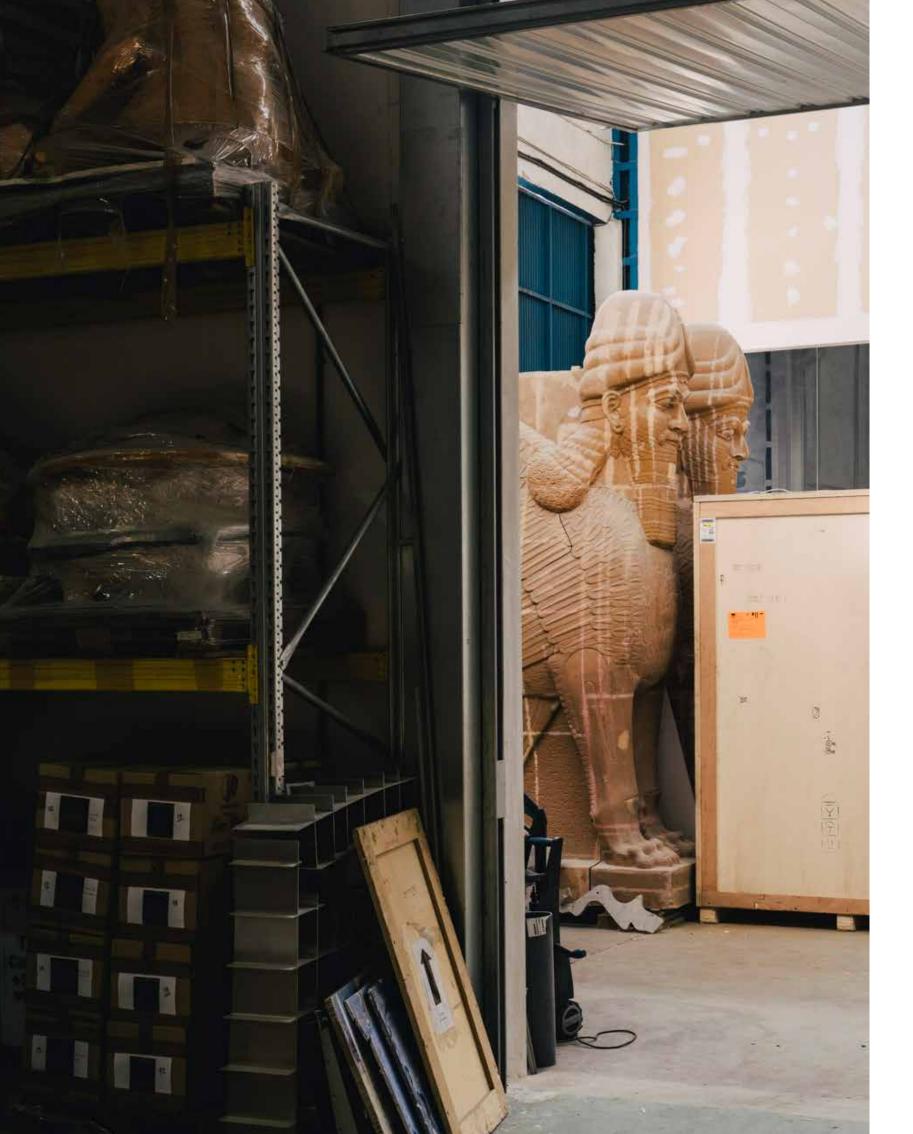
WHAT LIES BENEATH

Creating exact replicas of works of art allows Adam Lowe and his team to get under the skin of some of the world's greatest masterpieces – with incredible results. At his Madrid studio, he explains his approach to Anthony Sattin

Photographs by Salva López









dam Lowe is a copyist. The term has unfortunate connotations, implying an inability to create original work. It is attached to Lowe with justification, though, because he is a man who makes copies, or reproductions. But there is much more to his work than the word 'copyist' suggests.

One of his core projects was a replica of the burial chamber from Tutankhamun's tomb, which opened in Luxor in April 2014. With Factum Arte, a team of artists, technicians and conservators brought together by Lowe and a colleague, he conceived the replica and created it using scanners and flat-bed printers.

The lure of the tragic young pharaoh ensured that the project had great exposure. Interest spiked when British archaeologist Nicholas Reeves published an academic paper suggesting that Tutankhamun's tomb was originally the burial place of Queen Nefertiti. The day after the story ran, in August 2015, Factum Arte's website had almost two million hits. Reeves's argument is credible. For one thing, Tutankhamun's tomb is laid out unlike any other royal burial chamber in the valley, and some of the treasures we associate with the boy king originally carried the queen's name. If Reeves is right – and this is what has caught the public imagination – there might be another tomb

beyond the burial chamber's north wall. Discussions are now under way with the Egyptian authorities to test the wall in the hope of finding what lies beyond.

Lowe is particularly delighted by the attention because Reeves reached this conclusion by using Factum Arte's scans of the original tomb. 'What we are doing is a form of archaeology,' he explains. 'We explore the surface of things. Our scanners and the technology we have developed allow us to see the surface as the eye sees it, but also some of what lies beneath.' The scans of the chamber show that one wall is painted using a different technique from the others, with a different background, and there appears to be the outline of a doorway or opening. But Lowe's delight also stems from his obsession with the relationship between reality and appearance: for years he's been trying to work out how to map the physical presence of objects, how to create an image of something that cannot be photographed but can be seen, how we understand the reality behind images. Now he has created something that allows us to look at things that cannot be seen but can be photographed, or revealed through 3D scanning.

Lowe studied at the Ruskin, then spent three years working for a Masters in Fine Art at London's »

Right, a view of the office, including Adam Lowe's desk. Opposite, a Factum Arte workshop containing facsimiles of the British Museum's two sculptures of human-headed, winged lions from Nimrud







Royal College of Art, where he graduated in 1985. 'I went to university because I got a full grant, and so I had time – paid-for time – to explore.'

One of his influences was the French artist Peter de Francia, who was Professor of Painting at the Royal College. Lowe was painting on canvas and board, but also 'exploring' with photography. His fascination with how things transform led to a series of exhibitions at the Pomeroy Purdy Gallery (now Purdy Hicks) in London's Bankside. The catalogue for his 1992 exhibition, Registration Marks, included essays by the academics Bruno Latour, Adrian Cussins and Brian Cantwell Smith, whose expertise straddles philosophy, anthropology, sociology and cognitive science. These essays were the result of a series of conversations between the four men, and although such interdisciplinary collaborations are now commonplace, a couple of decades ago they were cutting-edge. Lowe remembers having the sense that he was hitting his head against a wall at the time. 'By then, modernism had played itself out,' he says. Convinced that art was not about self-expression, Lowe worked away at the connection Above, Adam Lowe in the Factum Foundation space looking at his work *Littoral Deposits*. Opposite, photographing a 3D-printed polyhedron derived from a book by Wenzel Jamnitzer published in 1568 between objects and how we perceive them. Or, as he put it in the *Registration Marks* catalogue, 'how we register a world... we can no longer assume has given edges, boundaries, objects and truth'.

Two years later, his exhibition *Littoral Deposits* perfectly expressed this fascination with surfaces and with ways to record what cannot be seen. The title refers to what lies on the Thames foreshore between high and low tide and to the 36 images that formed the core of the exhibition. These images were created by fixing etching plates onto the foreshore and leaving them there as the river rose. The plates had a range of different grounds, from very soft to extremely hard, and they recorded the passage of the river and what was dragged along its bottom. Images from the plates were then printed into one long, folded strip and augmented by images of the detritus that remained. 'One thing I like,' Lowe notes as he looks through the print version of the plates, 'is that sometimes nothing very exciting happens.'

Some of the key moments that have led him to where he is now have been conversations. One was at a meeting with Latour at the ICA, following the publication of the sociologist's book We've Never Been Modern, and another with Cantwell Smith to accompany Lowe's Registration Marks show. 'That was when I realised I couldn't do the things I wanted to do alone,' says Lowe. A major turning point was a conversation in London with the Spanish painter and engineer Manuel Franquelo. Franquelo's main concern has been the re-materialisation of objects in paint – he creates hyper-realist images – and through various other types of mediation. After that initial encounter in London, Lowe moved to Madrid in 2000 and together they created Factum Arte.

Factum Arte occupies several warehouses in the eastern district of San Blas. Seated at his desk in the back of the office, with half a dozen people around him, Lowe looks like the manager of a small factory. Then I notice the assembly of objects here and in the meeting room behind him, where replicas of some of the British Museum's sculptures from Nimrud line three of the walls. The fourth wall has huge scanned images of Leda and the Swan, by Leonardo and others; some pieces of a reproduction of the tomb of Seti I in the Valley of the Kings; an analysis of the Institute of Ecotechnics' research vessel Heraclitus, which Lowe is helping to restore; and life-size photographs of an olive tree which was dug up and cast in bronze. But none of this comes close to reflecting the range of Lowe's interests or the scope of Factum Arte's activities. 'Come,' he says with undisguised excitement, 'let me show you the place.'

As we walk, he is eager to tell me that Factum is not about him. It is a collaboration of artists and technicians that has happened organically, without any clear plan or obvious management structure, although at a certain moment he was persuaded to »



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have someone draw up a business plan, 'which I subsequently ignored'. He is also quick to point out that they don't advertise for people to work there: 'People find us; many of them are artists in their own right.' But if there was no plan, there was an intention: 'Factum Arte was set up to bridge the gap between new technologies and traditional crafts – it's all about mediation and transformation.'

Its activities fall into two distinct camps. One is the work they create for other artists. As we walk around, I notice one of Anish Kapoor's huge mirror works in the process of being assembled, a Marc Quinn sculpture being painted and a Rachid Koraïchi bronze, fresh from the foundry. In another part of the hangar, a young woman is checking colour tones on a tapestry that is being woven in Flanders but overseen by Factum Arte. 'It started with Lara,' Lowe explains, referring to the Egyptian-Lebanese artist Lara Baladi. 'We looked into the processes for her.' Since then, the company has overseen work for Grayson Perry (whose tapestry series, The *Vanity of Small Differences*, is hanging on the wall) and many others. In another hangar, a young man has a camera set up in front of an artwork by the Chinese artist Xu Zhen.

But I am more intrigued by the second area of activity: reproduction. Factum Arte has developed its own 3D scanner and printers, and only the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has equipment capable of revealing a similar level of detail. In an upper room, the bright Madrid light banished by blinds, most of the space is taken up by a huge scanner; but the interest lies on a screen, where an expert from a major international museum is looking at scans of one of her institution's masterpieces. As she goes through the various layers of a work she knows so well, the significance of the minutiae dawns on her. Before she leaves, she has an epiphany. 'This is not just a workshop,' she says, tears in her eyes. 'It is an *opera*, a work of art itself.'

Lowe is obviously delighted. 'What she will find might be as explosive as Reeves's discovery,' he says. 'This and other things we are doing will overturn many accepted opinions and theories in art history.' Looking at the scans, I really can see below the surface and identify different layers in the history of the painting. 'Conservation is always about stripping back,' says Lowe, citing the Sistine Chapel, which

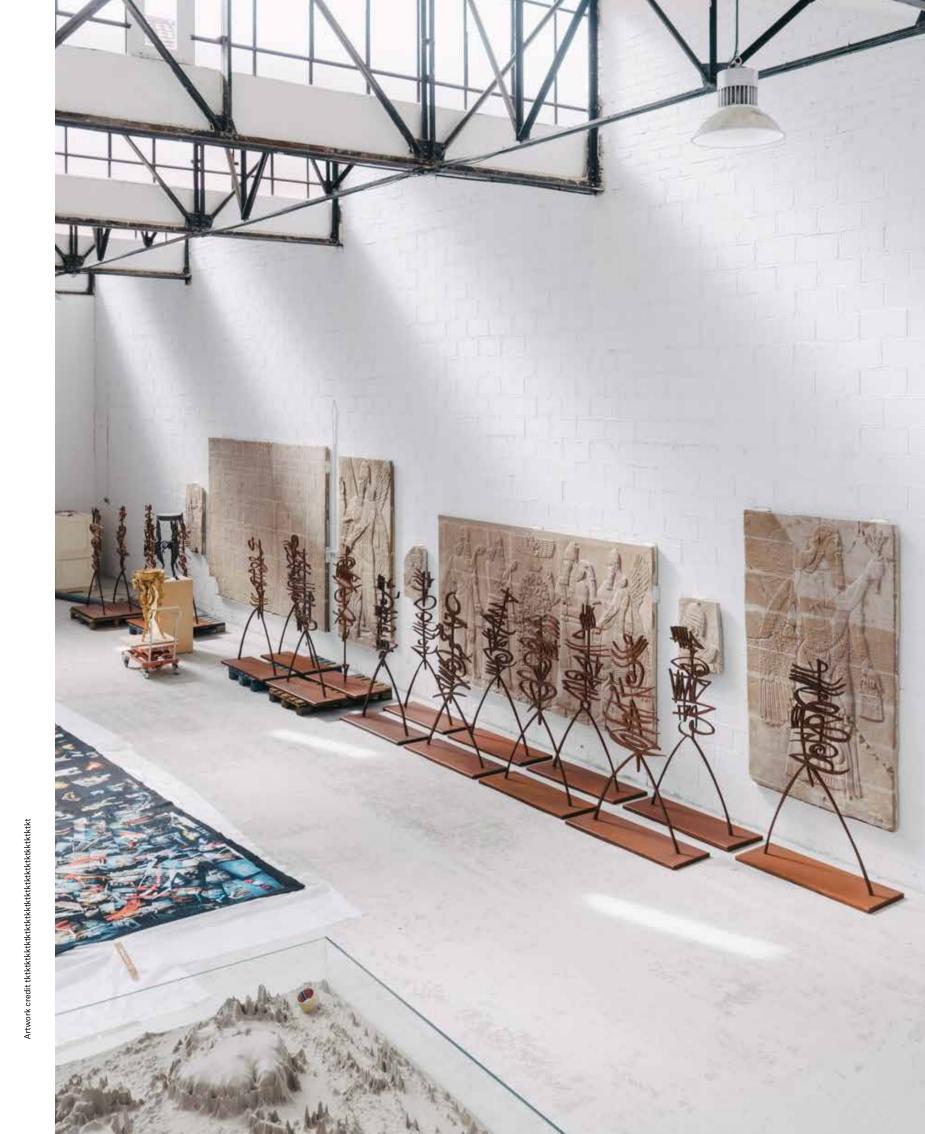


Above, detail of a relief made for the upcoming exhibition *Terra Forming: Engineering the Sublime.* Opposite, *Les Priants*, a group of 21 works for the artist Rachid Koraïchi

of a relief problem. When they cleaned the Sistine Chapel, they stripped away the last surface. That lost surface was also part of the painting.'

Any conversation with Lowe, however brief, will take in antiquity and the modern moment, painting and sculpture, his own thoughts and those of some of the great theorists of our time. But I bring him back to the Tutankhamun replica. Factum Arte sank a significant amount of its own money into the reproduction, which they have since donated to the Egyptian government. 'The hope is that we will be able to reproduce the three other great tombs in Luxor – Seti I [which has suffered so much it has been permanently closed], Tuthmosis III and Nefertari – and place them alongside the Tutankhamun replica in the grounds of Howard Carter's house.'

The point is not just to save those tombs. It is also to challenge our assumptions about what we think is original, or authentic, in a work of art. Lowe refers to the response of an Italian art critic to Factum's reproduction of Veronese's masterpiece, *The Wedding at Cana*. The original, plundered by Napoleon in 1797 and not included in the post-Waterloo reparations, has hung in the Louvre ever since. To mark the 210th anniversary of the looting, Venice's Giorgio Cini Foundation commissioned Factum Arte to create »







Above, a series of early tests relating to the re-creation of a stolen (presumed destroyed) painting by Caravaggio. Opposite, the back half of one of the replica Nimrud sculptures, next to a fragment of a work by Subodh Gupta

an exact facsimile. When the reproduction was hung in its original setting – Palladio's Refectory on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore – on 11 September 2007, the critic Dario Gamboni wrote: 'It seems that many are still wedded to a fixed idea of originality... I would like you to consider that originality is rooted in the trajectory or career of the object – it is not a fixed state of being but a process which changes and deepens with time.' For Gamboni, the reproduction in the Refectory was a more complete and authentic experience than the painting hanging in the Louvre.

Lowe is a man with many plans. He wants to reproduce the Elgin Marbles, mix his replicas with the originals and ask the British Museum and Acropolis Museum to take turns to chose a piece. 'The original marbles, in London, have been significantly changed by conservation,' he says. 'So while they are more authentic, the old pre-conservation plaster casts are more original. I mention the destruction of antiquities in Palmyra and the announcement that one organisation is shipping 3D cameras to Syria. 'There is no such thing as a 3D camera!' he explodes. He has spoken to the person who made the claim and even they have admitted it. But he would like to find funding to send out cameras - ordinary cameras - to the Middle East to record at-risk works. 'The critical thing now is to document. Later we can decide what to do with the material we collect. But

if we lose the data these things contain, then we lose something that could influence future generations.'

Maybe one day soon there will be 3D cameras, and Factum Arte will be using them, although Lowe is more interested in pushing other boundaries. 'I would like our facsimiles to smell and feel like the originals; I want the temperatures and acoustics to be the same. There's a vast amount of work to be done in that area.' That comment reminds me of a line by the Spanish poet Enrique Juncosa, who called Lowe's work 'excessive'. It is also multifaceted, energetic, thought-provoking and definitely ongoing.

Just when I think we have reached the end of the opera, Lowe produces his latest creation, a hydrophobic block of salt. The salt has been coated with a thin skin of an omniphobic material and then put in water. 'One day we will have a block of salt that will withstand water for years. This block lasted several days before the water got in and destroyed it.' He turns the object around on the table. 'Look at how gracefully the outer skin has folded onto itself. It's one of the most beautiful things I can imagine.' This destruction seems the perfect antithesis to his work, but the master of reproduction sits there smiling. 'I'm happy with that.'

Only after I leave does it occur to me that his obsession is with more than surfaces: it is with telling us what they say about the passing of time. •