

Definitive, Monumental and Progressive: An Interview with Sculptor Nick Hornby

The sculptures of Nick Hornby are intimidating, impressive and mighty. Creating monumental pieces which are transformative of any space, it is hard not to recognise his work. A fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors since 2014, Nick Hornby is certainly at an advantageous position in the contemporary art world. The Norman Rea Gallery were fortunate enough for him to share some of his knowledge with us.

NRG: Why have you chosen sculpture?

NH: I have a stronger response to objects than images or words. Interpretation is the combination of text and then something else – perhaps “gut” or phenomenological feeling. A Rothko doesn’t move me to tears, but Donatello’s Mary Magdalene does. That physical feeling you get with objects – a small glass marble, a cathedral arch, a Giacometti or a Richard Serra. Humans are physical, subject to gravity, breakable. We have skin, nails, cartilage. We touch door handles, steering wheels, pillows, other people. Objects can be incredible – and when they are imbued with meaning...the combination is very powerful.

NRG: Is there anything significant about its process that attracted you to it over other mediums?

NH: Yes – I’ve always really enjoyed the periods of “mindless” process – mixing, sanding, polishing. Reducing your world down to the microscopic scratches of a surface can be a wonderful holiday from the complexity of life. That said – most of my practice now is more post-production... and working with other people – foundries, metal workshops etc.

NRG: What has your journey with sculpture been like?

NH: When I was a child I was unusually interested with sculpture – Moore, Hepworth, Michelangelo, Rodin. On my undergraduate at the Slade I shifted entirely to video and New Media. Afterwards I didn’t have a studio and spent my time reading critical theory. When I came to do my MA a few years later at Chelsea – something clicked and these three things came together: traditional sculpture, narrative and semiotics. I now make objects that are composed of signs and whose meaning unfolds over time.

NRG: Has your background determined your role as an artist? Are you trying to represent yourself through your sculpture or are you universalising particular issues you find poignant?

NH: This is a very complex question that I could approach from many angles – theoretical or personal. Some have said that my work appears to “not include me” – my subject has been the art historical canon, and my sculpture have the appearance of mechanised production. This was because I have been trying to fashion a pseudo-scientific enquiry into questions of authorship and interpretation – and I needed (the veneer) of objectivity so that my “results” wouldn’t be tainted by my touch, my bias, my faults. But unconsciously there is an expression of “hiding” perhaps. Recently I’ve had a change of heart – and I’m becoming increasingly happy to make more personal work.... Which will become apparent in my upcoming solo show at Mostyn. It will be full of touch, bias and faults!

NRG: Working with digital software, how does that help you create the work you are after?

NH: I’ve always enjoyed both physical making as well as technology. On my undergrad – as I mentioned – I got interested in New Media – and embraced tech – learning basic coding, HTML, Java, MAX MSP, web design, Flash, then video and animation. Where painters might enjoy the uniqueness of a canvas – I love the idea of digital reproduction – the ability to iterate and explore parameters. 3D software is incredible – I can go from concept, to sketch to a virtual gallery in moments. It makes collaboration easy – as I can send files to engineers, fabricators, curators.

NRG: What does your creative process look like?

NH: My studio is mainly a site for production than creativity... the works are conceived before I start the making process – and I tend not to modify a work during its fabrication. I want to test the idea, not the process. Another part of my process is discussion – I bounce ideas off my technicians, close artist friends, and curators. Practically speaking – some of the work is made in my studio, but I also work with foundries and fabricators in the UK and internationally.

NRG: You appear to have done an eclectic set of masks. Is there anything that you specifically resonate with doing art surrounding themes of identity?

NH: Although masks – as you say – deal with identity.... My mask series is part of a body of work that explored Cubism and how it was historicised. Twentieth century art historians made links between Cubism and African masks – which are now seen as deeply problematic. My masks are made through a simple manipulations of Matisse’s cut-outs – which are arguably the height of modernism.... They take the end point of Modernism and reverse engineer back to its mythic origin. My practice always tries to explore the idea of authorship, the original, the origin.

NRG: I particularly like Vanity Working on a Weak Head Produces Every Sort of Mischief (Jane Austen). Can you talk about the thought and process behind that?

NH: Thank you! This is part of a series (much of my work is serial) derived from nineteenth Century Marble busts that are on display in the Hintze Galleries at the V&A. The series is named Patrons, Muses and Professionals. Each work hybridizes three distinct portraits, one individual representing each of the titular archetypes. These heads simultaneously embrace and invert the dynamics of portraiture.

NRG: Your sculptures have been exhibited globally and are stationed both in cities and landscapes. Where is it you like to see them most?

NH: I find all spaces equally interesting.

NRG: What are you currently working on? Have you got any upcoming projects?

NH: A fair bit in the pipe line... I’m currently working on my first solo museum show at Mostyn in Wales, as well as my first Monograph published by Anomie press and also starting to work on my second monograph which is scheduled for 2025. Alongside – a group show at Asprey in London, a shortlist for a large public commission in London and a number of private commissions for collectors which include a site in Verbier in the Alps, and Fire Island just outside New York city. And alongside – fabricating works that have been sold.

NRG: Throughout your years of working with sculpture, what would you say is the most invaluable thing you have learnt?

NH: To say thank you. In my practice there are so many people I engage with and work with – from fabricators who you can rely on to friends who you can pick up the phone can call. And to engage – with other artists, makers, curators, collectors... For me – dialogue brings out my best work. Other clichéd truisms... “when in doubt – make it!” as it’s the only way to find out.

Written by Emily Quli
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