



John Montti **Beyond Irony**

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Brooklyn-based John Monti is a mid-career sculptor who has moved from a Minimalist background toward a Pop stance that catches the eye through travesty. Once a maker of cool, lozenge-like wall reliefs, he now deliberately oversteps the line of good taste with works such as *Cluster Study I* (2012), a table-top work of urethane resin flowers with a chrome surface. The profusion of blossoms and spaghetti strands is both deeply sculptural and bordering on the scatological. Monti's longstanding sense of craft is influenced by the absurd normality of his sculptures' content; additionally, as he himself points out, his work is influenced by the Finish Fetish movement of West Coast artists such as Craig Kauffman.

Reflecting on the materialism of American culture, Monti provides us with a mirror that reflects our headlong drive to acquire more and more things. Of course, this subject has been taken up by other artists, but Monti is unusual in his combination of implied critique and formal concerns—even as his products do away with nuance and more than flirt with bad taste. (One remembers, however, Dave Hickey's dictum in *Air Guitar*: "Bad taste is real taste...and good taste is the residue of someone else's privilege.") At the same time, Monti's reach extends beyond a conscious capitulation to bad taste—his work has always referenced architecture and refers to (in his words) "failed utopian visions from an optimistic past, being viewed in the present." In view of this disappointment, Monti has found an aesthetic path that aligns with the Baroque, William Morris wallpaper patterns, and other decorative periods and works of art—it is perhaps a way of salvaging genuine artistic impulses at a time when art is standing still.

The issue of extravagance in Monti's work has to do with popular culture's ability to reify sentimentality and take advantage of commonplace emotions. Sincerity, however, has its moments in Monti's aesthetic. He is too inspired by craft and too conscious of art's visionary implications to work otherwise. Yet he also undermines the presence of a noble attitude, implying that it no longer fits the circumstances we have inherited—both on the side of pop culture, given the influence of television and computers, and on the side of art historical inheritance, beginning with Warhol.

Whether we like it or not, the American art world has been permanently changed by Warhol's taste for mass



Opposite: *Cluster Study I*, 2012. Cast urethane resin, epoxy, and chrome finish, 6 x 7 x 6.5 in. This page, top: *Fancy Dress for Jodi*, 2012. Cast pigmented urethane rubber dress and nylon top. Performance view with Jodi Melnick at the Museum of Arts and Design, NY, May 2012. Right: *Cluster Study III*, 2012. Cast urethane resin, epoxy, and pigmented resin finish, 8 x 15 x 7.5 in.



Above and detail: *Flower Cluster 2*, 2012. Cast urethane resin, epoxy, and pigmented resin finish, 19 x 20 x 18.5 in.

media and democratized culture. Monti, who belongs to the generation immediately following Warhol, pursues his predecessor's shadow through the language of a personalized idiom. This does not mean that Monti's work is eccentric, only that he finds a place where a sculptural realism can be understood as much for its similitude to things as for its cultural critique. His position holds true to the current highly materialistic culture; moreover, his stance does not necessarily belong to the Minimalism of the 1970s, especially his decorative works. As Monti asserts in a recent interview, "I always admired the clarity of vision and the exacting craft of Minimalism but never ascribed to the dogma per se." For him, "The work is about approaching an ideal," although he follows that statement with the recognition that "this is an impossibility, of course." As a result, undermining the shallowness of Pop art with forms that belong to, but also extend beyond, irony enables Monti to put his sculptural impulse in flux, where formal associations can occur without alienating his audience.

In the large, ongoing *Flower Cluster Grandé*, we see him doing his best to overwhelm our senses — Monti is very often a sculptor of sensual feeling, in

the largest sense of the phrase — with a cornucopia of spheres nestled in shell-like forms, a group of flowers (including daisies and lilies), and an overall gestalt that tapers upward in defiance of gravity. Again, there is the question of taste. It would make sense to describe the work as both figuratively and literally over the top. According to Monti, "The process is spontaneous, building up a density where the image appears to be growing and expanding while simultaneously being crushed and suffocated by its own entanglements." He demands, then, a contemporary interpretation that would free him to pass boundaries of decorum. There is nothing restrained about his work, and that is its chief advantage. In addition, the processes reference notions of success and failure from the point of view of content and form. The shapes build upward without rational means; the sculpture is messy without being anarchic. The emotions conjured by such a work do not necessarily present us with a positive view; instead, any potential grandeur tends to be defeated by Monti's willingness to be absurd. One remembers, though, that this is a tactic and not an unconscious mistake.

Fancy Dress for Jodi (2012), a costume that Monti designed for dancer and choreographer Jodi Melnick, was worn in a performance at New York's Museum of

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Mirror Pour I, 2012. Pigmented urethane rubber on glass mirror, 21.75 x 21.75 x 0.63 in.

diva, making her a psychedelic rubber dress and flowers” (his inspiration was the ’60s German pop star Peggy March). The coloring is deliberately cheerful and eye-catching, but to the point where it becomes a parody of itself. Monti is working out an aesthetic whose extremism verges on the risible, and that is exactly the point.

Monti is responding to the visual crowdedness of American commercial culture; his work parodies its wild overkill of the senses. One may find the undertaking quixotic, but such extremism enables him to make fun of the visual rhetoric of signs and forms meant to sell something. In this sense, he aligns himself with Warhol, who made an art philosophy from the excesses of advertising. Pop art was the first postmodern movement to pay attention to how the public is pressured to consume. Monti reflects this pressure extremely accurately, though his vision does not yield to the buying impulse. Instead, he undermines the visual by overstating it, with the implication that we are in the midst of a deeply questionable materialism. At first it may seem hard to see the implied judgment of American affluence, but after the overstatement wears off, we are left with an assertion that finds fault with the pursuit of material gain. As Monti knows, artists can sometimes disparage the status quo by satirizing its salient effects—and this is what he has done.

In a series of urethane rubber pours on mirrors, Monti travesties narcissism and the consequences of questionable taste. Many of us remember the childhood experience of making art by pouring paint on a circling disk, so we are attuned to these low reliefs in which brilliant viscous color spreads across round and oval mirrors. On some level, the radiant hues in *Mirror Pour I*—red, yellow, green—continue Monti’s notion that too much is hardly enough. He pours the rubber at a particular moment, just before it sets, so that the colors mix and run but maintain individuation. By implication, these works question the basis of bad taste; they also revel in a language of organic abstraction that embraces the pours of Lynda Benglis, among others, and the movement of Abstract Expressionism. Just as we have learned from Duchamp to accept all manner of objects as art, so we are learning to accept all manner of taste.

For Monti, the pour works also reference “a psychedelic light show, which represents a beautiful but frozen, stilted moment, dashing one’s hopes of transcendence.” One wonders for whom these works are made. Their accessibility argues for a broad audience instead of a narrow coterie. But it can also be said that the visual simplicity of the rubber pours puts Monti in a narrow place, since the work also demonstrates high sophistication and a knowing presentation of art that belies its openness. Thus, a tension builds between motive and expression, between what is explicitly understood and what is not. Monti’s sly take on American art is not so much an answer to than a demonstration of the kinds of problems that artists have with audience, people who may well love their art without fully comprehending it.

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Arts and Design in May 2012. A tour de force of wearable color and form, the red, orange, and pink dress is composed of pigmented urethane rubber, decorated with equally colorful daisies. (Melnick also wore a top decorated with a yellow urethane-rubber blot.) The idea of making a sculptural costume in high-energy colors begins with extravagant decoration that is then pushed to the extreme. The clothing is given body by the dancer’s figure, but it also stands out on its own; Monti adds that he “turned [Melnick] into a pop