

## Liz Glynn’s “On the Possibility of Salvage”

PAULA COOPER GALLERY, New York

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The pants belonging to the “friend” of the eighteenth-century Welsh pirate Captain Howard Davis were apparently very tiny. Their sculptural replica, crafted from painted papier-mâché and complete with a petite button fly, now sits in a storage box made of birch in the Tenth Avenue space of the venerable Paula Cooper Gallery, alongside a large, floppy-armed, double-breasted overcoat. As the story goes—when Captain Davis landed at the Portuguese colony of São Tomé, a shipmate went ashore with a bag of second-hand clothes to sell to the “natives.” One can only imagine the small-bottomed man’s shocked expression when the crowd gathering on the beach made off with the goods instead. *Black Suit from a friend of Capt. Howard Davis (Stolen)* (all works 2013)—one of the new pieces on view in Los Angeles-based artist Liz Glynn’s New York solo debut “On the Possibility of Salvage”—exemplifies the artist’s careful balance between humor and pathos, politics and poetry. Taking the themes of piracy, smuggling, wreckage, and recovery as a starting point, Glynn stages an assortment of papier-mâché sculptures in the gallery, which represent either salvaged or seized (depending on one’s perspective) objects across a spectrum of times and cultures.

Why does one become a pirate? The “Golden Age of Piracy” (yes, it was great enough to warrant capital letters, and its own Wikipedia page) took place from roughly 1650 to 1730 and was set against a backdrop of colonial expansion, competing empires, and rapid globalization. Piracy takes hold in the gap between absentee or ineffectual governance and all-out anarchy, negotiating both free markets and strict embargoes. Without a doubt, it is about greed and avarice, but can also be understood as a form of political resistance against exploitation and opportunism. Take, for example, the current wave of piracy that has overtaken the coast of Somalia, where some of the actors involved, angered by foreign incursions into fishing rights and the illegal dumping of toxic wastes, insist on calling themselves the “coast guard.”

For this reason it is easy to see how “On the Possibility of Salvage” has grown out of Glynn’s earlier projects, particularly *Anonymous Needs and Desires (Gaza/Giza)*, the work she produced for the Hammer Museum and LAXART’s “Made in L.A.” biennial in 2012, which referenced both the passageways of the pyramids of Giza and the underground smuggling routes from Egypt into the neighboring Gaza Strip. In general, Glynn’s work maps the uncertainty of our own time onto more evocative moments in history, both as a veiled form of commentary and an exploration of how insecurity informs which objects are valued, desired, and saved.

At Paula Cooper Gallery, the new sculptures straddle the divide between haphazard, homemade kitsch and precious, jewel-like treasures. A surprising number of articles of clothing appear in the installation, including *Smuggler’s Petticoat*, an imagined undergarment hung from the ceiling that features a series of clever hidden pockets meant for squirreling away all sorts of illicit goods. Next to the suit that belonged to Captain Davis’s hapless friend is *Julius Caesar’s Purple Robes (Seized and Released, Aegean Sea)*, a glorious purple toga nestled inside a black, wooden crate with a gold-painted interior—a remnant from when a youthful Caesar was at the mercy of pirates unaware of his power and reputation. Glynn’s exuberant materiality is at a high point here—the stiff pleats of the papier-mâché and the streaky, violet washes of color have a salty brine to them, while the gold embellishments at the waist and shoulder of the toga appear to be dissolved by time.

Indeed, Glynn is clearly at her best when working with themes from antiquity. Fragments of an armless, headless statue, *Ancient Statue in Three Parts (Wrecked and Recovered, Bay of Naples)*, which may have once decorated the Emperor Nero’s summer villa, demonstrates how narrative and mythology confer value to the objects we cherish. Would we care as much about these bits and pieces if they did not once belong to an emperor-madman? This is why I found the centerpiece of the exhibition—*Vessel (Ravaged, Looted, & Burned)*, the partial wreckage of a colonial-era smuggler’s cutter, wedged into the back gallery quite literally like a ship in a bottle—underwhelming during my recent visit. On the show’s opening night, the artist staged *Reverse Siren Song* around the boat;



1 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014.



2 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014.



3 Liz Glynn, *Ancient Statue in Three Parts (Wrecked and Recovered, Bay of Naples)*, 2013.



4 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014.



5 Liz Glynn, *Vessel (Ravaged, Looted, & Burned)*, 2013.

an operatic performance, it featured four singing “sirens,” who were lured to the ship, instead of the other way around. However, without this performative element, the work’s mythology was missing, and the boat felt more like an empty and abandoned set than a lovingly produced facsimile or prop.

The most resonant work in Glynn’s exhibition is *Antikythera Mechanism (Wrecked and Recovered, Antikythera)*, a shallow, green box containing reproductions of thirty-nine fragments of an ancient Greek astronomical calendar. Turning the gears of this analog computer allowed one to calculate the positions of the sun, moon, and five planets known at the time for any given date. The mechanism was discovered amongst the remains of a shipwreck in 1900, but for the past century, scientists have been trying to unlock exactly how the device would have worked. This is truly the *impossibility* of salvage, and the inevitability of decay.

Ginny Kollak is a curator and writer based in Philadelphia. She is curator of exhibitions at the Berman Museum of Art at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania.

- 1 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014. All images courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. All photos by Steven Probert. All images © Liz Glynn.
- 2 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014.
- 3 Liz Glynn, *Ancient Statue in Three Parts (Wrecked and Recovered, Bay of Naples)*, 2013. Three pieces of papier-mâché with acrylic, 56 x 26 x 24 inches.
- 4 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014.
- 5 Liz Glynn, *Vessel (Ravaged, Looted, & Burned)*, 2013. Hardwood with bronze and steel hardware, rope, 86 x 246 x 73 inches.
- 6 Liz Glynn, *Antikythera Mechanism (Wrecked and Recovered, Antikythera)*, 2013. Thirty-nine pieces of papier-mâché with acrylic in birch box with oiled casein paint, 30 x 20 x 3 inches.
- 7 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014.
- 8 Liz Glynn, *Anchor from the King Solomon with Chain Cut by Pirates (Looted, Capt. Roberts)*, 2013. Cardboard and papier-mâché with acrylic and ink, 72 x 11 x 3 inches.
- 9 Liz Glynn, *Vessel (Ravaged, Looted, & Burned)*, 2013. Hardwood with bronze and steel hardware, rope, 86 x 246 x 73 inches.
- 10 Liz Glynn, *Sixteenth Century Pewter Tableware (Wrecked and Recovered, Dominican Republic)*, 2013. Twenty-two pieces of papier-mâché with acrylic in birch box with oiled casein paint, two boxes, first box 37 x 21 x 12 inches, and second box 22 x 14 x 10 inches.



6 Liz Glynn, *Antikythera Mechanism (Wrecked and Recovered, Antikythera)*, 2013.



7 View of Liz Glynn, “On the Possibility of Salvage,” Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2014.



8 Liz Glynn, *Anchor from the King Solomon with Chain Cut by Pirates (Looted, Capt. Roberts)*, 2013.



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