

# NICK HORNBY

SCULPTURE IN 2017



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In 2012 Nick Hornby was hailed by the Evening Standard as the new Anthony Gormley. You might be thinking that there stands an immediate problem with this grand statement; “the author of ‘High Fidelity’? Even for the ES that doesn’t make sense.” It is a facile comparison, but we’re not speaking about the renowned novelist, rather about Nick Hornby, the sculptor of postmodern subtractive works, employing famous cultural references like building blocks in order to construct a foundation of meaning. Brancusi’s Bird or Michelangelo’s David are uploaded into CAD software, resulting in a 3-dimensional composite, which is then cast in nautical resin, ground marble and manually perfected to breathe life into an abstract sculpture, whose identity shifts with each viewer’s different perspective.

Hornby is an exceptional example of the new breed of contemporary artists who can be described as self-aware, ambitious, and brand-conscious entrepreneurs. Long gone is the vision of the struggling, romantic artist enslaved by an unrelenting passion towards his craft. After Auschwitz no poetry, and after Trump no idealism, hence the rise of realism and practicality in the creative fields. Before Christmas I had the pleasure of visiting Hornby’s studio and speaking to him about his work.

There is a practicality and a matter-of-factness that surrounds Nick as I speak to him. He is warm, yet carefully tests the waters around me. He is eloquent and clearly intelligent, but not at all patronising or arrogant. There is a comforting self-confidence he exudes, illustrating that his identity as an artist was not a turn of destiny, but rather an active choice, something he has and continues to work hard for. One of his first revelations to me is that he eats the same 3 types of breakfasts, lunches and dinners everyday. This ‘choice minimalism’ approach has other famous fans (Michael Kors has simplified his attire to one outfit) and is becoming popular as a way to establish a routine by eliminating choice from a monotonous aspect of your life, thus allowing for a higher level of focus on your work. Food does not have any unexpected or unwanted influences on Hornby’s ability to create and think.

Entering his studio is an unexpected experience for me, someone accustomed to warehouse conversions. I am taken by surprise in this grandiose space, nestled in the backyard of a row of Notting Hill terraced houses. I liken it to the Sculpture Galleries in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Nick takes kindly to this comparison, and ushers me over to a sketch tacked to a studio wall. He explains that the sketch was part of a commission for the Cast Courts at the V&A. I see a digital rendering of a huge pyramid-shaped sculpture hanging point downwards just outside the Cast Courts. From a bird’s-eye-view one would recognise the outline of Michelangelo’s David. The figure is extruded to a point, paying homage to the great works inside. He was shortlisted in 2012 but sadly did not win the commission, so his vision of a massive 12m sculpture (reaching floor to ceiling) was not realised. As his audience we have to content ourselves with a 2 1/2m version that Hornby produced for his Churner and Churner Gallery in New York.

Our initial exchanges bring out a common frustration with his work, namely that due to the expensive nature of the medium, works often remain in the preliminary testing stages before (if ever) reaching completion. As I look around the studio where Hornby shows me his sketches, prototypes and maquettes, I have a feeling that he enjoys occupying the dual roles of sculptor and a scientist. Experimentation is facilitated through software, allowing his cerebral fancies to play out different eventualities before taking up precious studio space.

At once Hornby is nostalgic and postmodern, drawing inspiration from art history to create works which negate the artist’s hand (authorship). As Roland Barthes put it in his seminal text *The Death of the Author*, ‘a text’s (work’s) unity lies not in its origin but in its destination’.



Jacket YMC  
Shirt WAVEN  
Jeans STYLIST'S OWN  
Shoes WOOD WOOD

Nick tells me that the first time he remembers wanting to become a sculptor was when he was a young boy of 5 hugging the beautifully sculpted architectural legs of his mother's piano. As he wrapped his body around the sculpted column, he internalised the beauty of its physical form and foresaw his future as a sculptor. This anecdote typifies Hornby's practice, where abstract multi-perspective sculptures bred through modern technology are harnessed in a nostalgic memory.

During his BA at the Slade School of Art, in the early 2000s, Hornby undertook a semester abroad at the Art Institute of Chicago. Here he took classes in film and digital media, relishing this opportunity and learning as much as he could. This foray afforded him the technical skills that were imperative to developing his style, and perhaps also gave him the taste for digital experimentation. It wasn't until 2009 when he was commissioned to produce a public sculpture for the Southbank Centre with a group of young adults (the SE1 United Community for the Hayward Gallery Walking in Our Mind exhibition) that Hornby unlocked exactly what his artistic style and intention would be. Struggling at first to communicate with the group, he successfully broke the ice when he got everyone drawing and doodling. Hornby was determined to produce a single sculpture co-authored by the group where each person could have the same share of contribution. For the final piece Hornby had a eureka moment when he realised that he could overlap one drawing from each young person to make a single volume. Like Cubism, but using CAS software the drawings were intersected and the result carved using a CNC robot, resulting in a three-dimensional multi-faceted sculpture. He had created a truly collaborative piece, the sculpture: Walking in Our Mind.

Hornby attributes this moment in his career as setting the impetus for his method. By juxtaposing historical art references, depth and meaning is given to these intersecting forms through their referential existence in the contemporary cultural consciousness.

Prior to this in 2007 when he started an MA at Chelsea College of Art, he already began to pave his way in the art world, combining his love for the tradition of sculpture with the promises of a conceptual, digital technology. Exploring radical ideas for his final MA exhibition, he presented a life-sized cut-out section of a Boeing 727 airplane, which was displayed outside the Chelsea College of Art in the days leading up to the final MA show. This was to be quietly removed on the day of the private view, leaving behind an ephemeral presence. Inside the college, Hornby did display amongst others Victorian table legs that were carved using the rotation of a car wheel. Working with plaster and wood, Hornby was economical in material costs, so that he could spend his budget for the show on making his exhibition space look pristine, fixing lights, fitting exhibition walls and painting.

Is it possible to reveal the percentage of the influence that another artist's work or multiple artists' works have upon a particular new piece? Hornby has devised a formula by which he investigates this query and allows the results to be visualised in the finished sculpture. He loves telling stories by using elements from art and architectural history and is drawn to mythology.

The titles of his works are broadly enigmatic, for example I Never Wanted To Weigh More Heavily on a Man Than a Bird (Coco Chanel). In this piece Brancusi's Bird in Space meets Rodin's Striding Man, a marble/resin composite where the abstraction and minimalist simplicity of Brancusi meets the rebellious realism of Rodin's 'most incomplete' sculpture. Re-worked by Hornby, these two pieces converge but do not merge; Hornby activates the viewer by forcing him/her to view the sculpture from different perspectives in order to see the 'bird' and the 'man'. Perspective is key in his work. Whilst a piece is being conceived he is already thinking about how it will be "read" by a the viewer. This serves to exemplify what an exceptionally astute and concentrated person Hornby is, but it also reveals his deep interest in others.

There is a duality in Hornby's works; a fragility and a violence. Going back to The Present is Just a Point: the outline of Michelangelo's David has been drawn down to a point, upon which it precariously balances on its tip, supported only by an adjacent 'rock' fashioned from the same material. It serves as a neat visual reminder of Hornby's view of his own work, 'I picture pieces falling over and splicing someone in two'. Or Tree Plinth Series No1, or Shadows, Small Spaces, Old Furniture (Kevin McCloud), in which a rectangle is positioned in different angles to an exact replica of the tree stump featured in Michelangelo's David. Here again, Hornby cites a hugely famous historical art work and immediately conjures up the history of sculpture itself. This being the long tradition sculpture has of sitting on plinths, which was later challenged in the 20th century through Anthony Caro (Hornby features in an exhibition with Caro at Cass Sculpture Foundation) and the brazen step to place sculptures 'plinth-less' on the floor during his exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1963.

Even though Hornby's work is visually striking I see his sculptures to be richly symbolic, reflecting his method of visualizing rather complex conceptual ideas surrounding authorship, perspective, and the influence of the collective cultural consciousness on our interaction with art. His sculptures are to his beautifully worded ideas, what modern film posters are to the films themselves.

One of the reasons that I admired Nick most, perhaps, is his non-partisan, indiscriminate relish for inspiration and his delight in observation and constant learning. This comes through in his newest series of works, which can be seen at Reverse Engineering at Waterside Contemporary in Shoreditch. His previous works assume an identity of pristine elegance and purity, but these works add a splash of colour and vibrancy. His Masks are a series of 1/2m x 1/2m wall and standing sculptures that resemble strikingly 'primitive' masks, and are inspired by the famous mythical meeting between Picasso and Matisse, where some believe that Cubism was conceived. This time Hornby intersects silhouettes of Matisse's dancers with Picasso's abstract figures, creating by chance what he says, a new entity that really resembles an African mask. They are overlaid with colourful advertising posters, and bring with them a sense of play to the gallery space. It is clear that Hornby's work is ever-evolving.

2017 continues to be an exciting year for Hornby, who's work is featured in Think Pieces at the prestigious Cass Sculpture Foundation alongside great sculptors Anthony Caro, Phillip King, Bill Woodrow and I Lost My Heart to a Starship Trooper at Griffin Gallery in London with Glenn Brown and Gavin Turk.