

**INTERVIEW:
LIVING CONTENT X MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN, 2020
BRIAN PAUL**

Interview with Michael Jones McKean for issue # 36 of Living Content conducted by Brian Paul

BRIAN PAUL: Your past projects have been shown in galleries and museums, but you've also created larger public works. Your piece, certain principles of light and shapes between forms (in which the natural phenomenon of the rainbow is approached as an object out-of-time, or which relates to time on its own terms) is an excellent example of many of the ideas appearing throughout your work. Can you describe the process of creating this work?

MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN: The entire process from conception to completion for certain principles of light took about ten years, but was born out of simple questions: how might one make artwork for a “public”, and not Public Art? What might Civic Sculpture look like? Is there a class of object that can elude time? Could an object create other ways to be useful, not by scaling upwards, but outwards, laterally. Questions like these helped build a formal scaffolding that eventually congealed into the artwork. The primary form—a real prismatic rainbow—is a shared, psychedelic, time-traveling object. When we're with a rainbow, we're communing with an identical form our ancestors wondered about, the same color-shape future-folks will see. It has this incredible fidelity as an object, resisting time, continually recharging itself.

The full arc of this project is actually still very much undefined as it's grown into a larger, more challenging and cooperative work designed for San Francisco. I'm about 5 years in. In this new work, a prismatic rainbow repeats as the core element, but the project is finding ways to more fully deliver on the promise of usefulness, modeling a water recycling system that will help drive new water policy at the government level in California for years to come. The ways an artwork can put into motion processes that can nourish, and be nourished by deeper engagements with people and systems across scale—micro, mezzo, macro—is more and more exciting to me.

BP: While making this project across ten years, you created many other works for a gallery context. One of your current projects, Twelve Earths, engages with planet Earth itself as a site for a conversation about mysticism, the anthropocene, and future onlookers. Can you talk about the relationship between the projects that may appear as more discrete sculptural objects and the public, civic- or planetary-scale works?

MJM: Regardless of relative size, I think my work addresses the same core ideas again and again. The differences exist in the formal containers. Whether a discrete sculptural object, a civic project, or now as you mention, a planetary work—each establishes a different path and waypoints toward an idea. Those differences underwrite some important details I think are worth exploring. Embracing radical formal difference also allows investigations into a single concept—say, “time”—to become deeper, stranger, more wanton.

Elliptically, your question brings to mind how a sculpture practice has at the surface many available verbs to call on, but it's the nouns that feel more operative, interesting. "Proximity" is a really good one. Proximity, as in how close, or far apart objects live from each other. Sculptors dial in very specific valent forces to hold objects in relation to each other—together. But to make this point about scale, proximity needs to play with a sister process-based noun: velocity. Working on discrete objects one can just move faster. Time and action collapse together without significant lag. You can push materials around in closer alignment to the speed of thought. "This should go here. No, there." But as work scales up the misalignment, the asymmetry between thoughts, objects, actions is exaggerated. Working at a table, our bodies can triangulate with tools and materials seamlessly. Working at the scale of a city, or the planet, this arms-length triangulation stalls-out. This asymmetry is by no means proof of failure—the gap can be beautiful, the source of real awe. The familiar temporal dimensions of our flesh-bodies, counterpoised with the alien temporality of a planet-body, can provoke ways of thinking and making I'm just beginning to understand.

BP: Is there an element of mythology that motivates the different ways that your work takes form? Rainbows, as in certain principles..., function as important symbols throughout literature, while the Teignmouth Electron's origin story carries ideas of human struggle and failure. Can you talk about the ongoing work with the Teignmouth Electron and how you might engage with myth?

MJM: Myth is so important. Diving in, my involvement with the Electron began 15 years ago. Its central story is one that has magnetized many, many artists, thinkers, makers—perhaps because it activates within us a set of archetypal, mythological tropes: the dreamer, a vessel, a voyage, crisis, deep existential questioning followed by discovery, release into afterlife, mystery. I first learned of the Electron through a story I heard about the death of Bas Jan Ader, another artist caught deep within the orbit of the Electron and whose practice was nested in mythological thinking.

I won't belabor retelling the Electron story, it's easy enough to find, but still a captivating rabbit hole. As I learned more details about the story, the main protagonist to me seemed to be the Teignmouth Electron—the boat itself—rather than the human actor through which stories are usually framed. I imagined that the sum of its architecture: its contours, its volume, shadows, voids, created a set of energies—the specific ontological conditions—for the story to unfold.

Of almost any object I've spent time with, the Electron's intelligence feels unbounded, otherworldly. On the shore with it one night on Cayman Brac, I remember the feeling as it offered up a kind of beautiful, frightening cipher about the nature of matter, bodies, time... At that moment the Electron became more like a teacher, a kind of oracle.

Sorry to linger, but your question, rooted in mythology, also calls to mind that "experience" isn't what actually happens to us in a realist sense—experience is the distillation of chaotic events packaged into a discreet vessel, a container that can enter our bodies, be stored there and recalled. "Story" acts as this kind of vessel. So, our experiences are the stories synthesized from unmodulated events, doused in our own subjectivity. Through this narrative, they exist as something deeply unreal. But this unreality is crucial because it creates—maybe counterintuitively—the possibility for us to be together. To exist consensually through a set of shared, agreed-upon narratives. If we aggregated personal experience to its limit, we would erase the common-ground where shared mythologies exist. We have co-evolved with myth, continually re-performing these stories, for good and bad, in a feedback loop.

BP: In a talk that you gave at Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design titled, “On Objects, Time, and the Fallacy of Scale,” you touched on ways that size might be something that truly describes the universe, but that scale is a human or cognitive “tool.” Can you expand on that?

MJM: My work and thinking are rooted in sculpture and its processes, so the question of scale always feels nearby. If we momentarily relax our judgements about “scale” as it might relate to ego, value, degree of difficulty, and simply imagine it as an available tool that artists have to ask questions—questions that might nudge us to think in different ways—the perceived psychic gap between a “small” thing and a “large” thing dissolves. Objects, no matter how large or small, are full.

In a materialist sense, scale doesn’t exist. Taken to its horizon, a universe without “perceivers” distances as we understand them should all collapse. The void within an atom will meet the void within a solar system. Scale is only a cognitive device, an important one, for helping to conceptualize space, understand spatial relationships. But it’s not real and might actually hinder us in understanding the deeper machinations around us.

This style of thinking helped me begin imagining the Earth not as something impossibly big, but as a sculptural unit. A body with certain capacities, possibilities, histories, much like other units or forms: a forest, a stone, a table, a song, a pot. As with these forms, in the plasticity of thought, they can be limitless, or limited, but never really fully understood. Something as prosaic as a backyard can, in the kaleidoscope of thought, transform into a site of overwhelming and dreamy complexity. The lawn-object splitting into the clover, buckhorn, crabgrass, chickweed, dandelions, purslane, mosses, fescue. Splitting, cleaving into more and more minute, but still complete realities.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has this operative term—“intimate immensity.” It describes a feeling of enormousness—awe—emerging not from things external to us, but from within ourselves. Intimate immensity is born out of a personal archive of stored impressions. Immensity’s cauldron isn’t the world, but the body itself. We might bear some feeling of immensity gazing at a handwritten note as with staring up at the night sky...

BP: Bachelard’s concept of “intimate immensity” is interesting in its assertion that the personal archive of impressions is what engenders this sense of enormity and awe. Your phrase, “the plasticity of thought,” also feels like a useful one for drawing a connection between this notion of scale and the narratives behind objects. You discuss a kind of techno-animism, and how objects’ relationship to narrative is different in our current moment than ever before. I am reminded of Bruce Sterling’s 2005 book, *Shaping Things*, which talks about these shifts and speculates about continually increasing intercommunication—between humans and things, as well as object-to-object.

MJM: Totally. An object’s physical volume, its corporeal form, doesn’t correspond with something spectral like its scalability as an entity. Imagine that tracking along with every object, is a kind of portal indexing. An object’s shadow reality: all its compounding histories, their counter histories, cultural references, footnotes. Let’s call this “object metadata.” This is an ever-expanding backchannel tethered to an object that in no way relates to physical size. The full metadata surrounding, say, a pair of Nike Airmax 95’s would be overwhelming: petrol mining data, patents, factory conditions, borrowed nostalgia, global supply chains, ad campaigns, but also its BTU count, VOC off-gassing and much more. Compare a tiny pair of shoes to a truly massive, and hugely important object, that impacts life on the planet, say, the Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica and the point is underscored...

Your question about our right-now relationship to objects feels important. New wave animism taps into a deep human longing for mystery in our material world. As our technical understanding of matter extends from the subatomic to the cosmic, as the available information about materials and objects around us grows and grows, we seem to be retreating into zones where we can explore our own subjectivity—customizing more sensual and idiosyncratic relations with matter, not in spite of all we might know, or could know about “things,” but, I think, in parallel to this knowledge.

BP: In our previous conversation, we discussed how different classes of objects have different “time signatures,” which became central in talking about your practice. An iPhone 11 has a very specific signature while a certain style of chair, a Windsor, has a fuzzier relationship with time because it is something that was developed, and which has persisted and been replicated. A meteorite, or meteorites in themselves, have another relation to time. What are some of the other types of time signatures that you have specified and explored?

MJM: Without much effort, we might imagine all objects being time-stamped at the moment of their emergence. Part of this stamp is a unique signature that forecasts how objects will track through time and report back to us. The examples you mentioned are useful and point toward ways we might develop subsets of objects, each behaving differently in relation to time, but when Venned with other objects, might begin to relay interesting stories. For instance, imagine a simple conch shell: a stoic thing moving with slo-mo evolutionary precision. Even as its form appears changeless to us, in a sped-up, parallel, temporal dimension we can see it continually re-optimizing, shifting its form based on habitat, climate, predators, salinity, more. This shell-object could Venn generativity with, as you mention, the evolution of iPhones over the last decade. Dozens of nearly identical machines with slight morphological shifts, together, charting a coherent evolution optimizing performance.

To be clear, this idea of “time signature” doesn't have to do with biological halflife. It is just an available filter to accelerate thinking about how time imprints itself on matter. Illustratively, we can imagine a field of objects, something every day like a dinner table: vintage ceramic plates, a salmon from Alaskan waters caught days earlier, vegetables bought local but imported from California, rock salt, silverware, grandma's linen, a Danish modern table, mix-matched Ikea chairs, phones, Chilean wine—the objects forming a composition we called dinner-time, but each object living in a hermetic reality determined by time.

BP: Throughout my reading about your practice, and in reading some of your past interviews, there is an engagement with the thought models of Speculative Realism, New Materialism, and OOO. I'm curious about how you think about the ways that these particular ideas may have been digested by the artworld and in some ways are no longer in the fore in the same way they might have been just a few years ago. Your practice is very connected to some of their discourses, and I'm curious about how you might trace the evolution/direction of these movements. Can you pick up their threads, where they are now?

MJM: Panned way out, the artworld's interest in ideas is mostly superficial. As much as we all want something better, the artworld behaves more or less as a para-colonial agent. It roams for rogue channels, new feels, metabolizing, moving on, pivoting always towards novelty (or at least the semblance of novelty) as amnesia mostly overrides its logic board. With enough distance, its rhythms can appear almost pre-programmed, acting out some kind of imperialist playbook of “discovery,” colonization, extraction, depletion, collapse.

Maybe it goes without saying, it's not that materialist philosophies in the form of Speculative Realism or OOO are exhausted; it's just that support for them as brands within the frame of art are now viewed as unfashionable. Art's attention span is super short and doesn't map onto long-form queries. Thankfully, most artists understand this and find ways to get on with work.

There's always been a small camp of people concerned with deeper, stranger, more speculative relationships with matter and objects as they relate to our built-in anthropocentric bias. And the idea of animism, of course, extends back in time; shamans, witches, alchemists, even catholicism, or racing ahead to the forebears of radical environmentalism, ecofeminist thought, hyperobjects, techno-animism, and Haraway's investigation into kin. Speculative Realism and its branches use a slightly refurbished lense trained on ideas that are ancient. They will not suddenly disappear, though it might seem that way if we use the artworld as a sole metric...

A very basic tenet of Speculative Realist thought that continues to feel urgent is a deeper, more sensitive commitment to exploring ways of decentering the human experience as Earth's primary narrative. If we rally around this ethos, the experiment can only strengthen our empathic muscle; building bridges to care about stray, deviant, non-normative, even invisible things. The critique of speculative materialisms is often that deep attention toward the nature of objects somehow must be purchased at the price of people, our humanity. This has never made any sense to me; a crude way of weaponizing a useful tool against itself. And of course, it's never zero-sum. This path of practiced care is transferable, inevitably tracing a line back to us.