A Work in Progress

One of the works on view in Roberto Visani: Form/Reform, “liberty blend,” is currently unfinished. The sculpture’s first three panels, comprising the background landscape, were installed prior to the opening of the exhibition. During the following six weeks, the final two sections, which include the horse and figures, will be completed and installed.

While “liberty blend” is in progress, this document offers an in-depth look at the creative evolution of a work of art and unique insight into the way the sculptures in Roberto Visani’s cardboard slave kits series are created.

Step 1

Visani begins by identifying a historical work of art in which enslaved individuals play an important role, influencing our understanding of the institution of slavery—in this case, the ca. 1862 painting “A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves” by Eastman Johnson. Johnson painted three versions of the work. Two are now in public collections, and the location of the third is not known. According to the Brooklyn Museum, where one of the painting’s iterations is on view, the work depicts an African American family fleeing toward Union lines. It is based on an event that Johnson claimed to have witnessed near Manassas, Virginia, on March 2, 1862. The Brooklyn Museum notes that the painting is considered “virtually unique in art of the period” in portraying enslaved people as “agents of their own freedom.”

Step 2

Visani uses 3D modeling software to create a high-resolution model based on the original imagery. Because the file is made up of tens of thousands of polygons or more, the 3D model must be simplified to include fewer and larger triangles in order to be physically built. The artist takes into consideration the level of detail in the finished sculpture as well as the aesthetic and emotive qualities of the original work of art.
Step 3

For large sculptures like “liberty blend,” the model is separated into sections before construction begins. Each section is saved separately and opened in another software program that converts the 3D model into a 2D diagram of irregularly shaped geometries containing triangles and dotted fold lines. The sections are then organized to fit on standard size sheets of cardboard and laser-cut for construction.

Step 4

By folding and gluing edges according to the matching numbers the software provides, Visani recreates the surface of the 3D model. Due to the physical limitation of cardboard, however, an interior support system is also created. The artist uses another software program to “slice” the 3D model into cross sections. Once these cross sections are assembled, they are placed inside or behind the exterior surface to create more structure. In the case of “liberty blend,” because of the size of the artwork, special consideration was given to how the sculpture would attach to the wall securely.

Step 5

While all the sections of the sculpture are produced in the artist’s studio, final assembly of larger works happens within the exhibition space. Stay tuned for the completed installation of “liberty blend” in the coming weeks.