

Q + A

CLAYTON SEAN HORTON AND MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN, 2013

This interview was published to coincide with an exhibition, 'Seven Sculptures' at Horton Gallery in New York City in June, 2013.

CLAYTON SEAN HORTON: Your artwork often seems to exist in the space between materiality and poetry; in the past you've incorporated things like a 1985 Ocean Pacific windbreaker, a Campo del Cielo meteorite, and a cut ponytail from a Mid-Western girl...and you've made objects like a monochrome replica of a 1986 Dwight Gooden jersey, a fiberglass replica of the helmet worn by Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto, and a handmade wooden replica of a 1987 Promax J-1 Super Jumbo Boom Box. How do you decide when to invoke this sort of backstory to an object?

MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN: The space between poetics and materiality is a good frame for a couple of ideas I'm invested in; it's also an interesting, lateral way to address your question of 'backstory.' The sculptures embrace a double-reality where materials and objects travel between their lives 'with us;' a reality that supports their associative meanings, poetics, functions, references, mythologies, politics, and ordering systems that we construct for them, and their inward, private lives as pure material 'without us;' a parallel, more speculative reality where objects float in psychic voids, ambivalent to our desires and needs for them. I'm curious if somewhere in-between this object-oriented shadow world freed from human associations, and the mind-dependent, literate world we create for objects, there might be a fucked-up, but totally generative 'third thing.' Maybe an animistic plane of spirited forms evading us, escaping the gravitational pull of our poems and our metaphors. A place where objects, when they choose to visit us, do so with all their unknowable intelligence and perverse strangeness intact.

Your question about 'backstory' - this invisible, unobservable reality existing around objects - could help access this 'third thing.' Generationally, we seem increasingly skilled at parsing tiny, even alchemical details that exist, or we believe to exist within objects. Think about going food shopping, maybe for just a single apple. You walk into a store and we see bins and bins of apples. As we peruse the apples we make decisions, not just on how we project the apple might taste, but whether its organic, certified organic, genetically modified, whether its locally grown, or grown far away, or in a country that we agree with politically. And what is the total carbon footprint of an apple sourced from an orchard in New Zealand? And how were the workers treated that picked the apples? As we choose our apple we silently consider many extra-diegetic layers of information, *meanings* that form an invisible but palpably real backstory to the fruit-object. This kind of connoisseurship isn't static and carries over to corporate brands and computers and sneakers and chairs, 2 by 4's and bagged potting soil, koi fish and bottled water and of course is directly transferable to how we think about and consider art objects.

For me, there are moments when specific external details about an object, such as how it was made, or what it was made from, or its compounding meta-histories should surface. These details have the possibility to tell us about ourselves, our time, and belief in things - but it's not enough. For it to work, an object's private reserve of hidden-away knowledge and arcane anecdotes - the backstory - must also find access to larger, more shared structures; the ancestral, the civic, the continental. There, an object's metaphors stretch out from the clique-ish to the communal - something way more generous.

CSH: In addition to your materials, your titles are also a vital component; in particular *Sister Giving Birth* and *A Hundred Twenty Six Billion Acres*, which are both on view here. At what point do you introduce language into your process?

MJM: I work with language throughout the process, but titles usually come toward the end. A title is a way of establishing some parameters - a kind of ethos, or logic for a work to exist in. *A Hundred Twenty Six Billion Acres* refers to, in a very deadpan way, the total acreage of the earth's surface. It's also the title for the smallest sculpture in the exhibition: two carved wood cell phones conjoined sculpturally - an iPhone 5 and a Samsung

4S - resting on a common aluminum can form.

Sister Giving Birth is a sculpture of a white olive tree on a low ziggurat-like plinth with a hair braid encased in resin, then re-sculpted in low relief, which levitates near a circle-form. I hope the title helps frame a dual consciousness, one that's also very literal, like, how do you make a sculpture of a sibling giving birth; this intensely psychedelic moment of entrance and renewal and crazy out-of-time-primacy. 'Sister' also references an ancient grove of olive trees in Lebanon called *The Sisters*. The trees, some aged 7000 years, are older than counties and pyramids each living in a deep continuum of ancient fecundity – dissociated from our births, and rituals, and technologies.

CSH: *Certain Principles of Light and Shapes Between Forms*, which was the rainbow that you constructed from harvested and reclaimed rainwater at the Bemis Center for Contemporary art in Omaha, NE, and *The Possibility of Men and the River Shallows*, a large-scale installation made for Grand Arts, Kansas City, MO and *DiverseWorks*, Houston, TX are arguably your most well-know works to date. Yet this exhibition marks a clear return to discrete objects. Do you find that the differing scales changes your relationship to narrative?

MJM: I don't think so. The larger works, although they have the possibility to hold and meter time with much more narrative potential, really screw around with narrative as an efficient delivery mechanism for meaning. In earlier work, there was an overt engagement with using the machinery of narration, in particular theater, so there were a lot of props, sets, risers, the back stage, lighting and special effects to build a relationship with narration as a concept. Although I was using theatrical tropes within the work, I realized, perhaps counterintuitively, that a sculpture is actually missing the tools to communicate a true narrative arc, lacking the most basic elements required in storytelling: a beginning and end. Without an originating point and a totalizing conclusion, a sculpture exists as an inherently unstable device for narration, forever swirling around *in medias res*. This was an important realization for me, that within sculpture's genetic makeup I couldn't create the meanings contained in our most culturally popular forms: think the novel, the essay, film, TV shows, YouTube videos, theater, music. Sculpture is a strange communication outlier, almost mystical by design. Yet for me realizing this limitation created some generative conditions to not only think about the *nature* sculpture, but to think through the process of how one could *make* a sculpture.

CSH: For someone who may be seeing your artwork for the first time, what would you suggest are some of the common threads that run throughout the large-scale projects that we've mentioned as well as the sculptures currently on view at the gallery?

MJM: Traveling through all my work, there's a fundamental consideration for objects, materiality and histories with sensitivity to how things build and shed meanings over time. Also, there's an ongoing involvement with different modes of processing and representing a form. More recently the works play with the intersection of our physical, object-based world with allusions to our screen-based lives - a bifurcated day-to-day reality we're asked to toggle more and more fluidly between. There's also an interest in a homemade, armchair branch of Animism, something like techno-voodoo, coming out of an increased reverence for objects through the very negation of them, coupled with exponentially more information *about* them - classic questions encountered while wading through our shared Post-Internet condition. This relates more generally to a continued interest in the ongoing project of sculpture making – like why make sculpture now? I feel like there is a lot more to mention, but those are some of the ideas that come immediately to mind.

At the risk of over-determining some of the concepts in actual work, maybe it's helpful to conceptually ground and diagram some ideas here. The central component, as you mentioned earlier of *Certain Principles of Light...* was a prismatic rainbow that appeared very fleetingly in the sky. In a very speculative way, I wanted to build a structure to understand the rainbow as an ancient form, one totally out-of-time like a time-traveler immune to the effects of age or evolution. When we witness a rainbow it appears to us exactly as the first one did millions of years ago. The project set the rainbow-image in relation to a few other primary forms that included: a Bristlecone Pine tree dug from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains - an object with DNA allowing it to be the oldest living thing on the earth. A massive 110-pound Campo del Cielo meteorite – a non-earth object

older than the earth itself. A Micronesian shell pulled from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and a handmade quilt from Pennsylvania made around 1880. Although *Certain Principles of Light...* was physically huge with the rainbow stretching city blocks, the project's principle sculptural language is shared with the smaller works in the gallery now. For instance, even as *The Throat* - a set of three objects levitating on a fabric backdrop - might reference archeological field photography, CGI green-screen magic or quote drapery from Greek and Roman statuary, the work directly engages a similar object-based poem by triangulating a set of shared forms: block of wood, a shell, and a meteorite.

Another work, *The Constant Now*, is really a conceptual primer for the entire show and condenses a set of core of concepts I've been working with for years. The work contains a collaged group of homemade stock photos of hands holding objects - from a lump of clay, to sushi, to an iPhone - all hovering on a black and white photograph of pottery shards from an archeological dig. In some basic way I hope the work speaks about swirling geologic time and our fundamental relationship with objects and substances that are *not* us: tools, materials, food, chemicals, technology all touching us momentarily before they dissolve into an out-of-time, polymathic reality.

CSH: My original idea for pairing your work alongside that of Jackie Gendel, currently on view in the Front Gallery, was your usage of a sort of Neoclassicism. Do you find inspiration in antiquity and ancient cultures?

MJM: I do, totally, but my interest passes first over archeology and anthropology to get to art history. In terms of Classicism or Neo-Classism as an aesthetic, there is a tonal quality I'm interested in achieving that seems shared with the visual language of classicism. Maybe it's a breed of stoicism, a kind of inert valent charge that fills the air around a sculpture. When it's right, it reverses polarity on how we might normally absorb energy from an artwork. So a work's energy-store is not a frenetic or combusted one, not an expressive one - but an inward, haunted one.