

IN CONVERSATION:

KIM ZITZOW AND MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN, 2012

An unpublished email interview with Kim Zitzow from December of 2012

KIM ZITZOW: You draw from a vast assortment of historical, cultural and material fragments and tangents. Do you have a research strategy?

MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN: I don't really have a consistent strategy for research. One sculpture seems to lead to the next. I try to let the work tell me things, let it teach me things. It is a very metabolic system, the work continually eating itself. Over time, through this process, the studio has built-up a strange but important logic – very nonlinear, very inefficient, sometimes bordering on the sinister, devious. But it's a logic that I have grown to trust; one I actually need to trust. The moment I stop believing in it, everything crumbles.

KZ: In the process of gathering information -- both physical and mental -- can you describe the activity that occurs between the initial intention of the work and its actual realization?

MJM: The work usually must go through many, many cycles before it gets interesting. Sculptures usually have to get cast-off 2 or 3 or 4 times - multiple periods of intense psychic and emotional attachment swinging into total, abject release and back again before a work really starts to build a gravitational center - its own orbit, its own weather. The process is really slow and being cognizant of the process' quirks doesn't make it less heartbreaking to go through - endlessly falling in love only to break up, and repeat, it's a terrible way to live. It is something I don't fetishize or romanticize all. I wish I could devise a better system.

KZ: Your MFA is in Ceramics. How would you describe the knowledge of that material and its working processes as influencing your current installation work and the array of materials you use? Could or would you?

MJM: I was trying to understand clay not through a ceramic-process, but more as just earth, dirt, so I didn't really acquire a lot of traditional technical skills, but my training in school totally still impacts how I understand and use materials. When making sculpture within a ceramics program you're constantly justifying and conceptualizing your use of clay as a material - really asking it hard, existential, philosophical, social, historical questions. I extended this process to other materials - building intense, troubling, but personalized relationships with a set of materials and objects, trying to embrace all these diegetic and extradiegetic realities. Looking back it seems clear that this process was born within a material specific discourse found in ceramics.

KZ: How do you view nostalgia?

MJM: It feels diseased. I generally try not to think about it.

KZ: In Michelle White's article in Art Papers she discusses your piece *The Possibilities of Men and the River Shallows* and includes a detail that you journeyed to the Cayman Islands to bring back weathered wood from Donald Crowhurst's ship. Much of the ship in the installation is carved foam. How do you reconcile between a meticulously sourced material and a means to an end?

MJM: I think I understand your urge to question materials this way, but in this case I wasn't viewing foam as means to end. In this project I was building a large sculpture composed of many parts, many different sculptural languages - one of those parts was a stage-set of a boat. In preparation I studied stage design and prop building techniques trying to understand how to make an actual stage set and found that foam is a very common material in prop building and stage design. I tried to build something all the way through and chose a material, in this instance, that that spoke the language of 'set.' But its materiality never gave way and took on a

primary meaning – the material didn't announce itself. It stayed as background noise of this particular object...

KZ: *In regards to your work, what has been your greatest failure?*

MJM: So many failures. In the end, every project feels like a failure, like I didn't get it exactly right, I missed opportunities. The work always shows me my weaknesses, plainly, in clear light. I always think I can solve it with the next sculpture.

KZ: *Your greatest success?*

MJM: Maybe this is related, but nothing really comes to mind. For sure, good things have happened, but I have trouble claiming these moments as successes. I keep going to the studio, working every day on projects, maybe something will happen soon...