

**Davina  
Semmo**

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**Core  
Reflections**

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**Pieces**

**Conversation**



To see  
it reveal itself  
leaving gaping air pockets  
on quadrants of lit  
bronze which  
  
would be to see  
nothing  
but *here there is*  
even while over *there*,  
the emotional waves  
are so deeply gouged.

Leaning against  
her geological doors  
encrusted with black  
caking as she shaves  
the bell  
to its fixed pitch.

Such distinctions are re-  
capitulated in ominous  
registers from which  
human bodies have been  
extracted.

And as for the scarred  
tensions or the scrap  
anchored to its  
semblance? We are told  
to listen to everything  
the bell rings home:  
a simulacrum of bees  
polished into this gleaming  
honey sheen.



## Introduction

*Conversation Pieces* showcases newly commissioned works by emerging and midcareer artists that spark dialogue with the artistic legacy of Northern California. It continues di Rosa's interest in supporting the production of new work and invites a direct conversation with the surrounding landscape visible through the gallery's glass wall. Davina Semo works across two and three dimensions, often utilizing industrial materials in a way that evokes tensions between nature, society, and the self. She looks for inspiration to ubiquitous aspects of the urban environment, much like Beat-era Funk artists who found potential in overlooked, abject materials of the everyday. Her exhibition for di Rosa considers the industrial architecture of Gallery 1, the Northern California terrain that surrounds it, and the public assemblies that gather inside.

Gallery 1 is the entry point for all visitors to di Rosa, and the artist's recent travels to Greece inspired her to treat it as an ancient agora (open public gathering space). Both inside and outside she presents some of her suspended, wax-cast bronze bells, whose clappers viewers are invited to ring as instruments for expressing a call to attention. A number of wall-based works made of polished cast bronze, chain, mirrored acrylic, metal mesh, and 3D-printed seed pods conjure a range of everyday things that normally go unnoticed, like household mirrors and overgrown chain-link fences, but as presented here they inspire thoughts on the interrelationship between industrial materials and natural forms.

Semo's experience of waves, ripples, and light while on the Greek islands is evident in the mirrored, textured veneers of her work and echoes in the ever-shifting surface of Winery Lake outside. The distorted reflections are intended as metaphors for internal anxieties about social, political, and environmental concerns—that last a particularly persistent worry in this landscape so often ravaged by wildfires. Semo's installation, considered as a whole, offers space for contemplation and reflection against a backdrop of a world waking up to climate change. She hopes that gazing into the works' reflective surfaces and ringing their suspended forms will resonate through body and mind in a manner both uniquely personal and universally profound.

But in the company of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Forrest Gander, whose piercing words appear in the pages before and after this, it feels futile to write further on Semo's work. Gander conveys so effectively his understanding of these sculptures and the physical and psychic transactions they produce between viewer and object. As an undergraduate visual arts major at Brown University, Semo studied creative writing with Gander, who is now based just up the road in Petaluma. The two have maintained a long-term conversation across time and geographies. Thus, in conjunction with Semo's project at di Rosa, we commissioned Gander to contribute new writing inspired by her work. We are thrilled to present their dialogue via text and artistic form.

Amy Owen, Curator

## Core Reflections: On the Imagination of Davina Semo

But what has dispassionate description ever delivered? Nothing but a series of sentences: *here there is, there there is, and here there is*. To really see is to navigate the psychological and emotional waves generated in the choppy interaction between the viewer and the work as *it reveals itself in relationship*.

In Davina Semo's studio, large, heavy, rectangular bronze plates lean against one wall. Some of their out-facing surfaces resemble quadrants of sunlit sand from which a wave might have just retreated, leaving gaping air pockets to riddle the smooth metallic texture. Other plates display orbital mound patterns or ripple marks. A few are deeply scratched, pitted, and rough as exposures of Nova Scotia labradorite gouged by glacial erratics. In fact, the bronze plates look like geological doors to the earth itself.

Standing on crusty tables and on the floor of her studio, numerous large bells call to mind a congregation of hives: brown, black, alabaster, some so lustrous as to be reflective; others distressed, shredded, encrusted with hardened black caking. One huge corrugated bell of amber wax stands unfinished on a turntable where it will continue to be shaved, as it revolves, by a fixed blade.

What of the bell hung from the ceiling of her gallery, and the others likewise hanging farther in? They iterate each other, symmetrical forms facing in every direction at once, but with signal differences in color, texture, and size. These differences are recapitulated, we come to realize, as distinct nautical buoy-clangs that the clappers in each bell elicit. Both the shape of the bells and their sounds might be said to make off-rhymes.

The hung bells' sloping shapes are reflected as warped, ominous forms in a half dozen yellow acrylic mirrors fixed to the walls. We glance from the dark bells themselves to the distorted images of the bells, which suggest, in their contorted transformation, spectral black dresses from which human bodies have been extracted.

And the pocked, canyoned exteriors of the black bells? As our focal point shifts from the whole form of the bells seen from a distance to a closer inspection, we see that the scarred outer surfaces resemble topographical maps. We can make out eroded, river-carved landscapes, the trauma of glacial friction across some plutonic terrain.

When, in exhibition, the bells hanging from the ceiling are tethered to rectangular bales of crushed, packed aluminum, the tension between pendent weight and grounded mass is palpable. Look how the multiple, simultaneous registers of the bells—symbols for alarm, for death (for whom the bell tolls), for women (through the ghostly semblance of dresses in the acrylic mirrors), and for community

assembly—are weighed down, anchored to the destiny and density of scrap metal, human detritus. Our expressions, the bells suggest, are umbilically connected to our accumulated leftovers, the environmentally toxic residue of human material production. So, the installation seems to say, *Every signal of our presence on earth is anchored to the waste we leave behind us*.

From gallery walls, the polished acrylic panels mirror not only the still objects in the room, but the people passing before them. The acrylic mirrors are studded with ball bearings that add a background busyness to the atmosphere. Any of those ball bearings, if they could fly across the room, would fit perfectly into the round perforations in the bells. To wit, the ball bearings, and the negative spaces in the fenestrated bells, are a simulacrum of bees and their entrance and exit holes in the hive.

The lighter-colored bronze bells, polished into a gleaming honey sheen and grooved or perforated, suggest another kind of hive: towering, reflective urban architecture, the hives of our tribe in the city.

But only the simpleminded would reduce Davina Semo's work to some ecological or political message. We'd have to entirely ignore the playfulness, the joyful patterning, Semo's repeated and metaphorical incorporation of chain links, all of which are clear elements in her exhibited work. We'd also have to brush aside the fact that Semo isn't repeating her successes, but instead continuing to leap into almost perversely challenging new projects requiring steep learning curves, new technologies, and big gulps of humility. Her works' meanings are as complex and resonant as the interrelationship of her insistently various forms and materials.

Forrest Gander







## Works in the Exhibition

### *Flow*, 2019

Polished and patinated cast bronze, hardware  
16 ¼ × 11 ¾ in.

### *Generator*, 2019

Polished and patinated cast bronze bell, powder-coated chain and hardware, polyurethane clapper  
Bell: 34 ½ × 13 × 13 in., overall dimensions variable

### *Hollow*, 2019

Polished and patinated cast bronze  
23 ¾ × 17 in.  
Page 2

### *Shifter*, 2019

Patinated cast bronze bell, powder-coated chain and hardware, polyurethane clapper  
Bell: 22 × 11 × 11 in., overall dimensions variable

### *Transmitter*, 2019

Polished and patinated cast bronze bell, powder-coated chain and hardware, polyurethane clapper  
Bell: 22 × 9 ½ × 9 ½ in., overall dimensions variable

### *Blush*, 2020

Powder-coated galvanized steel chain, powder-coated stainless steel nails  
70 × 87 in.  
Pages 8 and 9

### *Cluster*, 2020

Acrylic mirror, woven stainless steel, PolyJet 3D-printed opaque VeroWhite resin, stainless steel, plywood, hardware  
48 ½ × 60 ½ in.  
Page 3

### *Drop*, 2020

Patinated cast bronze bells, UV-protected two-stage catalyzed urethane, stainless steel chain and hardware, polyurethane clapper  
Bells: 7 ¾ × 5 ¾ × 5 ¾ in. each, overall hanging dimensions variable  
Page 13

### *Emerge*, 2020

Acrylic mirror, woven stainless steel, PolyJet 3D-printed opaque VeroWhite resin, stainless steel, plywood, hardware  
48 ½ × 60 ½ in.  
Page 12

All works courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery

## About the Author

Forrest Gander, a writer and translator with degrees in geology and literature, is the Adele Kellenberg Seaver Professor Emeritus of Literary Arts and Comparative Literature at Brown University. Recent books include *Be With*, the 2019 Pulitzer Prize winner in poetry, and *The Trace*, a novel. Gander's translations include Gōzō Yoshimasu's *Alice Iris Red Horse* and Pablo Neruda's *Then Come Back: The Lost Neruda Poems*.

## About the Artist

Davina Semo (b. 1981, Washington, DC) has shown extensively throughout the United States and Europe, and is represented by Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; Marlborough, New York and London; and Ribordy Thetaz, Geneva. *Core Reflections* is her first institutional solo presentation. Group exhibitions include *Show Me as I Want to Be Seen*, Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco (2019); *TOUCHPIECE*, Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles (2017); and *Hair and Skin*, Derek Eller Gallery, New York (2013). Semo lives and works in San Francisco. She earned her BA from Brown University in 2003 and her MFA from the University of California, San Diego, in 2006.

## Public Programs

### Saturday, March 14, 2020, 3–5 pm

In conversation: Davina Semo and guest curator Amy Owen  
Gallery 1 Program Hub

### Saturday, May 16, 2020, time TBD

Gallery talk: *Core Reflections* and *Deborah Remington* with Davina Semo and guest curator Nancy Lim  
Galleries 1 + 2

### Saturday, June 20, 2020, 11 am–4 pm

di Rosa Days  
Site-wide

## Ongoing

### First Wednesdays

Residents of the cities of Napa and Sonoma receive free admission to di Rosa the first Wednesday of each month (with ID, no reservations required).

### Making Art with Everyone / Haciendo arte con todos: March–November

Free art making for all on the fourth Saturday of each month, 11 am–3 pm, on the Gallery 1 patio or inside during chilly weather.

## Seasonal

### Site walk weekends:

Take a self-guided tour of di Rosa Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, May 1–November 29, 2020

### Nature hikes:

First and third Sundays, 10:30 am–12:30 pm, May 3–November 15, 2020

### Outdoor sculpture tours:

Second and fourth Sundays, 10:30 am–12:30 pm, May 10–November 22, 2020

## Tours

### Public tours:

Wednesday through Sunday, 1 PM

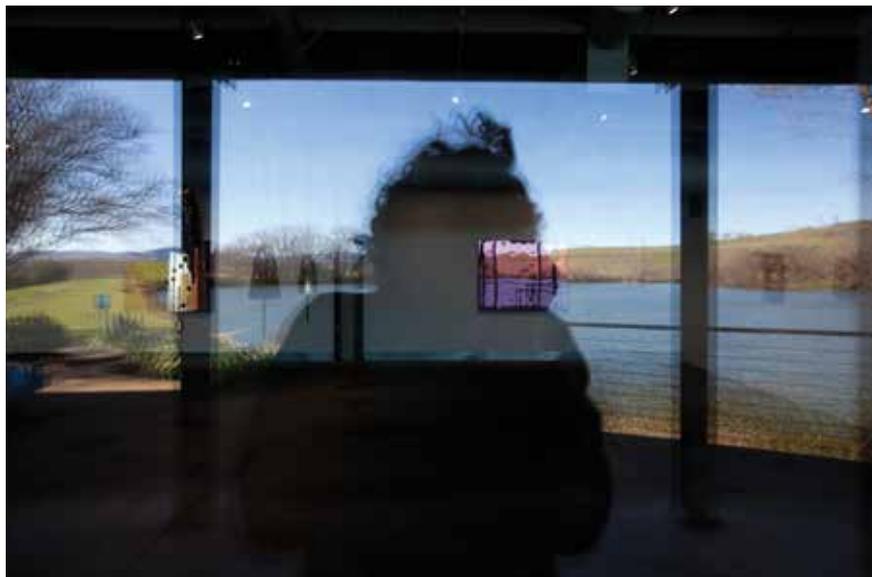
### School tours:

Wednesday through Friday, \$3 per student  
College and university tours: custom tailored, by request, \$3 per student

### Encuentros con arte:

A Spanish-language public tour the first Saturday of every month / Una visita pública a la galería en español el primer sábado de cada mes, 10:30 am–12:30 pm





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# di Rosa

