

Richard Rezac

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Limb (section), 2020, cast bronze, 10.75 x 2.75 x 3.25 inches



Limb (yellow), 2020, cast bronze and oil paint. 17.25 x 7.25 x 3.25 inches

Judith Russi Kirshner

Throughout his four-decade career, Richard Rezac's practice of sculptural invention and permutation has remained remarkably consistent. Rezac forges subjective combinations of fragments to imply much larger entities, highlighting figurative and literal interstices, sandwiching intersections that ultimately undermine distinctions between figure and ground. The considered incorporation of architectural details—crown moldings, reveals, balustrades, pilasters, architraves—constitutes the backdrop and subject matter of Rezac's constructions. Whether carved, modelled, or cast in cherry wood, industrial aluminum, or bronze, nearly all the artist's sculptures are relational, with parts joined together in unexpected, sometimes improbable-looking configurations. Each piece is emphatically hand built, studio assembled, and humanly scaled—what Rezac terms “torso-sized.” Inversely, despite their human scale, Rezac's discreet artworks assume singular presence and spatial assertiveness. These characteristics are all in evidence in *Cast*, featuring works completed over the past nine months of pandemic-enforced isolation.

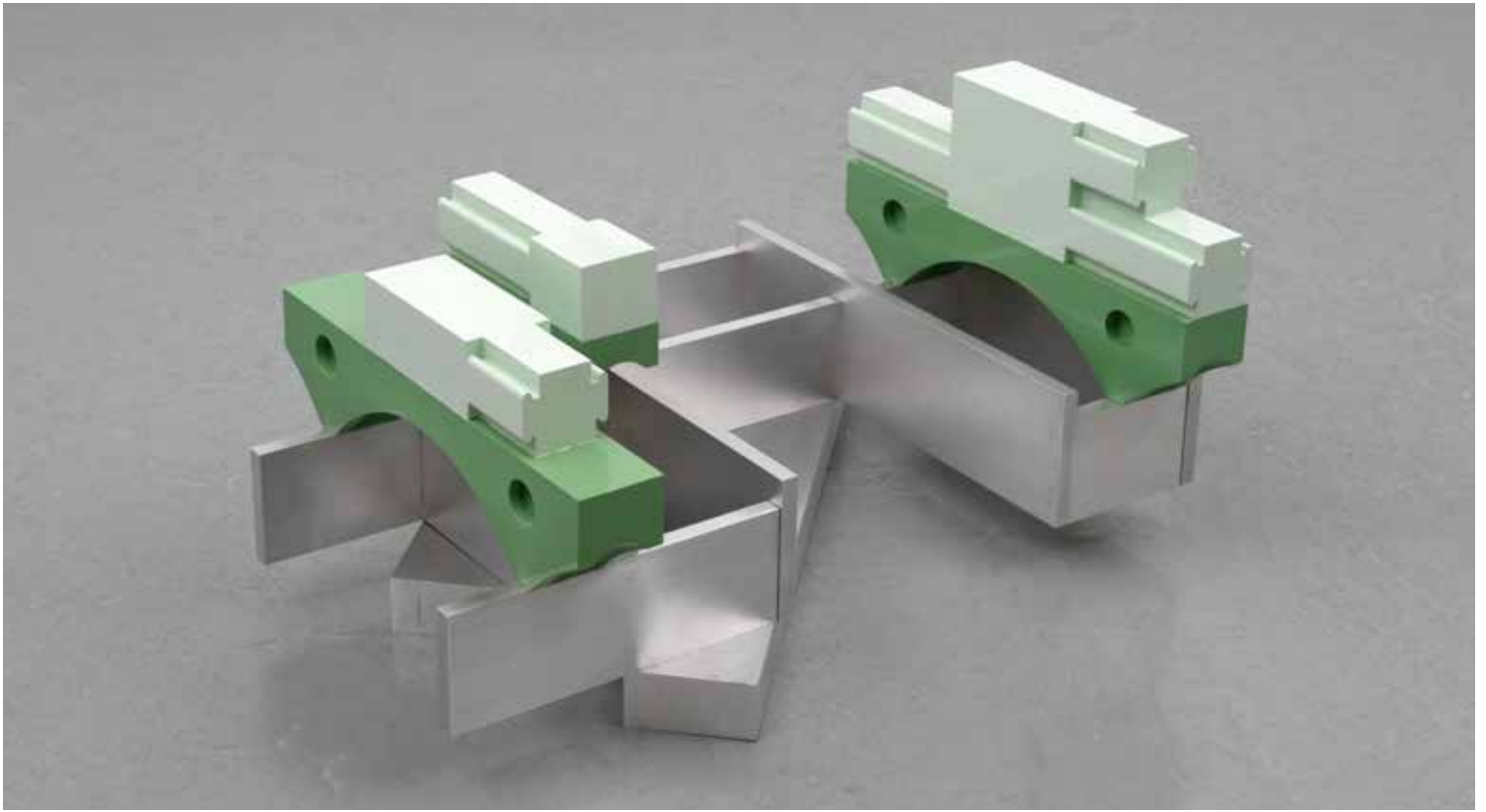
Every project starts out as a full-scale geometric drawing on a large sheet executed in graphite and colored pencil. Rezac describes the drawings created for a given sculpture as the “ghost, future-ghost” of that sculpture, and I can see it graphically as an

object.” These finely rendered drawings—on which he occasionally imposes a grid—are the same size as the resulting pieces and “persuade him to make a sculpture and determine the scale.”¹

But the reliefs and shape-shifting volumes that emerge from the artist's vivid geometric notations never entirely divulge their meanings or the intellect behind them. Rezac's skill is such that the sculptures seem to exist as self-contained material objects with few clues as to the elegance of their manufacture or muted affect. Pieces such as *Marking* and *Limb (harlequin dress)*, to cite two very disparate examples, become eccentric, even baffling presences; although firmly attached to the wall, they are formally expressive but enigmatic.

After auditioning his scheme on the page, the artist locates his work in a specific space and then positions us, his viewers. We are encouraged to look down at the cross section of the smooth bronze *Limb (section)*, gaze up at the suspended yellow *Averno*, or bend toward the shiny dashboard of *Marking*. The intuitive energy with which Rezac condenses volumes, revises motifs, and orchestrates placement all demand our corporeal involvement.

Protruding 3 ¼ inches from the wall and viewed frontally from above, *Limb (section)* presents a 10 by 3-inch polished



Root's plan (Monadnock), 2020, painted cherry wood and aluminum, 19.5 x 37 x 37.5 inches

bronze tube. The curving shapes of its cross section match the studies of red and green teardrop shapes in the companion drawing. Once fabricated, the vertical segment reminded the artist of a forearm, and on a metaphorical level this refined fragment, initially carved in wood, evokes a broken body part, a bone.

Limb (yellow) is also cast in bronze and mounted on the wall at eye level. Rezac bent and joined the limb in the manner of a frame for a flat diamond shape, which he painted yellow. With color, the subtle gradations between foreground and background restate the pictorial and structural correlation of surface to support in relief. Color is constituent for Rezac, in some instances covering but not hiding surface irregularities and controlling contours, as in the painted works of David Smith. Rezac's hand-mixed yellow, green, and pink painted elements have a strong retinal presence, often disguising the properties of the underlying material.

In *Limb (harlequin dress)*, a third iteration, the extremity, now protruding even further and broken into three parts, is flanked by and seemingly flaunts a pair of symmetrical diamond-shaped planes at both of its sides. Only one side is painted orange; the other remains in its original state: a strategy that echoes and accentuates the orange residue of the mottled coloration and the tactility of the bronze's fire-scale surface. Our first encounter with

this muscular work might delay recognition of the title, which articulates the costume and gendered performance of the theatrical jesters of the sixteenth-century commedia dell'arte. More recent references for Rezac are modern artists like Picasso and Jasper Johns, who incorporated these antic patterns into their paintings.

With a brilliant eye for scale and proportions, Rezac orchestrates installations that exercise our responses to pictorial and architectural space. In an earlier favorite of mine, *Largo*, 2017, he distilled the sprawl of an antique square in Rome, Largo Argentina, into a bronze structure measuring only 16 by 6 inches. In *Cremona*, the heart of an elaborate, twenty-piece installation in his 2018 Renaissance Society exhibition, Rezac carved the bridge of an antique violin from cherry wood and mounted the small fragment on an imposing screen.

A similar approach is apparent in *Root's plan (Monadnock)*, a formidable work that demands our attention albeit situated on the floor. Fabricated from wood and aluminum, and measuring roughly 3 by 3 feet, *Root's plan* invokes the legacy of an architect—John Wellborn Root—whose celebrated sixteen-story Chicago skyscraper comprises an entire city block. In a wry homage, Rezac brings the monumental down to size without undercutting its resilience and authority.

Root's plan exemplifies the nimble sensibility and understated virtuosity of Rezac's vision, his ability to contradict his own rules of balance and measure in order to achieve visual integrity. Stacked on aluminum diagonals, the work seems to expand, offering multiple perspectives when we peer through its apertures. The exterior walls combine geometry in eccentric couplings; Rezac has attached squat wooden arches, two on one side and a third on the other, to rectangular, drawer-shaped aluminum supports. For the arches, Rezac selected a breakfast-nook green to cast shadow and hold light, much like the role color plays in contemporary architecture. Aligned precisely with matched edges, each arch also displays oculi—a reference to Palladian design. Viewed obliquely, the parts comprising this work interlock in a syncopated convergence of stable and unstable components. Decidedly asymmetrical, *Root's plan* is topped with a suite of notched elements that further muddle any distinctions between built logic and the potential for fantasy.

I believe that Rezac also problematizes aspects of dimensionality, exploiting the discrepancy between two and three dimensions, magnitude and size, surface and core. The Monadnock Building itself consists of two different construction types, yet Rezac's intricate fulcrum derives less from engineering than from his daily, years-long of experience of exiting the adjacent train station to confront the Monadnock's iconic north facade.

By manipulating the cause and effect of scale adjustments in his constructions, Rezac subtly implies temporality. Architectural practice includes genres related to the notion of diachronic time: a small-scale *modello* prefigures and exists prior to a work, whereas a diminutive *ricordo* is a souvenir recollection of a project upon its completion. *Root's plan* might itself one day become an archaeological relic recalling a project from the past. While *Limb's* three-step progression contains other hints of temporal evolution, fictional creations such as *Averno* either exist before the fact or never at all.

From his spirited drawings, Rezac calibrates decisions regarding methodology, material, and color, compressing what is enormous (*Root's plan*) or giving substance to what is insubstantial (*Averno*). Suspended over our heads, three creamy, yellow lozenge forms are interconnected in *Averno*. Curved and inflated parallelograms, these curious shapes are frequent protagonists in Rezac's formal firmament. *Averno's* title refers to a volcanic lake near Naples whose sulphuric gas, according to legend, felled any bird flying through. Rezac clips the attenuated ends of this sensuous trio, linking them to one another, while the spiraling implications of nature and culture are forever restrained by the narrow, aluminum shaft that tethers them.

One significant result of Rezac's discerning edits is how inevitable the finished sculptures appear. The works declare themselves in a seemingly straightforward manner but are premised on a poetic interplay of color, texture, pattern, scale, weight, and—not least—the intersection of mind and body.



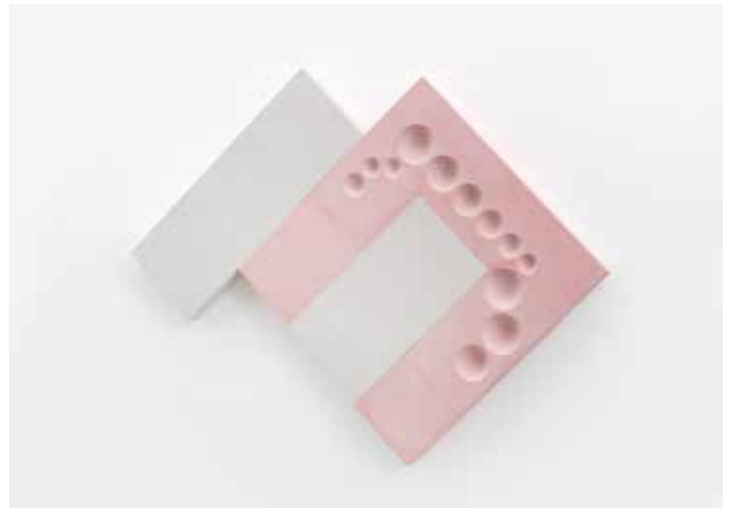
Averno, 2020, painted cherry wood and aluminum, 34 x 12 x 6.25 inches



Left: *Marking*, 2020, cast bronze and aluminum, 15 x 37 x 9.25 inches

Below left: *Untitled (21-01)*, 2021, cast bronze and aluminum, 28 x 23 x 8.5 inches

Below right: *Untitled (21-02)*, 2021, cast pigmented hydrocal and aluminum, 25 x 32.5 x 1.75 inches



I know of no other sculptor who can wring greater variation from geometric reversals of concavity and convexity, likeness and unlikeness, and simultaneously reference the humility of a wooden Shaker spindle and the dizzying vault of Borromini's Sant' Ivo, the epitome of the seventeenth-century Roman Baroque. Never academic, the artist's inventive recuperation of historical ornament typologies and modernist design is offset by his generational adherence to and personalized reading of Minimalism and Post-Minimalism.

The aluminum surface of *Marking* mirrors us at the same time that its three bronze handles and knobs, located at intervals along the top, at once provoke and frustrate our desire to hang on. This a signature Rezac hybrid, both lecternlike object and sculpture; it is belly high, somewhat familiar yet dysfunctional. Denying our presumptions that we might read the sequence of knobs to decode the riddle of its carefully spaced markings, the piece pivots between invitation and negation, Aluminum components again shimmer in *Untitled (21-01)* a suspended piece suggestive of a surreal chandelier. The diagonals of the framework are affixed to boxlike elements that, in turn, are punctuated by three life-size polished bronze doorknobs. In a somewhat disorienting example of cultural collision and scale shift, Rezac affixes

his revisions of a Roman ready-made knob to an abstract support: situationally bound, reflective, and ultimately ungraspable.

For me, *Untitled (corner)* demonstrates how the notion of difference, of inequality, animates the juxtapositions in Rezac's constructions. *Untitled (corner)* most obviously proffers a ricocheting narrative of dissimilarity. Featuring the interplay of similar scales, this piece, like much of Rezac's work, is installed at the viewer's eye level. On the left side of a corner wall, six narrow bronze tubes are arranged into two unconnected rows, reminiscent of hanging sausages; three measure 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches, two measure 11 $\frac{1}{2}$, and one measures 6 inches. I cite these dimensions to underline the mathematical—three, two, one—and rhythmic aspects that rationalize the parsing of Rezac's work and lend it authority. Attached to the opposite side in the manner of wallpaper is a digital print, a disarming cascade of pink, blue, and yellow diamond forms, echoing that of the harlequin motif. Both the cast bronze, alluding to internal organs, and the print, conjuring argyle patterns, are similarly posed to infect one another yet are forever divided by the reality of the room's corner.

The most abstract work in *Cast*—a shallow relief measuring about 2 feet by 3 feet—is, paradoxically, the most intimate. Rezac describes it as adding a “whisper” to the exhibition.² Molded from

cast Hydrocal, a gypsum plaster, *Untitled (21-02)* is composed of nine rectangular planes fitted tightly together. The dominant five tiles on the right, surmounted by and surrounding gray elements, are arranged like an arch, accentuating their rosy-pink tint, the effect of red-cadmium pigment mixed with the Hydrocal. On this smoothed-out surface, measuring 1¾ inches in depth, Rezac has carved fifteen marble-sized hemispheres, akin to finger holes or the indentations on dominos, tender cavities that both solicit our touch and reward our gaze.

The long days of political turmoil and Covid lockdown spent in his studio prompted Richard Rezac to mine his rich repertoire of themes and motifs. With an unfailing capacity for self-reflection and equivalent emotional reserve, Rezac has produced a group of ingenious recombinations. Although he characterizes his exercises as statements and restatements, each of these uncanny investigations, I would argue, raises more questions and enlarges the aesthetic possibilities of the experience of sculpture.

As quintessential reimaginings, part geometric, part organic, Rezac's artworks engage us because of their inherent contradictions. Straddling difference and similarity, his work serves to counter the noisy rhetoric of current conflicts. In the exceptional diversity of this self-curated group that is limited only by self-imposed procedures, Rezac's work compels us to come face-to-face with fragmentary forms and persistent contingencies. There is a deliberate convergence between the practical and the ideal in sculpture informed by architectural phenomena built on the principles of structural dependency. Since our future is inexorably defined by proliferating differences, Rezac's "models" can be interpreted as setting forth a memorable vision that proposes meaningful, yet precarious interactions.

NOTES

1. Solveig Øvstebø, *Richard Rezac: Address* (Chicago: Renaissance Society, 2018), 78–79.
2. Richard Rezac, in conversation with the author, 2021.

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Photography by Tom Van Eynde

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Cover: *Limb (harlequin dress)*, 2020, cast bronze and oil paint, 12.25 x 12 x 3.25 inches



Untitled (corner), 2019, cast bronze and digital print, 60 x 16 x 1.75 inches