

MARK HANDFORTH

Timothée Chaillou - *Annual Magazine - N°5, 2012*

Timothée Chaillou: With their weightiness, and the feeling of effort conveyed by their torsion, some of your sculptures look decidedly ‘virile’ – as if to underline the idea of gravity. Do these massive forms seek to dominate the spaces in which they are shown?

Mark Handforth: They certainly energize the spaces and often try to unwind the prevailing logic of the rooms. But it’s not so much domination as a desire to set all those solids in motion, to suck everything up into this particular action. I want all the space, not just where the sculpture is – I want the air, I want to occupy the negative space too.

TC: What’s your relationship with style? Do you feel comfortable or uncomfortable about taking a particular stylistic position? Do you seek to be recognizable?

MH: I don’t particularly seek to be recognizable. I don’t avoid it either, but it doesn’t seem to matter to the work either way. I’ve always felt quite strongly that all and any options are open to artists, a kind of god-given right, use it or lose it sort of thing. Of course market forces and critical forces and ease of production forces would like a kind of consensus, but you have to actively resist that temptation I think.

TC: ‘I’ve always been more interested in the object than in the illusion of the object’, wrote Robert Grosvenor. What do you think of this?

MH: Well, clearly I love that. It’s very hard to let things be, and with Robert Grosvenor’s work there’s a kind of magnificent tolerance to accepting objects in their own right. Harder than that even, is the confidence to accept your own idiosyncratic poetics pure and strong and lay them out there for all the world to see and pick apart and scratch their heads over. I think Grosvenor was able to put the readymade to bed with all its attendant fetish and replace it with a real world of his own choosing; with whimsical facts on the ground.

TC: When asked ‘What difference did you see between your work and that of Minimalist sculptors?’ Robert Grosvenor replied, ‘My work was resolutely more expressionistic, perhaps more dramatic.’ Is it the same for you?

MH: Yes, ironically I always loved Minimalist work for all its unintended drama, for its failure to lose touch despite all its best efforts. I think I saw that as a kind of affirmation of the humanity in things. I’m a kind of romantic ultimately, a true believer. It’s all expression anyway.

TC: Spleen, melancholy, sometimes even desperation, are very present in your work. Could you tell us more about this?

MH: Loss is such a keen part of life. We lose the people we love, and sometimes it’s hard to get out of bed. It’s the human condition, a kind of desperation and finding a way through all that. Suddenly, people are gone and you spend all your time wondering where they are. I think Syd Barrett is very much about that.

TC: Do your works evoke a contrast between heroism and failure?

MH: Not so much a contrast as a collusion between heroism and failure. A united front.

TC: Torsion, folding, distortion, deformation... What are the causes of, and reasons for, such imagery? What should we be worried about?

MH: It's an imagery of collapse, of surrender I suppose, but also of release and return. We change ourselves and allow ourselves to be changed through exertions – we overcome our blandness, we collapse our rigid forms and become fluid material. But it's a creative collapse, a way back into ourselves – it's a partner dance, it's not bullying thuggery. To my mind, it's the ones who won't collapse that you need to worry about.

TC: Are you interested in vandalism?

MH: Yes, very much so. At its best it can be such a direct, uninhibited process. It's a kind of drawing in the world.

TC: Susan Sontag wrote that Camp reveals in artifice, stylization and exaggeration, calling it a style of excess and shrill contrast, that blurs the boundaries between beauty and ugliness. Is this blurring of boundaries important to your art?

MH: Yes, because boundaries are such arbitrary inventions anyway, such strict applications of someone else's problems and never really worth dealing with – outside insecurities that I just don't have the patience for, seeing as I can hardly cope with my own. We are always as ugly as we are beautiful and vice-versa; of course we like to forget that sometimes.

TC: Please talk about your wish to create installations/exhibitions like incandescent landscapes.

MH: I've lived for many years in Miami; it's a strange day-for-night city of surreal, washed-out, sun-bright days and the persistent neon glow of a brilliant yet tawdry nightlife industry. In that sense, my 'natural' landscape has become a kind of incandescent landscape – the exhibitions are in many ways reproductions of this landscape, pictures of a kind of reality.

TC: Do you know Charles Burchfield's work?

MH: Yes, I do. These wonderful landscapes that are at once mundane and psychedelic. Entryways to a sublime otherworld that's always there, hidden in the flow of the leaves, growing out of the roots. I suppose I see the world somewhat like that – a set of possibilities that just keep opening up and opening up like the patterns of light, like Smithsonian's fern. A surreal world has just that much more reality to it somehow, its everyday nothingness is that much more sublime.

TC: What was the influence on your work of Los Angeles art in the 1960s, and the so-called 'Finish Fetish'?

MH: You could see John McCracken pieces in London when I was growing up, all zen obsessiveness, impenetrable surface and obtuse plastic colors shrieking of non-information, of anti-information – particularly during that heavily informed moralist moment in the late '80s. Those '60s sculptures were made in a different world though, an analog world where plastic finishes were painstakingly laid up by hand in resin on surfboard cores. The super-finish, the machined future was still very far away, was still desirable as an alternative. By the time I saw them, they were sharing rooms with the Haim Steinbachs or Allan McCollums of a very different moment. From where we are, there's something surprisingly uncalculated about those '60s surfaces, there's a visceral, intuitive rush to them that I love.

TC: Are the pure forms of Minimalism, with their reliance on industrial materials, a kind of prison?

MH: Maybe, maybe not. These rules were their own inventions after all; it's risky to break them and there's a chance of undermining the entire project if you do, but the freedom's always there... it's a psycho-prison actually. Bruce Nauman, who paralleled the minimalists in many ways, seemed to have no problem breaking every rule he ever wrote, regarded the breaking of rules as the project itself, felt the pleasure in it. Rules can give a kind of radical definition, draw hard lines against the mush but paradoxically end up telling us so much about the mush in the process.

TC: The objects you use are both minimalistic (in form and ornament) and utilitarian (floor-lamps, clothes-hangers, signs etc.) – clichés which everyone knows. Felix Gonzalez-Torres once said he used the formal vocabulary of Minimalism but to shake it – otherwise it would be 'just another Minimalist piece, boring everyone to death.' Is it the same for you?

MH: Minimal pieces were never boring to me, though they were making me very conscious of everything else around them. I saw them as utterly (and I always assumed deliberately, though it looks like I was probably wrong) colluding with the poetic trash of living that envelops art from every corner.

TC: Candles can symbolize desire, distortion can symbolize castration, etc. Please tell us about the sexual dimension of your work.

MH: We live in a fundamentally sexualized world, the elements of nature exist as and for and through their sexual function – their shapes and songs and plumage and aggression and scents and pollen and flowers and on and on and on. In a very simple, beautiful, necessary and sometimes clunky way, the forms around us reflect that. Ultimately all forms are sexualized, be it by nature, by design, by ignorance, even by mistake and I think you have to recognize that and work with that and enjoy that. It's something that binds us to inanimate objects somehow; the ability to look at a lamp, or a chair, or a rock or a hill and just know somehow if it's male or female – that's wonderful and strange. Candles clearly seem to do more living than most inanimate things. By virtue of flame, which is a kind of life-force anyway, candles drip and sag and deform. Their living progress is a kind of fluid rush toward collapse.

TC: Do you like the tension between the hand-made and the ready-made?

MH: Yes, very much. There's an idealism to the hand-made, a sort of William Morris belief in radical manufacture that stands counter to the alienation of mass production. Art is all about the hand, it's all about finding the artist somewhere in it, even when there's nothing there.

TC: Your work questions the aesthetics of photography. The quest for aesthetics involves strict rules in order to convey a message effectively in the media. Do you aim for 'visual efficiency that works 100%' (Xavier Veilhan)?

MH: Not efficiency. I think I rather despise efficiency as a notion. Clearly, I like the idea of my heart being somewhat efficient, or the Post Office maybe, but not art. Art just seems to be of a different order, a place where failures and mistakes are often the real successes and it's important to not know where things will go and how they will get there. All that effectiveness is so bloody boring anyway.

TC: Victor Hugo called ruins epic and heroic; René Huyghe, evoking the art of Hubert Robert, claimed that 'artists who exalt the sentiment of life are led to cherish ruins which evoke the price of Time.' Destruction, accidents, catastrophes all interrupt Time and render it visible. Your work involves the aesthetics of ruin: what is your vision of this? Can you tell us more?

MH: There's a humanity in all that decay, an unmannered poetry to ruins – they stand in defiance of time. Stonehenge is as timeless as it gets, yet the wonder of it all is that you can grasp something so old in a split-second, a permanent channel of communication.

The architect John Soane exalted ruins as the ultimate destination for architecture, often painting his proposed designs as the ruins he hoped they would one day be. For him this was an aspirational jump to a place beyond the reach of Time. What took weeks to build up could spend millennia in decay, could become one with nature, could become more beautiful every day... forever.

TC: In your shows, are you interested in generating a place outside Time?

MH: Yes, I think I am. Time always seems like this rigid tyrannical order that we're obliged to follow blindly – it speeds up and slows right down, but we can't stop or exit; it just seems to go on and on with or without us. Not to mention that constant fear that it's all going to shit. That I'm supposed to casually accept my children's future as some kind of spooky global meltdown. I just can't stand that.
