

INTERVIEW

THE POSSIBLE WORLDS OF BEING-IMAGE: THE RAW MORPHOLOGY AT A+B GALLERY, 2019

IRENE SOFIA COMI

Interview to Michael Jones McKean on ATP Diary on July 28, 2019 on the occasion of the exhibition The Raw Morphology at A+B Gallery in Brescia from July 2 to September 28, 2019. The exhibition included works by Davide Bertocchi, Manor Grunewals, and Michael Jones McKean and was curated by Gabriele Tosi.

IRENE SOFIA COMI: Your artworks are used to entangle different languages, times and places. If you should imagine to describe your interests and your research in a few keywords, especially referring to the sculptures displayed in “The Raw Morphology”, which would you choose?

MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN: This is difficult! Let me think... I would say: energy, transmutation, time and magic.

ISC: In a while we'll go deeply into these categories, but before I'd like to talk about the relation the exhibition created between your artworks and Grunewald's and Bertocchi's ones. Keeping your dialogue in mind, how much importance did the display have in the show?

MJM: I suppose the overriding idea of display, even though there might not be large cases or vitrines still feels consistent with earlier exhibitions. The solar panels act as frames for museological-like groupings, very provisional indexes, in this instance simple morphologies; branded snack food, starfish, USBs...

ISC: Absolutely. And I was thinking for example to the interplay with Grunewald's shelves, comparing it to your habit to create big display/archiving cases...

MJM: There's a playful quality I like with the way our works co-mingle that nicely undermines some of the cool off-gassing that can come along with minimalist geometries in the grid-work of Manor's shelves, or the inert logic in my sculptures. The shelves have an important dual life in the exhibition – one as sculpture, but also one just as *shelves*; so they retain physical and conceptual room for David's gum-things to rest on or hide beneath, for the gallery didactics to live, or more literally for my work to hang out on. I really like this, but it's important to say it's *alien* to me and how I generally work. Yet in this context with Manor and Davide, and with Gabriel's hand, I'm happy to be ruffled-up some.

ISC: Following the ideas of index, archive and technical processes I read the works – and especially their silver squared backgrounds – in relation to the idea of the Grid. The “grid” creates “lack of hierarchy, of centre [...] emphasizes its referential characters [...] will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and result is silence”, Rosalind Krauss would say. Do you see this though in your practice? And how do you connect the “grid” (I mean your personal idea of grid) with the “real” objects on the surface?

MJM: We might say that there are two sides to the grid. One references the world Krauss speaks of – a versatile ordering system that's also an elegant compositional tool coaxing all modes of disparate forms into union; life's stray howls into song. The other side acknowledges that even as the grid lacks hierarchical structure, it is *laterally* oppressive, easily defaulting as a compositional and conceptual crutch. With these caveats in mind, I think the grid operates a bit undercover in this show. The techno-grid of the solar panels rhymes distantly with the muted grid of Manor's shelves. To use Krauss' term slightly out of context, these moves feel like a whisper.

ISC: It seems you want to contextualize a sort of universal energy which travels all around the world and connects different times. Especially observing the three wall sculptures what stands out is a sort of static and cold structure but at the same time sensory perception of balances between technology and nature, and in *Common* there's a connection between history and present.... Keeping in mind this premise, which role do the solar panels play?

MJM: Yes, at a very base level, we can think of objects as simply momentary storage vessels — batteries — for this 'universal energy' you mention. Objects, and us included, are all differently becoming something else: a mountain range, a gnat, Cesium 137 are all degrading, morphing, becoming something other. We innately understand that even in life, the "I" we believe is 'Irene Sofia' or 'Michael' is in a process of continual replacement.

ISC: You spoke about storage and replacement, so linking again to Grunwald's shelves (saying so, a clear connection comes out observing *Kaptelyn* sculpture, literally part of the shelf) and observing a sort of constellation or catalogues of human elements you represent, what comes to my mind is the word "hyper-productivity": does your research relate to this concept? I find in your sculptures references to high specific ordering of materials. They seem to me to be an index of taxidermies...

MJM: I'd like to linger on this idea of hyper-productivity, there's a way to play with it if we first pan-out, remembering that the solar panel sculptures are in dialog with very large, more elemental forces: 'energy' and 'transmutation.' If one imagines the panels as a 'medium' to the sun, a thru-line can be drawn where sunlight passes through the panel becoming electrical current, on its way to transmuting into a billions of processes and possible objects; pharmaceuticals to hand-axes to nightlights and so on. I'm not as interested in critiquing or developing subject matter around late capitalism — which hyper-productivity has roots — through objecthood as much as I am with being attentive to 'differences' in objects, and with it, the innate pull emergent systems have toward increased diversity. I think this is beautiful, and of course with the right lens — *political* — imagining all matter racing at different velocities toward more complex states of themselves, of *differentiation*. This baseline coding within matter extends to why there's not just one basic pair of sunglasses for everyone, instead, hundreds of thousands of slight variations on the form of "sunglasses." This of course circles back to hyper-productivity.

ISC: It sounds interesting and is related to the idea of an unspecific time that goes by. Which value do you give to time? How do you connect it and how do you relate it to the contemporary anthropology you represent?

MJM: Time is the most fascinating thing, which I suppose also makes it the most banal. It inflects every aspect of life; the cosmic, the quotidian, the spiritual, the material. As a sculptor, time is embedded in the dna of objecthood, underwriting a set of baselines in every object ever made. In regards to 'contemporary anthropology,' time also relates to a process of 'artifacting.' The moment that something is created, it becomes time-stamped, beginning a life not just as a device of function, or pleasure or desire, but something born into a parallel stream of existence — its life as an *artifact* on an escape trajectory from the realities of its emergence. Of course this time-stamp is not regulated and lives differently within different objects; a usb stick records time with extreme precision. Less so a blanket, even less so for an arrowhead or pottery shard...

ISC: In my idea, looking at your sculptures, this idea of time relates with a sort of immanent mysticism hidden in your works. What do you think? How do you represent "magic"?

MJM: One of the enduring functions of art might be its bond to mysticism. Wired in human consciousness is a drive toward making meanings. Perhaps the result of asymmetrically large frontal lobes, we manage to find meaning everywhere — in cosplay, in mineraloid collections, in deities, in conspiracy theories — deep neural satisfaction. Mysticism and with it magic, acknowledge that a rift exists between the amassed reasoning of our everyday world, and a hidden from view shadow reality that we can't easily explain away.

Counterintuitively this feeling is not quelled by additional technology, or more science, but exacerbated by it. As our objects surpass us, we no longer truly understand how anything works. So we reach a state when objects truly become magical. A stream of emojis sent to a friend in Lisbon appears on their phone instantly. Communication is happening, yet neither of us understand exactly what just happened — our texts the result of impossibly complex machines utilizing vast armies of accrued labor divided in ways that even the individuals involved in producing an object can't fathom how they are made.

An analogue to this feeling can be an encounter with art. A small stack of folded blankets supporting a few crude clay objects exists as a kind of gap — something specific, yet made strange in the world, fueling a belief that objects and actions wield more power than that of their volume and caloric expenditure. A belief that meanings extend beyond what's present, available to be seen, felt.