

IN CONVERSATION:

MIKE DRAKE AND MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN, 2015

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MIKE DRAKE: Hey Michael, How're you doing? Where does the world find you these days?

MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN: I'm in Houston for an exhibition that just opened at Inman Gallery - a *hundred twenty six billion acres*. Recuperating a bit here, but mostly getting organized for a new project that opens in China this summer, and another project in Pittsburgh in early fall.

MD: Does being a professor in the VCU Sculpture and Extended Media department affect or influence your practice in any unexpected ways?

MJM: Yes, but in ways that are difficult to account for. I can say for certain that being around people who are making choices to become better artists, that are questioning core presumptions while also being mindful and as accurate as possible with their words and work, is completely energizing. Its counterintuitive, but the longer I'm involved with teaching, the more sensitized I am to the process. I'm so much more susceptible and lost, generatively so, inside in the things I'm interesting in sharing, teaching. Somehow teaching as a process inverted itself to an action now approached from the center outward.

MD: You use a lot of specific, often historical, cultural objects and artifacts. Do you pull from your own history and relationships to those objects and materials, or do you try to in some way synthesize what may be the greater relationships that your viewers or society have to them on their own?

MJM: It's not an easy question. My work doesn't outwardly mine personal biography or use identity as a concept, but I acknowledge that it always originates internally. Of the hundred million things we can select to make work with, a thing first must move us – imprint itself on our psyches and prompt us to feel something, to make it possible even just to *see* it. This has everything to do with our experiences, our generation, our biographies priming us for an encounter. In some oblique way, if my work does anything, it diagrams an evolution of what I've been interested in exploring and understanding. But for me, this distillation period has to find a backdoor, where inchoate inward-looking interests can graft onto forms that are more shared, collectively accessible, networked.

MD: In dealing with specific objects and artifacts in your artwork, you utilize a broad range of both presentation, and representation. Many are handmade replicas, crafted using traditional sculptural building techniques and materials; objects like a paper-mache replica of cosmonaut Boris Volynov's helmet, or a carved wooden 1987 Promax J-1 Super Jumbo boom box. While other objects, are the very specific artifacts, pulled from the real world; 5,000 year old meteorites, seashells from Micronesia, a 1967 McCullough chainsaw, even parts of the infamous shipwrecked trimaran *Teignmouth Electron*. Could you tell us some of the parameters that might guide you as you are both creating from scratch, and curating the existing material manifestations of your artwork?

MJM: I want to understand objects in many ways, to get as physically and psychically close as possible. These strategies you mention are really just processing devices that allow the development of certain kinds of relationships with objects to emerge – to draw-out time, to practice being deliberate, to code switch with them, to be more acutely aware of them as multi-dimensional, fully unknowable things. Each method of processing - borrowed or invented - creates a set of relationships that enable one kind of life in a multiverse of possible lives. A process can be mechanical in that it establishes an action plan, but it can also chart pathways in which we can swerve, pushing us to commune with an object in some peculiar, impossible to pre-conceive way. In

this sense, 'process' can initiate a rational approach forward, that in turn liberates us, gives us permission to be completely strange with materials, establishing a peculiar solidarity field.

MD: Many of your large scale works are viewed in the round, even if they do have a facade view, there are many behind the scenes details. In a recent work 'The Religion' the many elements are only visible face on and are separated into several boxes, each uniquely hued and categorized. The various elements appear to sneak into each other's spaces though, through cutouts, texturally, or just thematically, leading us through the artwork. This brings to mind the way comic books are divided into individual panels, or the electronic windows and screens that we increasingly experience our world through. Could you tell us about how the relationships between the separated objects relate to the context or the manner in which they are presented as a whole?

MJM: I wanted *The Religion* to do many things; one was to develop a sculptural form that could project an overarching system of narration, while simultaneously struggling with the limitations of how sculpture can *be* narrative. At its core, sculpture screws-up sequential time, enfolding all possible starting points and totalizing conclusions – points that might be used to order classic narrative arcs. So without narrative's most basic tools, a place to begin and end, the time encoded within a sculpture feels wayward, simultaneous and continuous. When measured-up against our age's de-facto cultural formats – films, books, articles, videos, serial dramas, songs, commercials, all still ticking on Newtonian clocks – sculpture possesses an almost inbred relativity, a kind of mysticism stemming, at least in part, from its relaxed temporal condition.

Also at play in *The Religion*, as you mention, is its flatness. As our initial and primary experiences of objects occur more and more as images, our brains speed to process the inversion. This is by no means a new problem, but its acceleration is interesting. We've reached a ledge where, for most practical purposes, an object's native state no longer resides in a here-and-now material condition, but in a disembodied image-form. This is a huge shift. Reconditioning ourselves to exist in an image economy initiates all these other downstream ceremonies and gestures for objects - sculptures - to perform, which is really exciting. In the same basic sense, *The Religion* is a sculpture that plays inside these notions, compressing its life as an image into its 4-dimensional reality as an object.

MD: In 2012, you completed a long-term project in which you successfully produced regularly scheduled rainbows overtop the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, Nebraska. Using recycled rainwater, pumps, pipes, and nozzles, you were able to capture a phenomenon that is normally so fleeting. Can you tell us what got you started on this endeavor and maybe some of the challenges that you encountered?

MJM: So many challenges. The project from beginning to end took about 10 years. Inside that time were extended periods of just smoothing and surmounting challenges – conceptual, technical, institutional, municipal, personal, intellectual, financial. It was emotionally the most difficult project I have worked on; something that I don't romanticize but that has imprinted itself on me, really changed me, I hope for the better. This goes back to your question about what started the endeavor. More and more, the projects don't simply chart a progression of ideas but cue new processes altogether, reversing the typical way thought becomes material. With the rainbow, the scale of questions the project seemed to be asking changed my entire approach – fundamental questions like, is there a way for an artwork to learn - to become smarter than those who make it? For a work to point toward horizons that couldn't be imagined without it coaxing us, maybe even tricking us? Can this process be anticipated, folded into a style of working? And could such a model - by nature, heavily invested in time and process – capably aggregate the millions of micro attunements leading toward a finished work in such a way as it could extend past $1 + 1 + 1$ arithmetic, to something more algebraic, non-linear, fractal?

MD: Your new show at Inman gallery, just opened on the May 29th. Could you give us a preview of what we might encounter? Are there any themes that might be carrying over from previous works?

MJM: I'm showing six new sculptures. Time and its relationship to objects play a big part, which feels central to the work for a while now. The cycling and transmutation of energies, materials exchanging into new substances. One of the sculptures contains a large cryogenic freezer chilling an invisible set of small boulders to pre/post human temperatures – like minus 200 degrees Fahrenheit. In another work, a chunk of silver is embedded into a representation of a Hudson Bay blanket into which a Mac Book Pro charger has been partially embedded. There are a couple works that use solar panels as substrates for object/hieroglyph/pictogram collage. In another work, a representation of a potted plant physically Venns together with a small diesel generator - its surface impregnated with finely ground meta anthracite...

MD: If you had to go into witness protection and change your identity and career, where would you choose to go and what occupation would you want to do?

MJM: I'm really failing in the speed round. I've managed to back into a life where my studio absorbs all my interests. Maybe I've had dreams about a life in the hard sciences, physics or working at CERN or something like that, but I don't really have the aptitude and I'm not wired psychologically for it. With art, any armchair interest – be it Armenian political history, pottery shard morphology, cryogenics, the 10,000 year history of blankets, whatever – channels into the studio. If suddenly I didn't have this central pivot to rally around, I'm not sure what I would do... Maybe horticulture, maybe a gardener...