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“Studio Visit: Artist Davina Semo on the Lure of a Ringing Bell and Why She Always Looks Forward to Mondays”

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January 13, 2021



Artist Davina Semo, 2020.

The ringing of bells can have so many meanings: the arrival of a new hour, the celebratory joy of a holiday, or the bliss of a wedding. Other times, when slowly tolled, bells carry news of death. Throughout history, bells have been a way of communicating over distances, communally telling us to gather or rejoice or sometimes warning us of coming danger.

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San Francisco-based artist Davina Semo taps into these histories in her public art installation, *Reverberation*, currently on view at New York's Brooklyn Bridge Park and organized by Public Art Fund.

For the installation, Semo created five cast bronze bells and installed them on the park's waterfront promenade to recall the many maritimes uses of bells in this once busy seaport. Park visitors are invited to ring the bells (the chains are sanitized frequently) and enjoy the sound of the urban landscape during a time of widespread isolation.

As is characteristic of Semo's works, the bells meld the almost brutalist sensibility of industrial materials and forms with a poetic delicacy—the bells, painted pearlescent orange, each have a unique sound and are drilled with varied patterns of holes that reference astronomical patterns.

In her West Coast studio, Semo experiments with different bells' individual sounds. Her space is filled with wax-casts, drills, hardware, and paints, and, currently, lots and lots of bells.

Just ahead of the opening of "Sharing a (S)hell" (January 15–March 12), a group show featuring Semo at San Francisco's Rebecca Camacho Presents gallery, the artist offered us a glimpse inside her studio.



Davina Semo, *Reverberation* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Public Art Fund

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What are the most indispensable items in your studio and why?

Indispensable, always: natural light, space, time, work tables, olfa knife, cordless drill, laptop, and a door that closes. Lately: wax pots, wax tools, rigid foam, silicone rubber, paper, ink, my bell machine.

What is the studio task on your agenda that you are most looking forward to?

I look forward to Mondays, getting back in the zone, and setting the tone for the week. The exact flow is open. This week, I'm cleaning up wax reliefs, working on new prints, making a new bell wax, and seeing what else comes up. I have a meeting at the foundry to try a new patina, and I'll get to listen to some new bell shapes for the first time.

What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?

I start the day with *Democracy Now*, then move to podcasts, NPR, or audiobooks. Recently, I've been listening to music on NTS radio, which has introduced me to a lot of new music and generally been a great change for me.

What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?

I admire so much. I love seeing art that has a *newness*. It's hard to describe, but I experience a full wave of excitement and awe when I encounter a general aura I haven't known before. I love the surprise of finding myself in the presence of a creativity and approach that has been translated into an artwork. I love gentle and aggressive, minimal and maximal, it's not so much the what, but the how, the touch, the overall magic. Despise—I don't usually despise art.

What snack food could your studio not function without?

Water, coffee, fruits, lunch.

Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?

I deeply value seeing artist friends, peers, and artists I don't know personally posting pictures of work in their studio throughout this time. It's important and comforting to be reminded that artists are people who work no matter what. I think many artists work because we have to. There's something about the working itself that is vital. I don't mean to dodge the specifics here about who I follow. Strangely, in quarantine, the world of people I look to for community online has grown so much that I don't even know

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where to begin—and by that, I mean that I learn equally from artists, activists, writers, journalists, scientists, and inventive people wherever I encounter them.

When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get un-stuck?

The studio is one of the only places I rarely feel stuck. I am an artist who fetishizes and needs a studio. I have a comfortable environment in which I can work in many ways in the same general space. I like to work this way, so there is always a place to pick up and drop off, something that might take an hour, or something that needs a longer arc of time. I like to let my moods guide the flow.

Some work is more meditative and lets my mind drift, while other work, I need to start with strong energy first thing in the morning. When I feel unsure of something, I usually set it aside and start working on something else. I also like to go for walks and observe.

If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?

Black Lives Matter, climate change, clean air, clean water, simple pleasures, working outdoors, hiking, observing and interacting with animals, change (the concept of), change (how can large- scale change practically happen?), holes, flowers, gears, bells, mycelium, growing mushrooms, vibrations, sound waves, tools, stones, stress and pressure, grief, strategies for overcoming existential fears, pleasure, movement, missing friends and their touch, live music, dancing at parties, gratitude, family, love, growth, and joy.