

When Is an Artwork Finished?

For some artists, a work is done when it leaves the studio. Others keep tinkering in the galleries. One waits for the piece to “cry uncle”

BY ANN LANDI

In 19th-century England, Varnishing Day was traditionally the time when artists arrived at an exhibition to put the finishing touches on their works and seal them with a coat of varnish. In the winter of 1835, J. M. W. Turner famously arrived at one such event, where he proceeded to squeeze lumps of color onto a half-finished canvas and, according to various accounts, work without a break, using his fingers and a palette knife to coax the surface to life. In the end, the painting Turner produced was one of two versions depicting the burning of the Houses of Parliament a few months earlier. It was a bravura performance in which



Emilio Perez with his painting *All I Can Say*, 2011. “Part of being able to know when you’re finished is not putting too much pressure on yourself,” the artist says. “If you mess it up, you can always make another one.”



***Mirage*, 2012, by Mona Kuhn, who compares the completion of a photographic series to giving birth.**

COURTESY FLOWERS GALLERY, NEW YORK AND LONDON

the artist seemed utterly possessed as bystanders looked on in amusement and surprise. After a few hours, the artist packed up his paints and left without saying a word. As one contemporary reportedly commented, “He knows when it is done, and he is off.”

For Turner, the question of when a work of art was finished was evidently an easy one, as it is for a handful of artists today. But others—working in an array of mediums—find the issue of completion more complicated. Choosing when to stop altering a piece can be a highly individual decision, as idiosyncratic and personal as style, and there are instances in

which a work is never fully done, at least in its creator’s mind.

Some say it’s a matter of physical removal. “For me, once the piece has left the studio, then I consider it finished,” says Mark Sheinkman, who uses a process of erasure to make large-scale, virtuosic paintings and drawings, which he shows at Von Lintel Gallery. “If the work is returned to me, unsold or for whatever reason, then I feel free to make changes. Once it’s gone out into the world, I don’t.”

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Often the sense of completion is a purely intuitive one. “I always liken it to a conversation,” says Emilio Perez, whose paintings are similarly made through a process of subtraction, in which he cuts into the canvas to expose layers of color. “And like every conversation, if it’s a good one, it ends in a natural way—I have this very intuitive sense that I’ve finished something. Part of being able to know when you’re finished is not putting too much pressure on yourself,” adds Perez, who was the focus of a solo exhibition at New York’s Galerie Lelong last month. “If you mess it up, you can always make another one.”

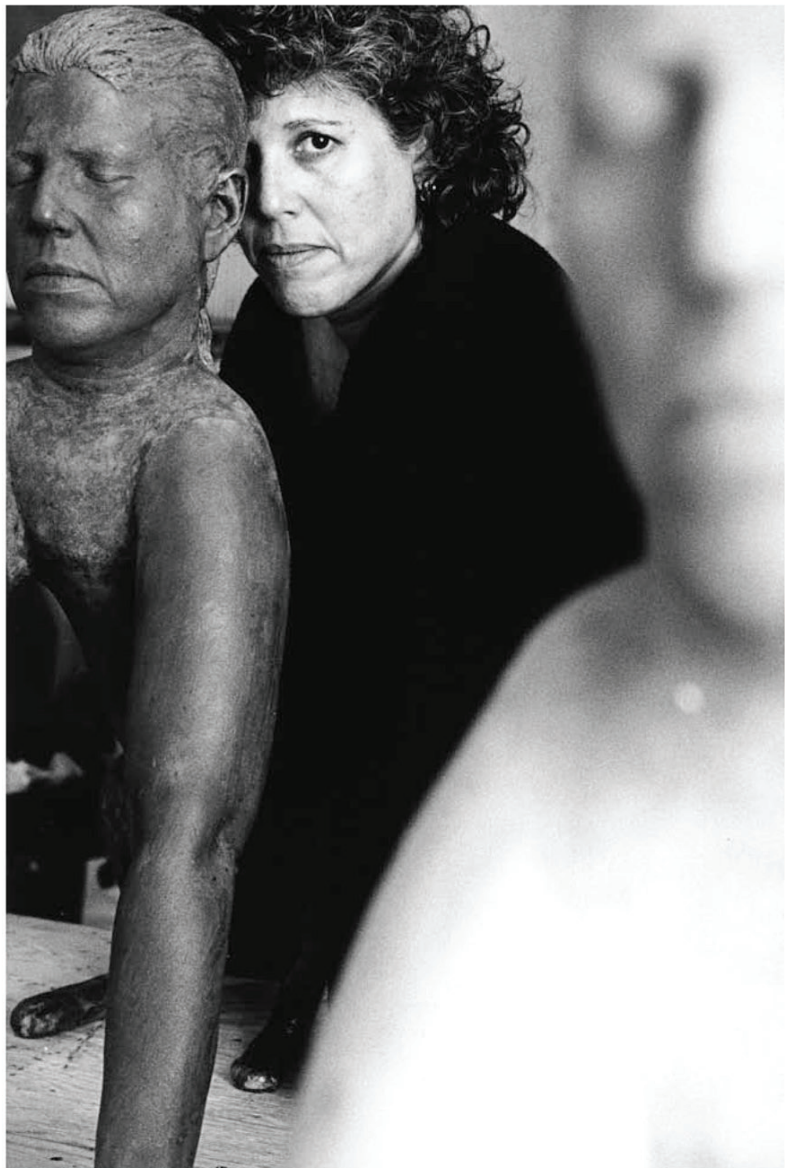
Mona Kuhn, represented by Flowers Gallery in London and New York, often bases her nude photographs on a place (such as Venice or Bordeaux), and a series can evolve over several years. She likens a project’s completion to childbirth: “When you feel that you are ready, you want to separate from it. You can’t take it anymore, and you have to push it out. And once it’s out, it takes on a life of its own.”

An almost biological, or at least psychic, connection also informs Rosemarie Castoro’s relationship with her art, which she shows at Galerie Arnaud Lefebvre in Paris and Hal Bromm Gallery in New York. Castoro says that “Flashers,” a group of sculptures from 1979, “were done when they cried ‘uncle!’ They actually said, ‘I’m alive, I give up.’ They spoke to me and told me to go away. That was an anthropomorphic moment, and it happens an awful lot, automatically, when a piece is done—it just happens.”

For some artists, though, many

years can pass before a work seems ready to leave the studio. “My output is incredibly small because I work and re-work my sculptures endlessly,” says Rona Pondick, who had an exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery in New York last spring after a seven-year hiatus. “It can be five, ten, or even more years before I think something is finished. Right now, I have 15 or so pieces in my studio at different stages of development. I may revisit one six months later because I’m at a point where I really can’t see it anymore and I want to stop being engaged with it on a daily basis.”

As an example, Pondick cites a sculpture called *Dog*, the first from her “Animal/Human Hybrids” series. After making it twice in wax, the artist cast it in aluminum and bronze. Not satisfied with the results, she made a mold from the figure and cast it again in yellow stainless steel, which still didn’t meet her



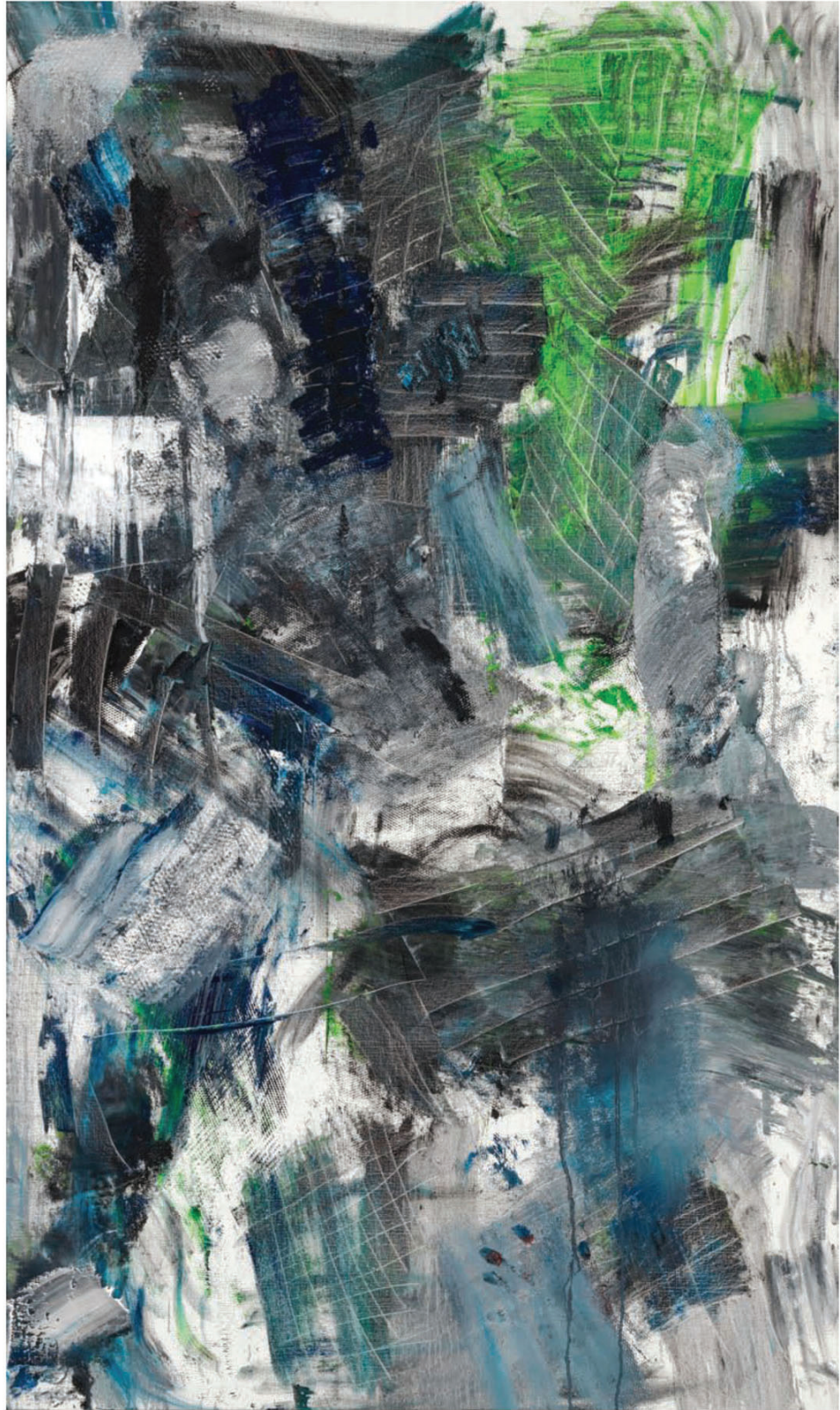
Rona Pondick with two in-progress versions of *Dog*, 1998–99.

requirements. “I cut out the part I wasn’t happy with and then remade that section and made the piece again until I finally had it the way I wanted it. This spanned maybe five or six years,” she confesses, “with my revisiting the work over and over again.”

Pondick’s standards of perfection in part stem from her labor-intensive techniques. A painter can often scrape down a canvas and start over; some sculptors can work in malleable clay before turning to heavy metals; a video artist can edit and reedit footage. But some methods of fabrication require many, many steps, and the end result may not be visible until after a large investment of blood, sweat, and time.

NANA WATANABE/COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY, NEW YORK AND GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, PARIS AND SALZBURG

Louise Fishman, *A Sweet Disorder*, 2012.
“The end of a day’s work on a particular painting is an ending,” Fishman says.



"You have an idea, you work like crazy, mostly in the dark, but you can't really get a feeling for the piece until you go through about 15 stages of sanding and polishing," says Fred Eversley of his works in cast polymer, which were most recently shown at the Imago Gallery in Palm Desert, California. "When you clean it up and stand it in the gallery, it either works or it doesn't. If it has a flaw, you can sometimes deal with that. Usually you can't. And even if you've put in a couple hundred hours, you reject it and just walk away."

Like sending a child off to her first day of kindergarten, separating from an artwork can be difficult. "When do I know when a work is finished?" Ellen Harvey asks. "When I am forcibly removed from it is the correct answer. I was working on my pieces for the Turner Contemporary a couple of years ago, right up until about an hour before the opening, when the director came to me and said, 'Ellen, stop it!' There's a point at which the work is no longer in my physical control and I have to call it quits," she says.

"I'm always amazed by people who are able to look at a work and say, 'It's done now.' I've never been able to do that," Harvey continues. "I work in large groups of things, so I'm always thinking the groups could be

larger and more impressive. For the 'Alien' show at the Corcoran this past summer"—titled "The Alien's Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C."—"there were 150 paintings, but I was thinking maybe 154 would have been better."

Sometimes, a work goes through many finales before the artist considers it completed. "The end of a day's work on a particular painting is an ending," says Louise Fishman. "The painting is finished in my mind or I couldn't leave it. Then I'll come back the next day and the same painting is standing there and I'm thinking, 'This is a piece of junk. Not only is it not finished, but what could I have been thinking?'" When she believes the work has come to a point of resolution, Fishman sits with the canvas—"just kind of getting used to it"—or she invites a close friend, often another artist who knows her work well, to offer an opinion.

"It really has nothing to do with what they say or what they think. It's really a way of my seeing the work differently because someone else is in the room, and often for me it can mean that the painting is finished," Fishman says. And then there is yet another ending after the work arrives at a gallery, such as Cheim & Read, which represents her work in New York. "It's in that private-but-public space, outside my studio—either in the context of other work of



An installation view of Ellen Harvey's *Arcadia*, 2011, at Turner Contemporary in Margate, England. Harvey says she adjusted her artworks until the eleventh hour before the show's opening.

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mine or in the context of other paintings—that the painting is again finished. I have rarely walked into a space and at that time thought, ‘Uh-oh, that’s not done.’”

For some artists, the problem is not knowing when a work is done but realizing that it’s *overdone*. “The worst thing that could happen is for me to *really* finish a piece, and by that I mean finish it in a way that the metaphor I mean to be there is blocked,” says sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard. “I’m saying too clearly that this is what it is, and the mind can’t wander in and out, like one does in a poem.”

One of the beauties of many of Cézanne’s late paintings is that he “had so much breathing room in his canvases,” notes von Rydingsvard, who is represented by Lelong. “The most important thing about art is the magic that it can give, and that can be stuffed out by too much information.”

Given that finishing a work

can entail a certain level of anxiety and insecurity, lucky is the artist who can recycle elements from one project to the next and perhaps forestall the postpartum blues. This is often the case for sculptor Nari Ward. “I did a large installation for Spoleto a few years ago, a huge glass fortress, and inside I had palmetto plants,” he says, referring to a structure he built for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina.

The outdoor installation, made largely of scrap metal, showed the life cycle of the plants inside the glass enclosure. “It was a huge project, and then in the end the piece stayed in storage for at least ten years, and so I decided I’d take the elements that I could possibly reuse and bring them back to my studio in New York.” At the moment, he’s rejiggering the work and adding a Confederate flag and wheelchair parts to form a makeshift base. “It looks like a really funky little vehicle,” says Ward, who shows at Lehmann Maupin.

Ward keeps what he calls a “soup room” in his studio, a place to store the raw materials he finds on the street. However, he says, “it’s the other works that have been sent back to me in proper storage boxes that might trigger an idea about how to incorporate them with other elements.” Simply changing the venue for a particular work—such as *Amazing Grace*, Ward’s seminal 1993 installation consisting of 365 abandoned baby strollers—can mean the piece has to



Ursula von Rydingsvard in 2012 with a cedar model for her bronze sculpture *Ona*, 2013.

be re-formed to fit its site. Most recently, *Amazing Grace* was reassembled for last year’s tribute to art from two decades earlier, “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star” at the New Museum in New York. “It always evolves depending on the shape of the space and the context,” Ward says.

The downside to working this way is that the original artwork can disappear. “I can’t tell you how many times a gallery has said, ‘We have a collector who’s interested in that piece,’ and I’m like, ‘Oh, that piece is gone.’ ‘What did you do, sell it?’ And I say, ‘No, it’s something else now,’” Ward explains.

Leonardo declared more than 500 years ago that “Art is never finished, only abandoned.” But Ward’s recycling habit is perhaps a more ecologically correct approach for our times: Art is never finished, it’s merely repurposed. ■