977 concrete sculpture by Donald Judd that has deteriorated. Glynn and her assistants constructed plywood forms and hired a concrete truck to stand by as she read excerpts from the museum’s archive that document staff deliberations on the work’s preservation. Refabrication would involve destruction of the original. What would be lost in that act of “conservation” and what would be gained, since the deterioration would begin again?

In the earlier *California Surrogates for the Getty*, 2010, Glynn also made copies—using trash and common found materials—of classical objects that the Getty Museum had repatriated to Italy. The imperfection of Glynn’s surrogates mirrors the fallacy of our efforts to preserve and conserve these ancient objects. Whose hands have touched these objects? What interventions account for their current existence, and how do we account for these in our histories?

The fact that Glynn makes her objects by hand is not so much about a privileging of craft as an attempt to foreground the way in which history is made and embodied within the material objects we value. Casting is an apt choice for Glynn, as it is practically and historically a method to produce multiple copies of the same object; sculpture wax, which evaporates in the lost-wax method, has an indexical relationship to metal, such as the bronze of sculptural monuments or the gold of cups and vessels. Bronze and gold have retained value as material over time and across cultures, but the objects are multivalent and their value is culturally relative. Gold and other precious metals were used as commodities beginning thousands of years ago in Asia Minor, and the gold standard is the most obvious and enduring example of the exchange value of a precious metal. Yet Glynn’s project reminds us that the gold ingots distributed among Pizarro’s men and sent back to Spain as capital have no story to tell us. There is no longer any symbolic or historical value in the objects: the history of the Inca empire was essentially lost to us in the melting of the ransom.

By laboriously recreating the beautiful if clunky Inca objects and then destroying them, Glynn repeats the cultural erasure. It seems incredible that she could spend months making these objects only to turn them all into rectangular bars of gold-streaked red wax: even her father was not permitted to take home a gold panel or cup as a keepsake. But Glynn was committed to the total destruction of the material as artful or meticulously crafted forms. In her replication and transformation of artifacts, Glynn connects the rapacious destruction of objects with the obliteration of an entire social and cultural structure. What we know of history is only what is left to us as material evidence—original, copied, or counterfeit.

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1 There is much debate about the specifics of this story and whether Atahualpa was ransoming his own life or freedom for his people. This uncertainty and the unreliability of historical narrative is something Glynn returns to regularly in her work.

2 About the German customs’ judgment, Liz Glynn writes: “Reportedly, the curator watched soldiers carry off the box containing the Gold, but as Berlin had just fallen and continued to smolder, he thought the artifacts might be safer with the victors.” Note to the author, September 22, 2015.

3 *Serial Classic, Fondazione Prada, May 9–August 24, 2015, co-curated by Salvatore Settis and Anna Anguissola.*

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*notes*
Liz Glynn: RANSOM ROOM

Caption TK
It takes a lot of work to create cultural materials. It takes another kind of effort to hold them constant over time. Different kinds of physical labor and social performance become entangled, and these entanglements are then reinforced through repetition. Why recall, recast, and reenact history? Wielding the metaphorical power of gestures turns history into material, while matter is rendered in motion.

Any attempt to reconfigure the relationship between matter and meaning involves some degree of loss, often obliteration, as Liz Glynn’s RANSOM ROOM attests. For this enactment of the construction and destruction of history, Glynn recreated a sixteenth-century encounter between two empires, the Spanish and the Inca. With the help of extra hands provided by the team at SculptureCenter, she resized a gallery to the reported dimensions of the room that the Inca emperor Atahualpa offered to fill once with gold and twice with silver in order to save his life and secure his release from the Spaniards.1 The walls, the floor, the fountain, and the low platform in the center of the Ransom Room were finished with a sandy stucco that recalls the color of the room as it stands today in Peru.

Over the course of the exhibition, Glynn moved objects in and out of the room: casting, carrying, dumping, piling, melting (and thus destroying), recasting, numbering, and stacking a series of cast forms made of red sculpture wax coated with gold mica powder.

The objects that Glynn cast first were gold wax wall panels and corn stalks complete with golden ears. The corn was on display for the opening, quickly removed, and later melted and destroyed. The panels were hung on the walls of the room. A couple slipped and tilted off the wall. They were taken down and added to the ransom pile. Later, all of the panels were melted and destroyed. Glynn spent four weeks casting wax objects at different locations around New York City. At the end of each day, she stuffed goblets, shields, cups, and other gold-coated vessels into reusable plaid plastic bags and hauled them across the boroughs to SculptureCenter, reperforming and echoing the futility of the massive Inca endeavor to muster gold and silver from every corner of the empire to meet the Spanish crown’s demand for an endless supply of precious metals.

During the final week of the exhibition, the panels, corn, and ransom were all melted and transformed into ingots. A minimal wooden structure covered with a tarp was erected in the SculptureCenter courtyard, where Glynn now stepped into the shoes of the Spaniards, who, before the whole ransom was ever assembled, began melting the array of Inca objects to form regular ingots that could be quantified, distributed, and shipped efficiently back to Spain. Visitors to SculptureCenter were able to watch Glynn methodically carrying the contents of the room out to the courtyard, load by load. She broke the gold wax objects into pieces, put them in the melting pots, and poured them into molds to make gold bars, or ingots. The thin coating of gold mica powder shifted the color of the red sculpture wax, and settled differently in each pour, making the ingots various shades of earthy red and brown. She then numbered the ingots, stamped them with “RR” for “Ransom Room,” carried them back to
the exhibition space, and neatly assembled them on the low center platform. At the end of the exhibition, these regular stacks of ingots/wax bars were all that remained.

I have named all of the gestures and forms that constituted this exhibition because this catalogue is one of the few locations in which to gather them together. Glynn designed the exhibition to emphasize the instability of objects, and so, over the course of two months, the room was continually changing. Another way to describe this process is that Glynn enacted many verbs in order to make and unmake a series of nouns.

Depending on the day and time, visitors may have glimpsed the verbs—Glynn dropping off a load of casting or casting ingots in the courtyard—but they are more likely to have encountered just the nouns—the comfortably resting objects. Those who came to the opening and the closing reception would have missed the ransom altogether. For anyone who visited the exhibition more than once, there was a kind of stop-motion effect that imparted a sense of history in progress and reflected the great amount of effort expended by the artist. Although the evidence of labor—the heap of actions—was only peripherally present, they were palpable in their excess, offering up the suggestion that our objects may only be temporarily settled verbs. Forms remain stable only as long as relations are occurring: storing, securing, holding, maintaining, repairing, caring. The many transformations of material and cultural forms over the course of the exhibition imparted a sense of the general instability of our forms and of the critical role that our actions play both in transforming them and, just as importantly, in holding them still.

Glynn’s choice of materials reinforces her choice of actions, stressing the role of loss and destruction in the process of making sculpture, or any other object. The objects in the exhibition were all made of the sculpture wax that is used for lost-wax casting, a process traditionally employed to produce a metal sculpture from a mold. As the name suggests, in this process the wax positive is destroyed and the wax lost. It burns away when the ceramic shell (the final negative mold) is hardened in the kiln. But for Ransom Room, Glynn inverted what gets lost and what remains. The material—the wax—became the constant, while the forms—the sculptures—were destroyed. At the opening, upon entering the gold-paneled room and walking around the stand of golden corn on the central platform, viewers were audibly wowed. The room appeared as a static image: a myth conjured up from scraps of history. But this impression was not to last. Patches of red sculpture wax peeking through the gold mica coating in unpredictable places quickly revealed the objects to be imprecise and overtly un-precious: imperfect objects, like broken tools, that continually insisted that they were artificially manufactured rather than pure metal. While the cumulative effect of the room was spectacular, the objects themselves refused to be, deflecting attention back to both the manual and intellectual labor of the artist. At the closing reception, the room had been drained of spectacle. The walls’ sandy stucco surfaces were left studded with pins, marking where panels had so recently hung. Of the vast piles of golden objects, all that remained were chips of red wax and gold flakes scattered across the floor. The low platform in the center of the room held a neat stack of brown wax ingots.

One of the most important things that the combination of materials and actions makes apparent is the tremendous amount of effort which goes into rendering both cultures and materials “raw,” and thus “fair game”; fodder for commodification, colonization—the next empire’s delusions of grandeur. The combination calls on us to attend to what exactly gets lost, destroyed, and forgotten in the process of production, and why. In choosing to recast this encounter between the Spaniards and the Inca, when ritual objects were transformed into currency, Glynn prompts us to think about the destruction that undergirds the foundations of financial capital. In this case, the capital of the Spanish empire was quite literally created through the destruction of the wealth of objects employed in Inca spiritual and ritual practice. Gold carried different types of meaning and value in each culture. For the Inca, it held deep ritual value and was not used for transactions. They had a barter economy based on the trade of agricultural stuffs for human labor. For the Spaniards, gold was currency. It was capital. And the Spanish crown had issued explicit orders that the conquistadores were to amass as much as possible.

The drive to accumulate is a destructive one, and part of what often gets destroyed is the understanding that history is never a purely cumulative process. It necessarily involves destruction, loss, forgetting, disappearing—in large volumes. Historians of science Londa Schiebinger and Robert Proctor call for the study of cultural ignorance. The point of redirecting scholarship from epistemology to what they dub “gnotology” is to reframe “questions about how we know” to include questions about what we do not know, and why that is the case: “ignorance is often not merely the absence of knowledge, but an outcome of cultural and political struggle.”

Schiebinger focuses specifically on instances of the “nontransfer of important bodies of knowledge from the New World into Europe.” The destruction of the Inca civilization, represented in the capture, ransom, and execution of Atahualpa, is a case in point. Almost no record remains of the Inca empire. The Spaniards did not care to learn the workings of a system of knowledge based on a set of relationships between matter and meaning that differed from their own. They shipped massive quantities of gold to Spain from the New World, where it was used to pay debts and fund religious wars. Renaissance Europe was suddenly awash with a renewed enthusiasm for this brilliant metal. Europeans moved the material, and left the meanings behind.

Why focus on this particular historical narrative in the context of contemporary sculpture and performance today? What Glynn made and destroyed were sculptures that had both cultural and commercial value. We long for the objects that have been destroyed. One of the purposes of the exhibition is to produce this longing. What remains are different sculptures that have distinct yet related cultural and commercial value. The remaining sculptures take the form of gold ingots. Making gold into currency is not a more rational act than making it into a ritual object. Currency is perhaps one of the strangest and most social objects of all since exchange value depends entirely on a collective social agreement. During the Renaissance, gold made for good currency in part because its reliable ritual value provided a foundation for its transactional value.

Of course, Glynn’s objects are not ingots. In another inversion, the final sculptures have more in common with the Inca objects that the Spaniards melted down than they do with the ingots that they formally represent. They are art objects, and a great deal of work, care, and capital went into enabling their production. More will go into ensuring that they both hold their form and occupy their intended place. The stacks of ingots will cycle through carefully climate-controlled spaces as they are packed, shipped, stored, sold, dispersed, displayed, and stored again. As they travel, these residual objects foreshadow their future destruction and enchant us to imagine other hierarchies of value that might ultimately alter their fate.

The room thought to be the Ransom Room is on Peru’s tentative World Heritage Site list, and the height to which Atahualpa was said to have offered to fill it is marked on the wall. But there is some uncertainty among archaeologists and historians regarding whether this was the Ransom Room itself or just one in the scale of rooms where Atahualpa was held. As it often goes with history, chronicles at the time reported different dimensions for the room. Glynn followed a contemporary translation from Paúl’s secretary, Francisco de Xares, which is footnoted to indicate where Xares deviates from what is thought to have happened. Glynn is interested in teasing out what we can and cannot know from historical accounts, arguing that not only the established “facts” but also the gaps reflect political agendas.


3. Ibid.
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Caption TK
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