

Laura Hoptman and Eva Rothschild  
in conversation

*Laura Hoptman:* You have said that 'figuration is a vexed issue' in your sculpture and in contemporary sculpture in general, implying that in your work there is a tension between the figurative and the abstract. Figuration is understood to refer to recognisable forms but it is a slippery term, because there are forms found in nature and ones that are recognisable – say, a pyramid – but not necessarily thought of as organic. Abstraction is also a slippery term; there are abstract forms like our pyramid, and then there is formlessness, a total non-objectivity that you see in a monochrome painting. You have done both kinds of sculptures – the sculptures that are shapes and the 'non-objective' or formless ones. To me, the issue doesn't seem to be figuration versus abstraction, but narrativity versus the purely formal. What do you think of this resetting of the argument?

*Eva Rothschild:* It's interesting and is probably closer to where the questions do arise in the work, because narrative implies a greater range of associative referents than figuration. Figuration is actually quite narrow, whereas narrative suggests a multiplicity of arising meanings. Also, I suppose I have to admit that a sense of underlying narrative is introduced through the titles, which have always resisted confirming the formal aesthetic concerns present in many of the works.

*LH:* Do individual abstract forms – a pyramidal or star-structure – have a significance in your work, a meaning, even if it is just metaphoric?

*ER:* They do have a significance in terms of a kind of recognition or geometric familiarity, but the significance is specifically not metaphoric. The pyramid is a particularly interesting structure, as it has more subjective associations than any other geometric form due to our knowledge of its use in history. However, while we as viewers may bring something to the pyramid, for me the form is not a stand-in for any meaning other than what it may carry in its own materiality and presence.

*LH:* So the pyramid and other geometries are kind of 'gestalt' objects? Forms that one apprehends all at once, with a kind of inchoate understanding?

*ER:* Yes, I think that is a good way to put it. They are forms with a kind of intrinsic rightness or presence.

*LH:* Your installation at Tate Britain of triangular forms that seemed to be soaring, even shooting

down the gallery, had an unforgettable dynamism, a real energy that worked brilliantly with the stolid neoclassicism of the architecture. It seemed to me to be modern, even futuristic, without being either ironic or nostalgic. Was there a narrative to that installation? Do you think there is a kind of dialogue with, or commentary on, the history of modern European sculpture in this piece in particular?

*ER:* *Cold Corners* was sequential, even episodic, but this was more a formal than a narrative property of the piece. The piece necessarily had to traverse the galleries, so the form was driven by the existing architecture. I did not think specifically about modernism in my creation of the piece, but in its direct dialogue, even argument, with the neoclassical Duveen Galleries, there is perhaps a sense of clash between different aesthetics which could be related to the development of modern sculpture. In approaching the commission, I did refer to previous installations in the galleries, though, and I was particularly interested in the Serra shown in 1992, where a ton of lead was placed in a very condensed format at the far end of the Duveens. The economy of that piece and its reliance on the knowledge of the weight and density of the materials was what interested me, and I wanted to bring in something that had a totally different manifestation and yet was also very materially based in the space.

*LH:* Your connection to the history of postwar sculpture, from Anthony Caro to the American Minimalists, has often been mentioned. What is your relationship to Minimalist and post-Minimalist sculpture?

*ER:* I feel my interests lie more directly with artists like John McCracken, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt, who created their work within the Minimalist moment/movement but seemed to be trying to create works that resonated beyond that idiom. Following on from that generation, the artist who had the most impact on me was Cady Noland, whose work completely changed my understanding of the possibilities of art when I saw it at college in the early 1990s.

*LH:* If there is a tension between the narrative and the formal in your work, there are also tensions between geometric and organic form, the processed and the natural. This tension is most evident in your recent outdoor work. There is no doubt that your piece



*Someone and Someone*, installed in Regent's Park in autumn 2009, was industrially fabricated; the colours, particularly, were decidedly not from nature. Yet the flanks of the arch form resembled both human forms as well as tree branches. It made the obviously alien form more at home in the landscape. Maybe the word 'negotiation' is a better word to describe the relationship between the natural and artificial?

ER: We are so used to the presence of the natural and the artificial alongside each other now that I don't think there is a particular anxiety around that anymore, and our sense of what is natural and what is artificial, especially within the urban context, is quite complicated. The placing of a painted steel sculpture in the landscaped and manicured context of a royal park, while different from a gallery setting, is still, essentially, the placement of a manufactured object in a manufactured space. That particular piece, *Someone and Someone*, did surprise me in how it became so humanised around the two bases; I knew there was a suggestion of that in the form, but I did not anticipate how present it would be. The piece was fabricated due to its scale, which does give me a different relationship to it. The majority of my works are made in the studio where everything is very directly under my control, and changes, flaws and failures can be absorbed and adapted into the work until the moment when the end is declared. With pieces made externally there is a different process. They are essentially finished at the point where I finish the model or drawing, and then I have to let them exist free of any further interference on my part. This allows me to have a different relationship with those pieces. In a way, I can be much more of an audience for them, I can discover them in a totally different way than the studio work, where I can only ever view and critique my own processes.

LH: Within your oeuvre there are examples of work that does not reveal the artist's hand, and also more handmade ones like *Ashes* that incorporate braided leather, or the irregular, hand-formed beads that make up *Us Women*. Do you deploy these handmade elements as a vehicle for narrative? Is it in these elements where the narrative in these sculptures happens?

ER: The handmade does tend more towards the narrative or associative than the fabricated, but I don't necessarily approach making on these terms. I tend to think of works together as a group, and to gauge what they might need materially in terms of what the other pieces they are with might lack or might benefit from. I think that the narrative in the works, and this may well be what you have been asking me about all along, comes from the conversations the works can have as a body or group rather than anything a piece can do on its

own. If all the works were beaded or braided, then the meanings they create would be quite different than those that can be generated by having these handcrafted objects placed equally in a body of works which also use industrial processes.

LH: There are works like *Phoenix* that have both going on – the knotting of the rug and the slick surface of the resin. *Old Masters*, too. Both are hybrid objects with elements that seem to work in parallel rather than together (again, we can use the descriptive 'tension'). Can we read this as a competition between methodologies? Between the past and present? Between male and female?

ER: *Old Masters* brings together the manufactured and the handmade quite directly – one is supported and framed by the other – but they remain materially separate objects. *Phoenix* is different in many ways, not least because the two elements are permanently joined so they become one new hybrid object – the resin rug. Also, it is one of the only pieces I have made with something that pre-exists. I bought the carpet to make the work, which is not something I've really done before. The rug was handmade, but not by me, and I was very ambivalent about 'destroying' it. The process whereby the rug is coated in resin was quite uncontrolled, despite our best efforts, and the result was much more organic and fluid than I had anticipated.

Regarding the question of gendered objects and practices, I think there is a tension, and I am aware of the female readings that are placed on crafted, as opposed to manufactured, objects. I consider myself primarily as a female artist, and I think that my gender is significant to my practice in every way. Making does tend to generate different responses, depending on the gender of the maker, and there has traditionally been a gap between the value of women's making being seen as a craft activity while male making has more often been raised to the privileged status of art. Often the most important part of my use of craft processes is based in expediency – how do you get what you want from the materials? It's a basic question but it is the starting point for almost any sculpture. If you know that you want to make something that has colour changing from red to black to white, and you also know that you don't want to paint that sculpture or to involve others in its making, then you have to find a way to achieve that yourself. For me, plaiting the leather and phasing colours in and out achieves that, and it also brings something else to the sculpture, a meaning that is carried in the materials and processes.



LH: What about colour? What is its significance in your work?

ER: The colour I use the most is black and I set that apart from other colours, it is more like another material to me. It has been more consistently present in my work for the past ten years than any other element. Black defines the space a sculpture occupies, and in its different surfaces, matt or glossy, it can be deployed to create illusions of depth and reflectivity. I also often use red and green, as I feel they have a defining quality and a toughness that other colours lack. They are complementary colours and have a natural resonance when placed together, but they seem to be clearer opposites than the other complementary pairings. Their associations are quite functional: left and right, stop and go. Often the linear pieces are broken by stripes of red and green, and I am interested in how the eye follows the broken line, especially when the colour is at odds with breaks in the structure.

Generally, my application of colour is quite rigid and follows or interrupts the form in a very controlled way, but I have recently made some spray-painted pieces such as *Yr Inner Child* where I have very little control over the paint. I am interested in this as a way of applying paint to a curved or irregular surface, because here the paint becomes the straight line as it travels from the can and the painting of the object occurs where it materially blocks the trajectory of the paint. Hopefully, this leaves a kind of a gap between the intention of the painting and the intention of the sculpture.

LH: You have said that 'colour ruins the purity' of form. Do you mean that it humanises the geometry?

ER: I think it draws us into details in the geometry, and that it can mislead and confuse the eyes in relation to the actual location of surfaces within a structure. Maybe, previously, I felt it was a bad thing to ruin the purity of form but I think I might be changing my mind about that!

LH: When you deploy black, though, it sounds like your method is closer to drawing in three dimensions. The body of work makes use of a kind of three-dimensional outline to sharply delineate forms in space – it reminds me of the neoclassical British artist John Flaxman (1755–1826). Is there a connection to drawing in your practice?

ER: I always draw to begin to understand what I might want to make, and I do ink drawings, which, although separate from the sculptures, have a similar sensibility. Drawing affords an artist a freedom from the physical realities which often end up dictating

three-dimensional forms. Some of the more linear pieces such as *Jokes* or *Jealous Sea* come very directly from drawing, and often I find that when the work is documented it seems to revert to its drawn state, as the dimensionality and depth all but disappear in the photographic image.

LH: You have said that 'you can't fabricate a chaotic object', and that objects like *Little Ghost* were among the most challenging works you have made to date. Is this because you cannot gauge the outcome?

ER: It's because you can't control the process. To produce a randomised object is really difficult, because in making our hand tends to lead us towards order. If you try and scribble on a page, within a few turns the hand starts repeating itself and the pattern becomes standardised. Similarly, to make a random three-dimensional structure is almost an oxymoron, because structure demands regularity, even geometry, if it is to hold form. *Little Ghost* is one of a number of pieces trying to have an extremely confused form and each fails in its own way, having parts that become repetitive, structural collapses and almost infinite capacities to absorb materials without gaining any significant size or structure. In this sense they are frustrating and almost horrifying, but on the other hand that is why they interest me so much.

LH: How do you want people to relate to your sculptures? What is the ideal interaction?

ER: I have a very physical relationship to the pieces which comes from the necessary manipulation and construction involved in producing the work. In the studio I perceive the work very much in relationship to the body, and quite specifically the hand which is generally the primary location of construction. The photographs I make refer to this physical relationship with the works, and the cards for my shows always have an image of me holding or interacting with something that usually becomes part of a work, but once my pieces leave the studio I feel that this direct physical relationship ends and the eye becomes the primary source of interaction.

I know that the work has a physical presence which relates to the body, and that this is of course one of the characteristics of sculpture, but I always privilege the experience of the eye over that of the body. I increasingly think about the eye of the viewer as pieces move towards being finished, because the viewer's eye is the unknown eye; it is the eye that can come across the piece for the first time and can see it as I cannot. Ideally, I want the works to engage and confuse the eye, and for this confusion to allow a kind of hard looking to occur where the eye and the brain become aware of looking

as a way of understanding a confused or deceptive materiality. Within this mode of looking there is also the hoped-for possibility of a kind of transcendent view, whereby belief in the possibilities of art, magic and transformation of both the materials and ourselves as the viewer may, even momentarily, occur.

*LH:* You have a work from 2007, a diamond-shaped form made from shiny black Perspex. It has an intriguing title: *Ordinary Me and Magical You*. Can you say something about the title? Does it have to do with the object-viewer relationship?

*ER:* Yes, it does. The piece is located in a corner and reflects both itself and the viewer. There is no direct explanation of the title, more a sense of being

doubled within the piece which is doubling again on itself. I know at the time of that piece I wanted to make work that had a generosity towards the viewer. Other pieces in the same show were called *Kindness* and *All for you*. In a way, the title is a way of working against the material hardness of the piece and offering a way in which addressing the viewer – me or you – makes him or her part of the work.

*LH:* Is *Ordinary Me and Magical You* a kind of mandala?

*ER:* Many of the works are kind of mandalas. The idea of the mandala as a visual object created to facilitate transformation and transcendence has always been close to the way I think about making art.