

**Nick Hornby – Interview and Profile Feature for LiP magazine:**  
**Mar. 12th 2014**  
**By Jonathan Openshaw**

**Intro:**

Nick Hornby is a sculptor of our times, combining a digital toolkit with painstaking hands on processes. His bold, monochrome creations have echoes of classical sculpture, while also referencing the dominant minimal aesthetic of the iPhone age. Using a mix of cast resin and powdered marble, Hornby sands his pieces by hand to create a surface that manages to be simultaneously cold and tactile. “When I’m designing the form of an object, I’m constantly thinking about how it feels, about the surface and the contours. From the concept stage, I’m imagining how it would feel to touch, to pick up, to press against” he explains. Playing with geometry and perspective, Hornby’s sculptures can be approached from numerous angles to reveal hidden “citations” and forms, creating work that hovers between figurative and abstraction.

**Q&A:**

**– Jonathan Openshaw**

The LiP: Describe your creative process – how do new ideas come about?

Nick Hornby: Sparks seem to be random. I can normally force an idea with a trip to the V&A, a concert or going for a run. But it’s a long road from the spark to the final object, it takes me about six months. Henry James once explained that ideas “saunter into his head, at an angle”, and I like that concept of ideas arriving from the periphery. And of course I like the idea of them being angled, as all my works concern oblique sight lines. Once I start production though, I won’t deviate from the blueprint. The process of spraying resin, making moulds and sanding down the finished object is not conceptual or inspiring: it’s repetitive and hard graft. I keep office hours and am very disciplined about the process once it’s started.

TL: Why sculpture, rather than another discipline?

NH: I find it hard to care about images. Sculpture is like the difference between watching TV and being hit on the head by a TV, for me.

TL: Aerodynamics and ergonomics clearly have strong influences on your sculptures. It’s an approach to form bred in industry rather than art, per se. What is your interest here?

NH: I like classical marble statues, but I also like boats, cars and airplanes. Ergonomics is how we fit into our world. How a door handle feels, for example, or how a chair compresses under you. These are as important to consider as the classical marble drapery of Apollo and Daphne, and so my interest in ergonomics isn't just limited to exceptional objects such as a classical sculpture or a Porsche, but about the way we fit into the world around us.

TL: You're best known for white sculptural pieces that have echoes of the classical though. What attracts you to this colour palette and material?

NH: Yes, my work references classical sculpture, but it also references the early modern, sci-fi, and visions of the future. Old references are more stable than new ones, and I feel that if you're trying to build metaphors that triangulate between distant points, it's best if those points are as clear as possible. I create a collage of references, but I want the result to be cohesive and to stand alone, so that all of these references are seamlessly incorporated into something new.

TL: You use digital processes in your work, but the end product is very tactile. Do you find any conflict in the movement from virtual to real?

NH: I wouldn't set up them up in binary opposition. I use both, one after the other, and there are so many steps between an idea and its final realisation. I take an idea and then formulate this into words, jotting these thoughts down on my iPhone maybe, or saying them out loud. Then there's drawing blueprints and diagrams, designing into CAD, producing scale models, sample materials, artist proofs, moulds, casts. It's that long road from concept to object.

TL: You're currently being featured in 'Out Of Hand', a major exhibition at The Museum of Art and Design (MAD) in New York. Can you speak a little more about this group show and what ideas are being explored?

NH: It's a vast survey of more than a hundred pieces, and every work employs a digital process. The premise of the show is that we are now post-digital, meaning that the digital is ever-present. The exhibition also examines the touch of the hand within this post-digital age, and my work explores the intersection of the two; where automated fabrication meets a very hands-on mode of fabrication.

TL: Techniques like 3D printing have been a disappointment in many ways, when only a couple of years ago we were promised a complete revolution in production. What is your vision of creative production in the digital future? How will beautiful object be made?

NH: Why do you think 3D printing is a disappointment? I'm very practical about it. I've been using it for about four years, and it's extremely useful. I can make a scale model of a design and then FedEx it anywhere in the world in 24 hours. That's extremely useful in my line of work. From my perspective, digital production does two things. Firstly, it can cut out the direct touch of the human hand, so potentially eliminating the possibility for human error, and secondly of course it raises questions about labour-value. There's certainly a huge amount of human labour that still goes into my sculptures, but I'm not blind to the practical value of certain technologies either.

TL: As you increasingly use digital techniques, are there problems that arise from being a step removed from the tactile, and is there a risk of losing that sense of connection with materials?

NH: Not at all. Distance gives the artist a critical vantage point, and this is crucial. In terms of materials, I'm incredibly sensitive to what materials mean, where they come from, how they are produced, and how I treat them. All skills have a sting in their tail, and every time you repeat a process it becomes more familiar and less mystical. But to answer your question more literally, I have spent months of my life sanding objects. When I sand, I fold the sandpaper in half, doubling it back onto upon itself so that I can grip the surfaces with my fingers. This means that when I sand an object, I am also sanding my fingers, and after a few weeks, they bleed. That feels quite authentic and tactile to me! Then I take some ibuprofen and go back to my email, and touching things on screens with my thumbs. I think that some form of removal from the tactile is omnipresent in the post-digital age.

**Studio:**  
**– Photography by Nick Ballon**

Although Hornby has an expansive studio in London's affluent Notting Hill, the scale and ambition of his sculptures means that he collaborates with a range of expert artisans – from stone carvers in Pietrasanta to bronze foundries in Gloucestershire. To explore the technological element of his practice, we accompanied him to a CNC facility in the UK. Feeding precise instructions into a giant, automated cutting machine, Hornby becomes part-creator, part-observer. "Much of my studio work is quasi-digital, such as a rip saw moving along a glide rail, or the precise filling of a mould. There's lots of 'on/off' mechanical work". Removing the personal subjective is an obsession of Hornby's, and once initial plans have been laid, he tries to separate himself from the production process where possible, creating an almost autogenic system of creation.



Hornby's pieces are as informed by classical sculpture as they are by sci-fi



The process requires a technological separation from the act of creation.



Hornby examines a freshly cut segment for exact contours.



Each sculpture creates numerous cutaway sections as it emerges from the CNC mill.



His work explores an intersection between automated fabrication and a hands-on mode of fabrication.



The piece slowly emerges from a solid block of material.

## People:

### – Illustration by Spiros Halaris

No work is created in a vacuum, and precedents are important even when creating something entirely new. Significant figures and peers lend insight and new ways of seeing to your field. Nick chooses those who have most opened up his own outlook, explaining their impact upon his designs.



Kazimir Malevich

“If we build meaning by creating relationships between objects, then Malevich’s abstract compositions are an anchor I can always go back to,” says Hornby. “He juggles circles, squares and lines, and I’ve always been interested in figurative versus abstract in design”. The Russian painter and theoretician laid down the manifesto for Suprematism in the early 20th century, so called because it argued for the supremacy of pure artistic feeling over physical representation. “Malevich is also handy because his work speaks to us via vector graphics, which are very much part of the visual landscape today, through the evolution of computers and the Internet”.



## Gertrude Stein

“For years, I didn’t want my work to have any visible sign of my own life,” says Hornby, “but when I started reading Stein, I realised that it was possible to create work that was deeply personal, and yet simultaneously abstract and open to the viewer’s interpretation. Her poems helped me make that transition from abstract to personal”. So profound was Stein’s influence on Hornby that he used an image of her as part of a major sculptural commission for the Andaz Hotel in New York. “I’m slowly becoming accustomed to narrative in my design – telling stories and speaking my mind”.



Arthur Fleischmann

“I was lucky enough to meet his wife Joy when I was still at school, and visiting his studio was the first time I really understood you could make art full time,” says Hornby. Having pioneered the use of Perspex in sculpture during the 1950s, Fleischmann’s diverse output drew on a melee of references, from breakthroughs in science to his strongly held Catholic faith. “For my MA show, I made a copy of one of his sculptures that was used in ‘Star Wars: the Empire Strikes Back’. It’s taken from a scene in Cloud City, and the interiors are idealised white spaces of the future”. This sparse, futuristic aesthetic still influences Hornby’s designs today.



Robert Venturi

A master of architectural illusion, Venturi has come to encapsulate the post-modern movement in America, famously living by the maxim “less is a bore”. Exploring the relationship between form and meaning through the architectural archetypes of ‘duck’ versus ‘decorated shed’, Venturi provocatively questioned whether a restaurant that sells chicken should in fact be shaped like a chicken. “All of my work is trying to understand how collage and eclecticism differ now from their incarnation in the original post modern, so Venturi is short hand for my enquiry into the idea of collage, admixture and quotation. In particular, the duck-decorated shed relates to the idea of the icon, form and questioning where meaning resides”.



Roland Barthes

“Barthes laid down the foundations for the school of philosophy that sees meaning as fashioned in the act of interpretation, rather than by the author. This is what all my sculptures try to grapple with,” explains Hornby. In his seminal essay ‘The Death of the Author’ (1967), Barthes argued that the Western preoccupation with studying the life of the author to illuminate the meaning of a text was flawed, and limited the possibilities contained within that text. For Barthes, the ‘creator’ is actually just a scribe through which countless threads of culture and history passes, and Hornby responds to this by explicitly leaving multiple perspectives and layers in his work.