

Artist interview

Beauty and ugliness in the urban wilderness

Mark Handforth moved to Miami before Art Basel transformed its art scene. He can still find the city's original "crazy energy"

By Sarah Douglas

It may take a European transplant—think Alexis de Tocqueville or, more recently, Bernard-Henri Lévy—to see America clearly. Among artists, there is Mark Handforth. Born in Hong Kong, raised in London and schooled there and in Frankfurt, he moved to Miami in 1992. Since then, he has made sculptures—some of them public works—that use a vocabulary derived from the American vernacular: lamp-posts lying on their sides, one of which he showed at the entrance to New York's Central Park in 2003; highway signage; traffic cones. He has a knack for transforming these and other everyday objects or images through vivid interventions: a Vespa motorbike or a fire hydrant topped with candles and dripping with wax; a wishbone or a coathanger on a monumental scale; moons and stars drawn in neon on the wall. Handforth rarely shows in Miami, so his solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami (until 19 February 2012) marks a major moment for the artist.

The Art Newspaper: Why did you move to Miami?

Mark Handforth: I'd been to all these places that were solid culturally. Miami felt like jumping off the deep end. There wasn't really an art scene. There were still crack houses. It had the flavour of a neglected, crazy, tropical city. I liked that.

And then, the dawn of Art Basel Miami Beach...

In the 1870s people came here for the tropical wilderness. I came here also for an urban wilderness. When the art world moved in, that time was somewhat over. There are still parts of Miami where you feel yourself in this city of unknowns—a foreigner like everyone else. Miami Beach has lost that. It's been replaced with something wonderful for artists. It's a catch-22.

You've said that the American experience is "sculptural". Now we have a recession and abandoned homes. Are these socio-economic trends on your mind?

They definitely are. You could say that this is an entropic return but there's also something wonderful about the ugliness of many of these cities. You imagine the city being wild nature again. There are places where human activity is beautiful, like the Lake District of England, little stone cottages—there is no need to remove them. But often in America you will have this extraordinary nature and then this crazy ugly house that looks so temporary and trashy. In Miami, we are here in the city but the city might just be gone tomorrow. You feel it physically—with hurricanes. Miami has almost a non-relationship with history. It's a city of immigrants, it's about building a future. That changes the way you think about physical things around you. When you grow up in London it's all about the past. Here it's the opposite: a crazy energy that I like, even in its ugliness.

The idea of all art as public art is important to you. You talked about ownership being a bizarre notion. What's your take on the market?

The art market keeps us alive but it's not a benign influence. There is something particularly potent here in Miami—the fair is a mixed blessing. It's important especially if you're a young artist to be very suspicious of markets, and of corporations and capitalism full stop. Part of the requirement for being an artist is an inherent suspicion of those things. It's tricky if the first influence you get is a market influence. People my age were lucky to grow up in a time when there really wasn't an art market *per se*. We didn't have any expectation of that. When I started showing with Gavin [Brown], we just sold a few little things. There was something wonderful about that moment. Then the art market happened. Of course, there are



Mark Handforth with his sculpture *Moon*, 2009; below, *Silver Wishbone*, 2010

wonderful collectors who make things happen, or finance the making of a piece that goes out in public. There is an understanding among some great collectors that they are part of this business of making culture and getting ideas out there.

You see this show in Miami as being continuous with the landscape around the museum.

I'd like the understanding of my work to be as an endless project that spreads out—that art as a whole is something that spreads out, that things that appear in the landscape that are or aren't sculptures extend the notion of where the work begins and ends. It's to hammer home a belief in a big public project. I see the work as part of this broader community. The walls of the museum

become irrelevant. I have this old-fashioned belief—like Werner Herzog and his cave paintings—that culture and art are absolutely fundamental to human existence. People have been a bit tricked into thinking it's not, but it is. There is a set of bizarre social barriers. To some extent, the market has done a lot to create that. That would be my major argument against the market: it's sad when the notion of art is [that it's] something exclusive and expensive that's designed for a certain group, so that another group feels it's nothing to do with them.

Shortly after moving to Miami, you witnessed Rirkrit Tiravanija cooking at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Why was that important to you?

Rirkrit is a fantastic, beautiful, brilliant artist, a true believer in what culture is and what art can do. The reason I gravitated to him is a deep-felt honest belief in the project we were all doing. I grew up in a time when you would see these table sculptures on plinths and it was so disappointing. I just felt art was about something so much more than that. About somehow changing the world.

Critics have compared you to Claes Oldenburg. Is he an artist you have thought about?

Funnily enough, no. I saw some of his soft pieces in Frankfurt and thought they were great. I first made the wishbone for a school in Grenoble. Teenagers are great because they hate everything. I thought: "What a great group." So sullen, and all smoking, and they're so smart, it's brilliant. The wishbone came out of thinking about how rigid and secular and unromantic a lot of French culture has become in spite of the fact that France is the oldest, most prehistoric, romantic place on the planet. I thought these teenagers would get into it, in a very Stonehenge-y, heavy metal way. It plays

Biography

Born: 1969, Hong Kong
Education: The Slade School of Fine Art, London; Städelschule, Frankfurt
Represented by: Gavin Brown's Enterprise
Selected solo shows: 2011 Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; Hessel Museum of Art and CCS galleries, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 2007 Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas 2005 Kunsthau Zurich 2003 Le Consortium, Dijon; Lamppost, Public Art Fund, New York 2002 Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Selected group shows: 2006 The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; 5 Milliards d'Années, Palais de Tokyo, Paris 2004 It's all an Illusion, Migros Museum, Zurich

on trivial notions—it's a superstitious object. **Early on, you were interested in Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark.**

It was about the way they saw art as something that was everywhere, part of the urban fabric, that was within everything and could come out of everything. There was a side of Smithson that I particularly liked. His connection to nature within the city—how it's a beautiful thing to find these funny tiny pieces of nature fighting their way back.

Do you think of yourself as a sculptor?

Yes, but not in the sense that I wouldn't do other things. I like objects, stuff that exists. That's why I make sculptures. But it's not a decision against painting or photography or film. I just happen to always come back to actual, tangible things. Things you can get your hands on, or climb on. **Your coat hanger pieces seem to play with the idea of drawing in space.**

I'm not making images of things. A hanger is a drawing or image of a hanger but at the same time it is a hanger with these movements that cut through the space. The neon pieces on the wall picture things but are also themselves. I don't want to make a representation of something, I want to make a something.

There's a humorous aspect to your work. Is that missing in art, do artists shy away from it?

Yes. I think they are quite afraid of it, actually. You could argue that Martin Kippenberger's great strength was his total ability to embrace it. Or Maurizio Cattelan. It takes a lot of courage. In spite of all of us being radicals, there is something conservative in the notion of what culture is supposed to be: steady, heavy—deep ideas. A lot of the real critique comes out of humour. You see it in Franz West. Within the humour, there is this incredible critique of this society we've set ourselves up to live in.

You studied with Kippenberger. How did he influence you?

He was a complex character. A bit like Rirkrit—he had this crazy energy. You meet this person who is so totally immersed in what he's doing, and doing it with this incredible drive and confidence, and a lack of confidence at the same time. You think, art is my whole life, not just something I do. There was something exciting and a little scary about that. He could be a difficult, overbearing man. At the same time, you needed that kick to your pants to get you going. There's a lot of complacency and laziness in art school. Kippenberger was the polar opposite of that. Look at those paintings of him standing there in his underpants. It's a funny painting and a sad one at the same time. Like Falstaff. It's like Shakespearean humour.

Your Electric Tree will be placed offsite in Miami, near the museum. Tell me about its genesis.

In the late 1990s, I went to India to do a show in Delhi at the gallery Nature Morte. We went to Mysore, and there was an enormous banyan tree nearby and these people were going to have a wedding underneath because they couldn't find a building, so they would wrap the outside of this tree in canvas to make a shelter. There were all these fluorescent lights which they would hang inside the tree-shelter. I photographed it at night with a long exposure. I had a huge lightbox made up in Bangalore and we shipped that to Delhi and showed it. Everyone said: "Is this in LA? Is this a big American tree?" I've been wanting to remake it. In Miami, people live with nature and screw bolts into trees all the time. The fluorescent fixtures are clunky and ugly and are screwed onto this tree. There is a weird, harmonious disharmony to it and that's what's beautiful.

How do you want people to interact with it?

It creates an area where people can hang out. I did a proposal three years ago for a park in Paris, a constellation of hundreds of lamp-posts in the shape of the Milky Way. It was nixed because it would encourage the gypsies and hookers to hang out in the park. I want everyone to come. I want the bums to hang out under it too. ■

