

The Potential of the Pause:
Selah in the work of David Benarroch

Emily Markert

What would it be like to move through an hour, a day, a week, a life with frequent reminders to intentionally, thoughtfully pause? This is not a groundbreaking question; some version of it is asked by meditation teachers and busy parents and even some artists daily. David Benarroch not only holds but truly inhabits such in-between moments. Through a consummate yet experimental engagement with material, his work creates permanent pauses, asking what it would be like not just to embrace the in-between moments, but to capture them, hold them, hug them, freeze them, seal them, laminate them, regard them, revere them.

This paradox of temporality can be understood through the multiple definitions of a Hebrew word, *selah* (sometimes written *sela* or *se'lah*). “Word” may be a misnomer here, for *selah* is not usually part of a sentence, but rather a direction that comes at the end of one. Although it is difficult to pin down one definition of *selah*, it allegedly indicates a moment in the Hebrew Bible where the reader should stop and reflect on what has just been read. In other words, it stresses an intentional, thoughtful pause. Ironically, the word can also be translated in a wholly different way, particularly when spelled *sela*, as either “rock” or “forever.” Although somewhat ambiguous, *selah* is undeniably an invitation to consider both the infinite and the ephemeral—the time between two prayers, two thoughts, or, as this exhibition title suggests, two breaths.

Between Two Breaths features more than thirty works by Benarroch made from 2021 and 2023, including sculptures made from materials such as resin, fiberglass, concrete, aluminum, and bronze, as well as a new series of large-scale works on paper. Featuring work made over three continents, *Between Two Breaths* underscores Benarroch's nimble studio practice, which centers on accepting chance as a trusted collaborator in his intimate exchange with his mediums of choice—a nonverbal, physical dialogue. He often works with materials affected by pressure and touch but also a factor of time, such as resin, which hardens faster than materials like oil paint. *Between Two Breaths* thus speaks literally to the transitional moment in which the artist chooses how much control to exert over the material, but also conceptually frames all Benarroch's works, which seek to capture the energy of that fleeting moment of potential—the between state—and render it in a lasting way. *Selah, sela.*

Benarroch's process-oriented approach builds upon the legacy of Postminimal artists such as Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Richard Serra, who similarly embraced the idiosyncrasies inherent to their chosen mediums. Like Hesse's anthropomorphic fiberglass-and-resin columns and Benglis's oozing pour pieces, Benarroch, as he describes it, "guides" his sculptures instead of "making" them, resulting in works that are highly abstract yet curiously embodied. Furthermore, Benarroch's final works do not disguise the materials with which they were made; they have a rough, almost unpolished quality. His technique is not to manipulate but to, as he puts it, "leave a trace...attempting to enable the material to express itself and not only [subjugate] it to my wills and wants."¹

This approach is abundantly legible in the five freestanding, totemic works that dominate *Between Two Breaths*, looming like objects of great importance dropped in from another planet or unearthed from a past civilization. Constructed using fiberglass, latex, and resin layered over skeletal, wire-mesh frames—materials

¹ David Benarroch, *Between Two Breaths* exhibition statement, September 2023.

that are ubiquitous yet somehow difficult to confidently identify—each sculpture beckons viewers to move in close and examine it from all sides. Their monotonous color palettes and uneven surfaces almost suggest that a smooth, outer covering has been removed, as if we are seeing the totems’ innards. But rather than reveal how the artist manipulated the materials, Benarroch sees these accumulated sculptures as showing “the secret of the material and its consequences upon the artist, not the other way around.”²

As is the case with most of Benarroch’s works, each of these five sculptures bears a four-letter name derived from one of the languages Benarroch speaks: English, Hebrew, or Spanish. These short, nickname-like titles—*Vini*, *Lizi*, *Coco*, *Lopo*, *Polo* (all 2023)—bounce around one’s mouth like echoes of one another. They are not mirror images, but siblings, in a poetic nod to the most baseline similarities between the languages, cultures, and countries between which Benarroch fluidly moves. In fact, many aspects of Benarroch’s works can likewise be read through the lens of his biography, but often only incidentally; generally, they are deliberately nonspecific. *Take One Peanut! Take Two! Take Three!* (2021), a sculpture comprising three bronze hands each proffering a hardshell peanut, is the exception to this rule, with its autobiographical medium line: “cast bronze of peanut memory.” The memory in question is from the artist’s Bar Mitzvah, at the end of which family members unconventionally showered him with peanuts. While this work may seem out of place with its precise, quirky reference point, it too freezes a moment of potential—just before the peanuts were thrown—thus representing process and gesture in a different way. If *Between Two Breaths* presents various accumulations of gestures and material relationships built up in the studio over time, perhaps *Take One Peanut! Take Two! Take Three!* represents the *first* gesture—a formative motion at a formative event, both of which enabled all the other works here to exist.

2 Ibid.

Benarroch was born in Petah Tikva, Israel to immigrants from Morocco, who came to the country in the 1950s. He has traveled widely throughout his life and has recently moved house frequently, namely between, Israel, Spain—the then ruler of the portion of Morocco from which his parents hail—and, since 2022, Durham, North Carolina. Navigating these wildly varied contexts has required living in a state of near-constant transition and reinvention. Perhaps it is therefore no surprise that one of the critical tools Benarroch uses in his studio travels with him no matter which continent he is working on: his own body. Benarroch is deeply interested in consciously tracing the body, sometimes literally, in the tradition of Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series or the body prints of Yves Klein or David Hammons, but often more subtly, in ways akin to Conceptual artists Stanley Brouwn or Vito Acconci.

In an example of the former, Benarroch's *_ing* (2023) is a concrete cast of the artist's knees when kneeling, a position he often assumes while working in the studio. Not only is the work cast from Benarroch's body—although devoid of context, and thus rendered abstract—but displayed on the floor, it suggests a vantage point from which to view the other works that is not often assumed by visitors but frequently held by the artist. Other works, such as *Hold as Hard as You Can* (2021) and *Boca Abajo* (2023), float in space as formally curious objects, but Benarroch reveals their real-world source material in their medium lines, letting the viewer connect the dots of this constellated body. Meanwhile, like Brouwn's works that describe distances using the size of Brouwn's own step as a unit of measurement, Benarroch's freestanding sculptures, like *Coco* or *To be* (2023), allude to the dimensions of his body, indicating what sized object he can handle in the studio and the weight he can carry. Read this way—and grounded in the real world by the concrete casts that surround them—these abstract totems become self-portraits.

The sculptures in *Between Two Breaths* are both literally and conceptually framed by adjacent, wall-bound works on paper. Benarroch completed the sculptures and drawings simultaneously, but they are not preparatory sketches. Rather, they are the

artist's attempts to translate the gestures he uses to make the sculptures onto paper as pared-down, two-dimensional marks. With this context, one finds, for example, resonances between the sculpture *How to be* (2023) and *uu64* (2022). Whereas *How to be* occupies a sliver of space, delicately engaged with gravity, the similar line in the drawing is instead balanced by a large form that echoes another thought, another gesture. Elsewhere, such as in *uuxx* and *uu102* (both 2023), another nod to Yves Klein's body prints emerges, as bold, blue circles hover over smaller, sketchy black dots and lines. Made almost automatically, reflexively, these drawings are like pauses themselves—breaths taken between sculpture-making to trace what the body has been doing in three dimensions on paper. *Selah* within *selah*.

If *Between Two Breaths* constitutes a tapestry of intimate, often personal gestures, references, and journeys, *Untitled (Coconut heart)* (2021) can be read as a particularly poignant example of the latter. The unassuming work, dangling from a string, features a bronze cast of negative space at the center of a coconut. Made from a coconut found in the Lavapiés neighborhood of Madrid, *Untitled (Coconut heart)* represents one of Benarroch's characteristic, improvisational material experiments, using something we cannot see as a mold. However, the coconut can also be read in a more symbolic way. Lavapiés, where Benarroch has had a studio since 2020, carries a complex history as a longtime home for working-class families and now many migrants, particularly from Senegal; it is also undergoing gentrification thanks to the presence of art spaces. In this context, *Untitled (Coconut heart)* seems to draw upon Benarroch's family and cultural heritage and all those who are impacted by the challenges of forced migration. By casting this organic matter in bronze—a loaded material in the history of art as well as public statues—Benarroch also elevates the coconut and the cultures it represents to the level of a monument. Thus, although one of the smaller works in the exhibition, *Untitled (Coconut heart)* exponentially expands the idea of the space between two breaths—that it could be as large as the gap

between two phone calls home; two plane rides home; the last two bites of the last coconut from home. *Selah* as memory.

In essence, *selah* always contains memory; it is always cumulative. As an opportunity for reflection, it conjures the long past and the immediate past all at once. Yet, it is always poised between two moments, inherently optimistic, looking ahead. It is a moment of transition, but one fertile with potential. Writing about his work, Benarroch describes resisting the idea of the artist in control—the proverbial idea of the “one-way street,” in which the artist’s hands will the movement of clay and never the other way around.³ Instead of flouting control, Benarroch looks both ways at once. In their attempt to capture ephemeral moments of transition and potential, his sculptures and drawings ask us to consider what would happen if we paused to notice these moments in our lives. What if we lived and worked according to *selah*? Benarroch’s work suggests the possibilities could be endless.

3 Ibid, in reference to an *piyyut*.