



I never wanted to weigh more heavily on a man than a bird, Marble Resin, © Nick Hornby 2010

NICK HORNBY (J98)

“Don't spend time beating on a wall, hoping to transform it into a door”

- Coco Chanel

I STARTED by trying to make a simple pot. Lop-sided and wonky, I couldn't even out the surface, or clean off the finger marks. The pot fell over and became a tree. There, in the Sunley Centre, started a chain of events that took me via Florence, The Slade, Chicago, the V&A, clay, plaster, resin, The Tate and Southbank Centre, to New York where I am currently working, and hopefully onto Delhi in January, and Poland in September 2012. After the first pot I tried another that became a head, and a third that ended up a figure.

And so I spent my days with clay. Its a curious material, always transforming - as you handle it, it becomes drier, more rigid, harder to manipulate, but more able to support structures. The larger the structure or the more complicated the shape, the harder you needed the clay to be. I tended to build up too quickly and would have to support arms and heads with bits of metal and yoghurt pots. And they'd always crack and limbs break off. I bought a blow torch to speed up the process, fingers would crumble.

Just before my last year at Ampleforth, I spent two weeks at The Slade to do a summer course in Sculpture. It was unbelievable - at 17, I had the same studio space as the MA students and one-to-ones with iconic Slade tutors. I arrived and made a rather meagre clay abstract thing - it was rubbish. The Slade tutor then explained to me the difference between demonstration, illustration and metaphor, the legibility of process, the performative nature of sculpture - cutting, scraping, squidging. I was also introduced to plaster and in September returned to Ampleforth with several bags of it. Plaster becomes rigid in 10 minutes, and without the space restrictions of the kiln or the delay of clay drying, you could build anything, any height, slap bits on, hack bits off. So I made a huge figure, and carried it off down the valley and put it in the middle of Jungle rugby fields.

After Ampleforth I did a foundation at Wimbledon. It was terrible - entirely my fault - I made terrible videos and left after a few months. I went on to do an undergrad at The Slade. And for three years made ever more terrible videos.

After a few years out, I started to make sculpture again. I made a 1,000 foot long musical sculpture with 300 cello strings in an old toothbrush factory, I carved an oak wheel which turned a VW Polo to play the cello at the Arnolini in Bristol, and I won the Blind Art Prize.

For my Masters show at Chelsea I built a life-size slice of a Boeing 727 airplane: huge, bright white with British Airways blue and red. For three weeks it stood proud in the main parade ground at Chelsea, as if it had just dropped out from the sky, mid-flight. Then on the day of the opening, the sculpture was removed. It was a pivotal point. That night it existed as rumour and conversation and I realised that an artwork is only as useful as it is able to communicate. In its absence it had more power than as an object. It went on to be re-shown in the basement of Selfridges, and now is installed in the HQ of Sony BMG.

Off the back of this show I won the Clifford Chance Sculpture Prize, which in turn led on to various public projects including a 22 foot pink castle floating on a pond in King Cross for six months, a huge half-tonne sculpture in Tate Britain, a 14 foot commission for the Southbank Centre, and a project for the 2012 Olympiad. Then a Solo show in central London, which went on to Athens with the British Council, New York and the Solo Projects art fair in Basel 2011.

Thinking back to surface, and cleaning off the imperfections... at Ampleforth we were taught five historic proofs for the existence of God. A monk called Anselm back in middle of the 11th century asked the question whether it was greater to exist in reality than in just the mind alone. There's a similar quandary in sculpture. When I started out, all the ideas in my mind were perfect, and every time I tried to make them, I would be horrified by the result, by how disappointing reality was (they would be wonky, lop-sided, and have a terrible surface). But there are artworks that seem to defy this - Brancusi's bird in space is an object that sits in that liminal place between reality and idea - so smooth and reflective, tall and thin, that it is an onomatopoeic object as if not touched by a human, but straight from the sky. Ironically the immateriality comes through sanding, and rubbing, and sanding and polishing... it was precisely through the touch of the human hand that he was able to make this uncanny, beautiful and poetic object. I think about this, and Anselm all the time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Stephen Bird took a group of us to Florence for a week. In the many memories, the one which stood out most clearly to me was the experience of Donatello's Mary Magdalene, a sculpture of a hideous woman - an old gaunt wreck of a human with barely any flesh on her skull, like a monster from a slasher zombie horror film. But of course it is utterly utterly beautiful. It changed my life - I suddenly realised that beauty was completely subjective. Here it is the pathos of the narrative: that moment when Mary comes out of the desert after 40 days fasting. The subjectivity of beauty, the possibility that ugly can be beautiful, and the power of narrative.

My entire practice now tries to grapple with these two questions - the transition from

idea to reality, the interpretation and narrative. For the Clifford Chance Sculpture Prize, I was asked to do a talk - and feeling I needed some support - I managed to persuade Nick Hornby the writer to do an 'in conversation' with me. It turns out we had more in common than our names alone - namely that there's no point in writing a book if no one reads it. The same is true for sculpture. I make and look at art to try to 'compare notes' - to see if my take on the world is the same as anyone else's: thus, public sculpture. I am very interested in the context in which the work is received, whether institution, public domain or luxury hotel. All spheres open up very different questions - and provide different opportunities. Public Art is dangerous territory, subject to so many limitations, bad reputations and brief requirements, but it's an arena I hope to try to grapple with. I imagine I will fall into the same traps that other artists do, but I'd like to try to get my head around it. Bump.

Below: *Walking in Our Mind*, plaster, Southbank Centre, London, © Nick Hornby 2010

