

OBSERVER

Emmanuel Louisnord Desir's Bronze Bodies Challenge Labor and Objectification

Elisa Carollo
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An installation view of "Let My People Go" at 47 Canal in New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse

Emmanuel Louisnord Desir's work is animated by the eschatological tension between flesh and spirit, human and machine, functional labor and creative impulse. Drawing freely on biblical references and symbolism, the artist employs these archetypal forms to interrogate the human condition in contemporary society—reflections made all the more urgent by recent events in California and across the country.

In "Let My People Go," recently closed at 47 Canal, Desir orchestrated an intricate choreography of mechanized bodies and personified machines. Industrial remnants of the Los Angeles urban landscape—metal parts salvaged from vehicles and machinery—are repurposed into bronze creatures, dense with symbolic charge. As Desir explained during a walkthrough of

the show, he is particularly fascinated by the dichotomy and language of the material, which undergoes transformation through the various stages of bronze casting: “I like the different processes and the different ways the material changes—starting with wax carvings and lost-wax techniques, then moving to the pouring stage, welding, and finally turning into something solid again.”

Desir is especially drawn to the tension and possibility of synthesis between manufactured components and handcrafted bronze. Blending high and low, the DIY aesthetic of *racherquismo* with the refined craftsmanship of historical artisanal and ecclesiastical objects, his works unfold as layered meditations on the shifting values and hierarchies assigned to human invention and creativity across roles and contexts.

Desir often preserves elements such as engines, wires, wheels and other functional parts, transforming them into seemingly dormant bodies—inert yet suggestive, as if awaiting activation by spirit and purpose. “I think it’s like the other components you need to plug in,” he explained. “There’s always a part that needs to be connected but isn’t there yet. Maybe that’s spirituality—the idea of faith.” At the same time, in their composition and positioning, these machines appear to mimic human behavior, engaged in a silent performance or ritual within the space.

A tension between labor and spirituality, societal function and individual purpose lies at the heart of these works, which Desir conceives as metaphors for a condition of conflict and oppression that is lived and embodied. Yet within that tension, he also gestures toward the possibility of redemption and rebirth. Through the process of bronze casting, he enacts a form of redemption. Both alchemical and conceptual, this reactivation of material allows the objects to shed their original contexts and undergo transformation. Through Desir, they are transmuted into fresh forms, charged with renewed meaning and purpose.

Described as “holy allegories and historical narratives that are relevant to our present day,” Desir’s sculptures, like our bodies, are vehicles, conductors or producers of energy. At their core is an examination of how the body is so often objectified and repurposed for someone else’s convenience or utility. “The pieces have different parts—conductors, heads, guns, wheels—to suggest movement or a specific task assigned to the object,” Desir explained, likening these pseudo-machines to security guards, compelled to enact authority or violence solely because of their societal role, which might be opposite to their true self. “It’s not just physical,” he added. “It’s mental, too—almost like a sickness. This kind of depression or disenfranchisement of the self comes from external pressures, from the channels we’re forced to pass through to be seen as functioning members of society.”

Clearly, Desir’s work operates at the intersection of the spiritual and the political. By embracing a Marxist discourse, he challenges conventional notions of labor and societal roles, exposing their frequent dissonance with the deeper call of the individual soul. More specifically, Desir’s work can be read through the lens of Marx’s theory of alienation, in which the laborer becomes estranged not only from the product of their work but also from their own essence and soul. In Desir’s sculptures, the human body, reduced to machine or utility, embodies this alienation, dramatizing how individuals are severed from their spiritual core through mechanized roles imposed by late-stage capitalism.

Growing up in the lower middle class in a highly religious Black family, Desir offered at 47 Canal an homage to the condition of working-class communities in America. “These works speak to

the idea of purpose—what the purpose of an object or body might be,” he said. “I wanted to explore the tension between an assigned purpose, tied to one’s role in society and the need to survive, and a higher spiritual purpose, something connected to existential growth.” He’s reflecting on the often unseen or unrecognized labor of working people who build the infrastructures that sustain society and keep it functioning.

This post-human staging of machines considers how, in modern society, each individual’s physical existence is increasingly defined by functionality. Yet Desir also gestures toward a spiritual elevation that emerges when one becomes aligned with one’s true soul and faith. “I like thinking about the macro and micro scale, the cosmic level,” he said. “These could be seen as a collective, but when you look closer, each has its own internal happenings, its own orchestration that gives it a distinct identity. It’s like a uniform that’s been customized. I wanted to speak to each facet like a gem, to capture all its angles, in the hope of reaching the essence of these characters.”

The title of the exhibition, “Let My People Go,” comes from the Old Testament: “And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness” (Exodus 5:1, KJV). By referencing this pivotal moment when God commands the liberation of His people from Egyptian bondage, Desir evokes not only the freedom of movement embedded in the divine directive, but also the deeper idea of a final call or purpose assigned to each of us at the moment the soul enters the body.