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I've often heard you say that making sculpture in the 21st century is an impossible proposition. What do you mean by that? And what do you think the position of sculpture is today? Is it the same as when you first started making work?

I mean 'impossible' on a couple of levels – one being my personal experience over the last twenty years of trying to make the kind of sculpture I wanted to make – which requires a lot of space, materials, storage and time etc. Then on another level, the social climate I have been living in where I would say a process of dematerialisation has been occurring – a push towards compactness – economic pragmatism and an art world that at times became intensely academic and overly rational. But of course the impossibility is part of the draw, so I mean impossible in a very optimistic sense. Historically though, sculptors often experience a long and hard journey before they can really work with freedom, so maybe it has always been like that. But at least these days I am sure that the world really needs sculpture and art in general, perhaps more than ever.

I'm reading a fascinating book at the moment by Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, which laments, if you like, the loss of knowledge production through the hand, through doing and making in advance of thinking, and the potential social and communal ramifications of that. I wanted to ask you whether the very specific and physical relationship you have with material is the starting point for the work or whether it is preconceived in imagery? There's something that seems to reference this in the new work, for instance, *Clay Mountain I (Sun)* (2010).

I am fascinated by the act – whatever form it takes – of making art. And in a broad sense by how an artist responds to the world and the action that occurs from that interaction. I suppose I felt the need to return to very simple means to play out that drama – I wanted to get rid of the ready-made and figure out what I looked like and how I reacted to the world. I had no love of craft, or a romantic notion of producing things by hand. I just wanted to find space to act.

I remember Richard Serra saying something similar, that although the ready-made may have opened up a world of possibility, it nevertheless hasn't led to any greater invention in the making of a work.

That first moment you make something from scratch that you take seriously – it really changes you. It is horrifying and thrilling, and for me it set off a chain of events that I am still living. In the beginning in Amsterdam, it just flowed out of me in a pretty terrifying way. I had no idea where the ideas and images were coming from and it was almost a psychedelic experience that I was not prepared for and that nearly destroyed me. Over time, I have established some kind of balance between intention and its material manifestation. In *Clay Mountain*, which you mentioned before, this is the clay 'caught' before I try to do something with it. I work often on the floor and make piles of fresh clay around the studio that I then use to make the 'sculptures'. In this case I wanted to catch that moment of anticipation. I should also say it is a piece

I didn't actually 'make', in that my assistants had piled it up perfectly for me and I just climbed on it and messed with it while I was thinking. Though I'm still not sure if the piece you saw is actually finished yet.

**Yet there is a strong emotional impact that comes through your work. Do you feel this emotion has to be tempered, or brought under control in some way?**

I think my best work is the work that is most emotionally open – and that is a hard state to get in because it is really about reporting honestly on what you think, see and feel. I think humans are always emotional beings and it's dangerous when we forget that, and I think art – particularly visual art – is one of the last places where we can really explore that right now. You have to work to be able to work – if you know what I mean. This applies in my case. There is a lot of courting and laying down groundwork and every so often the creative act just drops by – when you're in the shower or something. But mostly I have to build up the studio and create an environment that is conducive. Most artists I know talk about this a lot – how you keep the muses happy!

**You have commented to me that your studio team has come to recognise the emotional strengths of a successful piece, that there is an emotional connection there. Has the growth of the studio over the last four to five years had a dramatic impact on the work?**

Yes, that's a very optimistic thing for me – the realisation that my studio as a whole could become a kind of being or a performance that could include other people rather than just me. Neither of my studio assistants, Andy nor Danny, are from the art world – in fact, none of my assistants are. Yet there is a strange, shared feeling when a piece is successful, and I don't mean just technically. In some ways making sculpture is like making a movie or staging an opera, you really need a good team that operate in a kind of mystical way, and so the studio – the group – when it's working well has a kind of magic where everyone feeds on the energy. Though I don't think it has changed the direction of the work per se, as I still usually do the creative work alone at night, but it has allowed me to feel less lonely and exhausted, and practically it also means I'm much less likely to have a fatal accident!

**Historically some of the emotional charge in the work came through colour, but in recent years you've tended to reserve colour for the masks, which have become a strong signature for you. Could you say something about how that change evolved?**

After leaving Amsterdam the colour disappeared really very quickly. I think that was to do with moving to Brussels and facing a new kind of reality there. I didn't want to dress things up or perform, or, more precisely, I had no audience to perform to. Colour on the sculptures began to feel like a form of make-up or a cheap effect – instead the form and the process of making became central in a very private or intimate way. It should also be said that Brussels was very much an inward journey for me and my wife Amy, like disappearing into a cave. It was a Rimbaud type of thing: 'He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences', and in that state, at that time, I felt I didn't need anything that could distract from it. Now, when I make the masks they are really visages or portraits, and the colour comes from the coloured pencils I draw with, which feels very different – they aren't painted or made up masks for a performance.

**Drawing is important to you? You seem to be continually drawing. And drawing on the surface of the sculptures themselves is a distinctive trait in your work.**

I rarely actually draw on the sculptures themselves – the drawing is often printed – as a by-product of the process. When I make a flat plaster plane or shape it is usually created by pouring the wet plaster on a drawn out shape that I make on the studio floor. I often work for a while on that floor drawing, as it's a way to get the feeling, shape and scale of the particular plane correct for the piece. After I'd arrived in LA, I started using Tuf-Cal plaster to pour and shiny melamine boards to make the drawings on. The plaster really picked up the drawings clearly – like a print – and that was a great revelation. I realised those sculptural elements were in fact drawings and vice versa. But yes, drawing is the beginning of the whole process for me, on every level, and is an activity I have been doing continually since before I could talk or crawl or any of that stuff, so it holds a mystical freedom for me. It's also because sculpture can get so weighed down by craft and technicality and practicality – keeping the act of drawing close is really essential.

**You were asked once from which lineage do you emerge: Picasso or Duchamp?  
I think you mockingly said Hanna-Barbera. But, more seriously, isn't European modernism the touchstone for your work?**

I actually didn't say that mockingly! Although I understand it could sound ironic. But cartoons, comics and movies were really some of the first things I saw that represented the figure, and I loved them and was tremendously fascinated by them. There were a range of odd things I looked at when I was young that are tied together in my memory: a book my father had on the Middle Ages, a crazy painting my mum made on my bedroom wall of Spiderman, the *Magical Mystery Tour* album cover, *Star Wars*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Jason and the Argonauts* – these things are mixed together in me and certainly still resonate in my work today. So of course the first time you see Epstein's *Rock Drill* for example, or African Fang sculpture, or Picasso, it is seen through this lens. Those artworks also came along much later in my life once I had visited London. As you know, Leeds is not known for its great museums. But yes, I love, and look at, and am deeply influenced by European modernism. I have also had big revelations with the work of Michelangelo, Donatello and of course Giotto, with Carl Andre, with Japanese Kamakura sculpture, with Broodthaers, Ensor and Magritte in Belgium. I love art and love that history, but I have also had incredible relationships with other artists, who are friends, which feed you and affect the work.

And what about those popular cultural references, I know film for instance plays a huge role in informing your imagery?

I think there is a strong relationship between film, performance and sculpture because they are dealing with a kind of crude collision between reality and fantasy. I was just at a Paul McCarthy talk where he described his studio as a kind of dysfunctional film set, which I can totally relate to. I find films really pleasurable but also useful for me. For example, I have been recently watching *The Last Detail* directed by Hal Ashby repeatedly and I find it helps to look at the intimacy in which he lets the drama of a figure or actor play out – his use of very simple posture or facial detail is incredibly powerful. I once read that Elia Kazan told Brando to look at Rodin's sculptures to help with his performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is fantastic if it's true. But I should also point out that I listen to music a lot, almost always when I'm working. I think we have been incredibly lucky to have this amazing period of music. For me, my first real avant-garde experiences – the ones that changed my perspective on life – were with The Beatles, Bob Dylan and later Neil Young. I think they, and others during this period, made incredibly important works of art.

What has moving to LA brought to your work? It strikes me that not only the very act of making sculpture in the particular resource-hungry and traditional manner that you do may be deemed 'impossible', but also you've compounded that by making works that engage in a distinct figuration, while being based in the homeland of American minimalism... Do you consciously take that position?

Well – you really have to remember how Amy and I arrived in LA. We were like shipwrecked pilgrims, we had absolutely nothing and the city took us in and embraced us when nowhere else would. I loved the city from the first moment I walked into it and it was only after arriving in LA that my faith in sculpture and art returned and was energised. I can't think of any other city on earth that is better for an artist on so many levels. It is a city that is literally a giant rambling installation. If you move freely around it you cannot believe the things you can see and experience in a day. The history of art making here is so relatively small and marginalised and open to new energy that there is not really any kind of dogma that dominates or oppresses in any big way. It's funny how often East coasters and Europeans see LA as having this kind of Zen, minimal, conceptual, cool, surfer thing – which is true I guess in some micro-climate of the city – but this place is huge and utterly unfathomable and absolutely a home for me and my family and my work.

You quite recently staged an exhibition with Aaron Curry at minimalism's spiritual home: Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas – how was that?

I guess I did feel a kind of hostility or sense of blasphemy when Aaron and I worked on *Two Face* in Marfa, because we were literally on Judd's doorstep. I thought that was exciting, as I have tremendous respect for Judd's work. But from the look on the faces of the Chinati groups that passed through and from some of the discussions we had there with the art tourists, I felt like we were viewed as marauding heathens! But that's the danger when the whole thing starts to become a religion or lifestyle. As Dylan says beautifully: 'He not busy being born is busy dying.'

Do you get frustrated with the continual suggestion of an oppositional relationship between figuration and abstraction or figuration and conceptualism? The figuration doesn't make them any less knowing, conceptual... you wouldn't say that Rodin had any less a conceptual underpinning that Brancusi for instance?

I think it's ultimately pretty insane that the art-academic response to the 20th century and its way of rationalising modernism led to this idea that abstraction, and later what could be called a conceptually-based art, meant that an artist was more intelligent or relevant, or something along those lines. Everything ends up having mannerisms, and I find most art that makes any kind of clear literal sense is often pretty unsuccessful. When I was at art school in London it was a fantasy that was everywhere, and it seemed so logical and tidy, which is probably why art historians and curators loved it. But I find it hard to accept that Marcel Duchamp would be cool with being a kind of godfather of institutional critique – or wanted anything to end up being academic or institutionalised. I can't imagine any artist who would want their work to be consciously 'knowing'. I certainly don't think the only way forward is figurative sculpture – it just happened to be what I felt could open up space and possibilities for myself and it was the horse I rode in on. So yes, I find it insane to even wonder who has any more or less conceptual underpinning and whether representing a figure or not has any bearing on that.

You've historically worked through groupings of particular kinds of works, the masks, the coins, the heads, gates etc. The masks in particular have been such a strong signature and clearly steeped in such cultural and art historical references.



Constantin Brancusi, *Socrates*, 1922

The gates and the coins, which I just showed in New York, came from something quite specific which was wanting to make sculptures for the land we own and live on in Tujunga, which is in the hills above LA. It is a very raw chaparral canyon that we built a pathway around and I wanted to create a kind of sculpture park that could be viewed and walked through on this journey around and over the hills. The gates would have been markers – or places to rest under. The coins I wanted to scatter around the land and lean on trees etc. But it's true that the coin / circle motif has returned periodically in my work over the last decade, sometimes as an architectural element, sometimes as part of a face or an eye, or even as the sun or moon. The masks often come in sets and are about trying to solve a problem or riddle I am having with a piece. They are a way to work through a progression of visual ideas. The heads are often the same thing but I've noticed the series play out over a longer time period. The masks began as failed heads for figures that I ended up hanging on the wall. Then I found that having them hanging in the studio helped me continue working. I was always wary about putting them out as artworks because I saw them as studies. But over time clearly some masks didn't need or want bodies – or turned out to be bodies themselves in a sense. The cultural history of masks or their relationship to performance / ritual is not really the fascination for me. I am mostly just trying to figure out what a face is and looks like and how you try to represent that because as far as I'm concerned, photos tend to do a pretty strange job. I've found often that when the heads are the most 'mask-like' they end up seeming the most realistic or true to reality let's say, which is quite strange. At the end of the day I could probably say that I hope all the work is part of a grouping or developing series. I was just in Paris at the Brancusi studio and it is the most superb example of this I have ever seen.

And you seem to want to confound expectations here, especially in the new exhibition at Modern Art Oxford that brings together your recent passage of work...

I don't really want to confound expectations – because this is my first real show in the UK, and I'm not sure if anyone has any! But of course it is, for me personally, a powerful thing to be coming back to England – as my work led me on a journey way out and now brings me back. I am tempted, because of that, to try and do some kind of 'greatest hits' as a Freudian thing. But instead I think the group of works will talk

about the point I am at, now, on my journey, and the different crossroads I now perceive to be before me. I am particularly pleased that we have been able to show the Whitney Biennial *Baby* (2009–10), and that we will present it with *Sprawling Octopus Man* (2009), as these two pieces I always saw as a kind of diptych and are important milestones for me. I think I have tried to present works that are the most vulnerable and open, and I hope that there is a feeling of possibility and energy.

**So, Duchamp or Picasso?**

... Picasso, and on a foggy day, Duchamp.

**Rodin or Brancusi?**

... I need them both!

**Beatles or Stones?**

... The Beatles, but I love the Stones – and this being Oxford, I think the greatest albums of our generation are Radiohead's for sure.

**Ali or Frazier?**

... Ali – of course.

**De Niro or Pacino?**

... I just recently watched *Casino* again; De Niro and Pesci are extraordinary.

**Yogi Bear or Top Cat?**

... Yogi Bear as a reassuring thing – Top Cat for the studio!