

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

**ArtSeen**

# Rebecca Warren: V

By **Louis Block**

The English *lung* is derived from an early German phrase for “the light organ”—so named because in a stewing pot of offal, lungs float while the rest sinks. Lungs are airy in both life and death, holding vital atmosphere then bloating with putrid gas; it’s no wonder their inner workings resemble trees caught up in a cycle of decomposition and rebirth. So, rounding the modulating volumes of Rebecca Warren’s bronzes, there is a sensation of halted breath, as if each successive facet of the sculptures represents petrification in a different register, from taxidermy to grand monuments. Their sensitively touched surfaces, like the dabs of color in Childe Hassam’s flag paintings, are acknowledgements of wind, stubbornly permanent.

Warren’s forms live somewhere between dimension and flatness, curling and wagging in profile view as if they could become inflated; but they are cast in heavy metal, and pigments drip down their faces like guano on a lone roost out at sea. *Jumper* (all works 2020) is optimistically skybound: a cow turning its nose to the sun or a toe mid-kick on the dancefloor, while *Kutoff* is weighed down by its drippy maw, evidence of either satiation or a crippling wound. Warren is comfortable in this anthropomorphic register, where each visible touch only bolsters a piece’s animated energy. The titular sculpture braces the viewer with its shield-like front, but then, the form



Rebecca Warren, *A Glyph* (detail), 2020. Hand-painted bronze on painted MDF pedestal, 74 7/8 x 17 x 14 1/8 inches. © Rebecca Warren. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

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curls and darkens into its stem around the side, so that the whole thing is caught in an act of metamorphosis. And what an appropriate title: *V.*, its intersecting lines like two branches extending from the center or limbs collapsing into loam, migratory birds crossing overhead or a raptor's dive into the ocean. The viewer becomes a celestial body, circling the subject and subjecting it to time, a verdant shoot growing tall, then blackened by necrosis, and rising again out of the dirt. The skinniness of Warren's sculptures allows for multiple lives; stepping around them and blinking creates a visceral zoetrope.

If these are lungs on pedestals, then their spongy tissue seems used, prodded, and wrung out. *Sibyl* is the only piece that strays from the organic, and it is more like a garment or flag caught on a limb than a sentient being. Its rectangle acts as a canvas for Warren's graffito, a circle crossed through by a diagonal line. Other works are decorated with small characters: circles, arcs, and slashes, but their meaning is immediately subsumed by surface—heat winning out over gesture and gravity so that the picture plane is always mottled. The reckoning of mark with form is most accomplished in *The Visitors*, where black and white lines stumble up the lengths of two slender columns. The lines' strange harmony seems to invoke the proto-alphabet of cavemen in a way that the other marks don't; when the gestures conform to their substrate, they are effective, but when they begin to ideate, they seem to dissolve.

Warren has a long history of working with doubles and with the imperfection of repeats, both in the infinite variation of hand building and in the confusion of editioning when cast forms are hand painted. In *The Territory*, two bronze casts rest on identical towers of crates-become-pedestals, deviating only in their patinas of clay and pigment on wood. As for the bronzes, which look like



Rebecca Warren, *V.* (detail), 2020. Hand-painted bronze on painted MDF pedestal, 72 1/4 x 13 3/4 x 13 inches. © Rebecca Warren. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



Rebecca Warren, *The Territory*, 2020. Hand-painted bronze on painted MDF pedestal, 83 5/8 x 88 1/4 x 25 3/4 inches. © Rebecca Warren. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

flattened lobes or flags at half mast, their surfaces are crisscrossed by brushstrokes of blue, black, and sienna. What are these imperfect twins? Windsocks, compass needles, or—like Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “*Untitled*” (*Perfect Lovers*) (1991)—markers of difference? Is the body present in the air between, busy stacking those boxes and painting the bronze? After all, assemblages seem arbitrary until they are doubled.

Primeval and metamorphic, this language is a departure for Warren, and represents a new way of engaging with the body. Where her former sculptures were concerned with the grotesque, and touch was an incessant reminder of the distorting gaze transforming every bulbous outcropping into breast or phallus, these forms are more intimate. Warren’s desire to create alien shapes is so intense that she has removed all exterior markers of the human body; but imagination fails to create a new paradigm for life, and organic shapes retain their associations with the body. This is what convinces me of the forms’ interiority: stripped of all appearances, they are undeniably human. Like skin, color lays atop feeling, and the slowly shifting volumes of bodies breathe in and out, creating lightness in a heavy medium.

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#### **Contributor**

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