



TUSSLE

John Monti

A Brooklyn Sculptor: Interview with Jonathan Goodman
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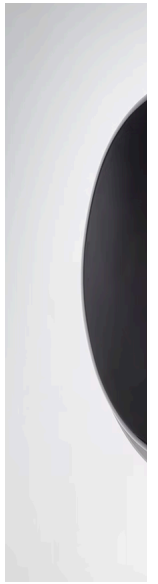
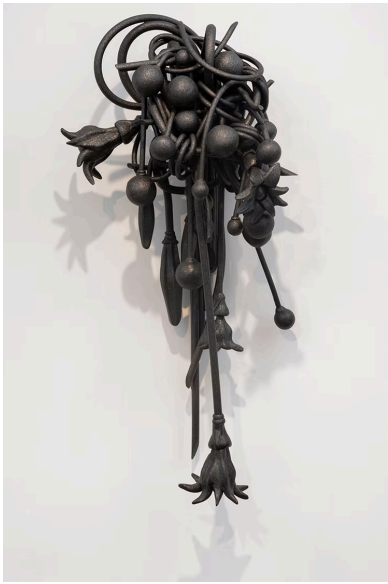
John Monti has been living in Brooklyn for many years. He has had a long career as an instructor at Pratt Institute, where he is much enjoyed as a teacher (he currently runs the MFA sculpture program there). Before becoming a professor at Pratt, he studied at the school, so both his training and his career have been influenced by his presence at the Brooklyn institute. In addition to being a gifted teacher, Monti is a gifted artist: someone who has worked in a variety of forms and media, ranging from the minimal to pop and the deliberately decorative. In some ways this makes him an artist hard to pin down, yet his variousness comes across as a strength and in no way a weakness. A master modeler in clay, Monti has used his skills to portray the beauty of flowers; other earlier works, and also some pieces from a couple years ago, play with both minimalism and monumental presence.

Monti and his long determination to cut an independent path, with an emphasis on his own originality even as he was nodding to various New York influences, has resulted in very good art. Monti's studio exists on the ground floor of his home, enabling him to work all day and long into the night. A man agreeable to friendship, Monti knows the art world well—hence the incisiveness of his comments on its current milieu. Like many mature artists, he chooses words carefully when asked to describe the strange circumstances of present-day art, in which public responsibility vies with private vision in the face of a seemingly large audience that is, in fact, composed mostly of other artists.

For more than a generation now, Brooklyn has been the home of artists and writers who may have been intrigued both by the numerous, vibrant small neighborhoods and the international flair of its artistic inhabitants. More than most art teachers I know, Monti has been able to balance a dedicated school presence with the solitude of a serious sculptor. Married to dancer and choreographer, Irène Hultman, Monti has produced sets for dance, which shifts his work toward a different purpose and audience—a task he has well accomplished. His long preoccupation with form, influenced a bit by performance, has resulted in a body of work that can demand the imaginative, and even the physical, participation of his audience. Monti is asking all of us to study not only the beauty of objects, but also the relations between the artist, the thing itself, and the viewer. Doing so requires not only a critique of the work, but also awareness of what happens among people who approach art. Monti's work, always strong, seems recently to have come into a clearing, in which art and intention merge. This is not only good for the artist; it is good for the people who have admired his work, now and then.

—Jonathan Goodman





INTERVIEW:

Jonathan Goodman: Like so many New York City artists, you come from somewhere else—in your case, Oregon. You have lived in New York for decades; do you still see the art world here with the eyes of an outsider, or have you acclimated completely? What is it you like, or don't like, about the present state of the art world here?

John Monti: I moved to NYC from Portland, Oregon in 1981 and after having lived here for several decades I consider myself a New Yorker. Despite that, I sometimes still orientate myself from a "Northwest" perspective, often recalling that initial feeling of looking at New York City and the artworld as if I have just arrived.

Though I moved from the Pacific Northwest, my formative years in the artworld were all in New York City. Since that time the changes have been dramatic, to say the least. Many are positive; there is a bigger, more inclusive artworld; more voices are being heard creating dynamic histories; standards are constantly being reevaluated; new influences and directions are felt and taken. The artworld is never static and the abundance of art, galleries, and artists both continue to challenge and reward. However, the economic pressures for artists are great, especially in New York. Before hyper-commercialization, the scene was scrappier. This allowed more time for experimentation, conversations, and play without the desire (at least in the beginning) for the expectation of money coming from one's artwork. But now the economic stresses are crushing for artists, especially those just starting out.

JG: Your sculptural output has varied over the years. Can you trace a continuum from the work you were doing when you first arrived in New York City to the work you are doing now? Can you say why you changed from one style to the next?

JM: I came from a painting background and gradually came to realize I was making objects. In grad school I found the beginnings of my sculptural language and started working in wood, making abstract figural and minimal objects that engaged the wall and floor; it went from there.

My work has always had conceptual concerns and a desire for the representation of "things." I have always been influenced by art and architecture cross-culturally, both historical and contemporary; materials and "craft" are at the core of that interest.

The changes in my work are usually a result of either some sort of impasse, or the work becoming too familiar and not resistant enough. Art is always an exploration, and when things feel too comfortable, for me at least, it's time to change it up. An impasse or creative block creates a need for experimentation and the breaking of old habits. Each change often results in new materials and processes, and new ideas tend to follow. My work has always developed slowly through process and discovery. Looking over the many years of my work, I find there are visual and material differences but familiar threads as well.

JG: Please talk about materials in your art. Do you usually work with clay? Or do you make use of other materials? How does your choice of materials affect the work?

JM: For artists materials are everything, and that's especially true for a sculptor. Material is content and informs the work; materials have a voice. Materials embody different histories and contexts. What you make and the materials you make them with are seen and felt

together. One needs to support the other, both conceptually, esthetically, and often physically. My conceptual thinking has always been in conjunction with materials and their corresponding processes. These are inseparable for me.

Some of my early works, the "Construct" series, are made of wood and influenced by images of ancient ceremonial objects, utilitarian forms, woodcraft and Constructivism. These ideas were partially borne out of my specific material choices. Craft and technique and the materials I use are mutually supportive in the making of an object. My current work is made primarily with resin and industrial finishes, glitter and pigment colorations. These materials speak to our desire for "object seduction," or, rather, are employed in the creation of an object that will seduce.

JG: What about the notion of craft? Much of today's art practice seems to be uninterested in craft, but you are very skilled. How do you see skill affecting your artistic process?

JM: I've always been drawn to the materiality of things, and with any material there are multiple ways to engage and work with it. There are many craft traditions and approaches utilized in art and many ways to make something. Craft may imply a certain way of working or thinking to achieve a desired effect or result. In contemporary art what determines a particular craft (or method) is always relative to the artist's intention and the specific materials used. This can be borne out of traditional, cultural, and invented ways of making. In my early wood pieces, I would use joinery, steam-bending, and lamination, methods that you would often see utilized in furniture making or boatbuilding. Of course, along the way, I would also invent different methods that the work "needed." Drawing upon craft traditions in tandem with my own invented processes have been consistent in my practice, regardless of the materials used.

My recent work speaks to beauty, ornament and the desire for attention. This work demands high methods of craft where any evidence of my hand is absent. How something is made is important and is part of my development and discovery, but when a work is finished, I don't want that perceived as part of it. I want the work to be regarded as having "arrived," a gestalt, its origins a mystery. All of this is characterized by its industrial qualities and high finish.

I always strive for visual clarity in my work. How something looks should be sharp and defined. This has always required a certain precision and exactness. I want you to see the form uninterrupted, without distractions to "snag" the eye.

JG: Much, if not most of the work, you have been making is organic in its form. What is it about organic shapes that attracts you in your art? Does the organicism suggest a free improvisation in regard to your work?

JM: For the past few years, I have used abstracted forms resembling flora, vines and seedpods as components for my sculpture. These are personally meaningful and are familiar tropes for ornament. I have always been curious about ornamentation, how it's used to adorn things for purposes of getting one's attention and to distract. Ornament displays itself lavishly and often covers up what should not be seen; it's very purposeful. The Italian baroque in art and architecture are definite sources of inspiration, as are Arabesque and Italianate patterning. I also gather source materials from historical drawings of flora, and I take walks in botanical gardens, looking at wisteria and vines or finding other discoveries along the way.

The repetition of organic forms in my work is borne out of my interests in how ornamentation and adornment are used in religious imagery. From my upbringing as a Roman Catholic and trips to ornate churches in Italy over the years, I have come to see the use of adornment as a form of propaganda, used to seduce and grab one's attention, all for purposes of cajoling or convincing someone of something. It's a vehicle for an ideology. The beauty of it all can't be denied, and we are willfully seduced. These are qualities that I aim for in my work.

JG: In a recent show, you exhibited clusters of small forms and oval-shaped mirror-like works. Can you describe the thinking that went on in the creation of these two bodies of work? How did you make them?

JM: The title of my exhibition was "Ovals and Clusters." I saw these two distinct types of work as being complementary yet oppositional. The Clusters are composed of dense amalgams of organic forms that are individually modeled, cast in resin, then combined as in many parts to a whole. The Ovals have mirror-like surfaces with Kandy pigments and glitter surfaces, some with organic patterning. These were made by shaping foam-board, which was then laminated with fiberglass and coated with layers of resin, pigments, and lots and lots of polishing. Each offers their attractions to the viewer. The overall desired effect is one of melancholy and pensive appreciation. Some described the show as being elegiac or like Victorian gothic, which I appreciated. I saw these works operating like vanitas objects. The Clusters were sculptures composed of congested forms of vines and flora intertwined and gnarled and extremely dense in parts. The Ovals are about three inches thick, in different sizes, all with dark and mysterious mirror-like surfaces. Looking at them, you would see yourself reflected in combination with the reflections of the other works in the room; this gave one a sense of both interest and apprehension. There is a funerary aspect to the work—in a poetic sense, it's about the contemplation of death. The works act as signifiers of sorts. This current body of work was heightened by our pandemic era and the gravitas of our moment. I was acutely aware of this in the making of this work.

JG: Can you name two or three sculptors, not necessarily New York-based, whose work means a lot to you? Can you say why?

JM: This is a hard question, to only name three. Generally, I'm very pluralistic and drawn to many different artists for different reasons.

When I was growing up, my mother would regularly take me to the library in downtown Portland Oregon. The Portland Art Museum was close by, which I had the opportunity to visit on several occasions. I would just roam and wander and always ended up looking at the Native American art collection. The museum has an extensive collection of work by regional tribes and indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Not knowing their cultural significance at the time, I was intrigued with how these objects were made and their use of craft and image representation. This experience was impactful, and the work entered me unfiltered.

In undergraduate school, and to this day, Martin Puryear is an important influence. His use of material, craft, and cultural perspective, all residing within an evocative sculptural form, is inspired. His work has a distinctive voice, which is heard through his use of abstraction and metaphor.

And Melvin Edwards, specifically his "Lynch Fragments" series. The concentration of various forms and objects in these works, their weight and density all in a relatively small size, is very powerful. His work is made political through his combinations of materials and found elements: scissors are not just scissors and a chain is not just a chain. You can identify the particular parts of a given sculpture but taken as a whole it's transformative.

A recent exhibition at David Zwirner gallery reminded me of how much I like the work of Ruth Asawa. She employs seemingly simple materials and processes to magical and visionary ends. All is revealed in the work; her incredible sensitivity to craft and labor gives way to beautiful, airy, delineated forms that exude lightness and transparency. This is true of her drawings as well. Her work is like a whisper that demands our attention.

JG: Many artists, including yourself, are committed to a political reading of culture. Yet your work does not directly address social issues. Is it possible to create political work whose esthetic merit matches its engagement? Why have you chosen to make sculpture that is not socially determined?

JM: I believe that all art is political, whether it takes the form of abstraction or direct messaging. All of it is political. At its core, art is the assertion of an individual's voice. Shared publicly, this has the potential to change someone's perspective, to challenge thinking, and to put something in motion or start a conversation. How art is viewed in relation to the political is always a matter of degrees. Art can't change the world but can assert itself as a critique, a reflection, or questions about that world. Art and the artist stand against the status quo.

I am very conscious of responding to society and the conditions of things that I experience. Through the modalities of ornament, glitter, and glossy surfaces, I mine the themes of religiosity, seduction, and melancholy. This is where I feel the esthetic matches its engagement. The art that I appreciate is often oblique, poetic, slightly ambiguous; I want my work to operate in this way—this is not so much a result of choice but rather a need. I want my work to give room for the viewer to interpret, to deconstruct, to decode. A successful work moves the viewer esthetically. This is the first approach: esthetics carry the intentionality of the artist or provide the entrance point of a work. After encountering an artwork, you want its impact to linger; you want the viewer to think about it the next day, not to simply consume and digest it like so much advertising or media messaging.

JG: In addition to sculpting, you have had a long career teaching at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. How has teaching affected your artistic practice? Are your current students oriented toward art in a manner different from that of earlier students?

JM: As in my art practice, teaching is a vocation, I find the two are mutually supportive. The exhibitions I see, the things that I read and find curious, I share with my students. This is also reciprocal, I respond to the student's work and their interests, and am often challenged to develop new contexts and frames of reference. Teaching is a dynamic conversation; it's never static, the sharing of ideas and perspectives impacts positively. Often I will ask myself the same questions in the studio that I am asking of my students. These intellectual investigations continually influence me and my practice, not necessarily in a direct way but rather more obliquely.

In comparing students over the years, some things have changed yet other things remain constant. An obvious change has been the realm of influences and exposure to things that impact their art; most students come with the understanding that art and life are nearly or fully merged. Hierarchies of influence are still there but less important than in earlier years. For some there are expectations of being a full-time artist and earning an income from their art right after graduating, a skewed view fostered by the hyper-commodification of the artworld. This can certainly happen for a select few, but for most it's up and down. In reality, being an artist is a long game. Most understand the need for the day job, unless they have money of course. The economic uncertainty for artists hasn't changed that much. The most consistent thing I have found among students is their need to speak their voice through their art. The good ones always find a way despite the obstacles.

JG: One assumes you came to New York not only for your education at Pratt Institute, but also because of the internationalism here. How does such internationalism affect you as an artist? Are we living in a time when cultural origins have small consequence in the way art is made?

JM: I think for most artists, the draw to New York was and continues to be strong. The stimulus here, the art and general cultural life have always influenced my studio practice. Living and working here is rewarding, sometimes challenging. It still has its edge. This sounds romantic I suppose, but I think the feeling still exists for younger artists, and it still does for me. New York City is a world destination, and for a young artist it is super important to be here, at least for a time. I moved to New York in a pre-digital era where art fairs were nascent. So being here was extremely important to be exposed to all kinds of art. Things from other places really did look different; you wondered about the artist's thinking and what they were accessing that wasn't available to you. During graduate school I worked at PS1 (this was the pre-MoMA era, closer to the time of its founding), where I did a variety of things. In my downtime I hung out with the artists who had studios there. They were part of the International Studio Program that existed at that time. This was a big part of my education. These artists seemed much freer, and open to things; they leaned toward experimentation, etc. They had different stylistic and conceptual approaches that were refreshing. There was less concern about galleries, or the market, etc., and no one had expectations to make money from their artwork, at least in the beginning.

Fast forward to today. In general, contemporary art now seems less contingent on place and may speak less to cultural origins (if one thinks of cultural origins in strictly geographic, nationalistic, or political terms.) There is a sense that we are living in a global pluralistic culture. There are still important distinctions though, and I think the idea of cultural origins needs to be reframed a bit. Concepts, materials, social, and political and community concerns are individually addressed by artists; each engenders its own audience. These are the cultural origins for contemporary art.

For years we've had our digital lives, international art fairs, and biennials and a global art market, all catering to the less than one percent. In general, this has created a global contemporary art, a new international style if you will. I think this makes individuals and their distinctions even more important. I for one seek these out.

JG: Almost always, artists have another art, in a different field, that means a lot to them. You have often worked in dance—are you still taken with the genre? What other arts are important to you?

JM: Well, my partner is Irène Hultman, known for her long activity in dance. Through her the world of dance and performance opened up to me. When we first met (that's thirty years ago now!), I would tag along and see everything. Eventually I got to know her peers and began to understand the language of dance and the distinctions between things. I was fascinated by my witnessing interactions between her and Trisha Brown, whom she danced for in those early years. I had a few opportunities to collaborate with Irène as well as other choreographers, for whom I made set designs for productions both in New York and Europe. This was highly important and influenced my studio practice in expansive ways. These opportunities came at a time when I was creatively stuck, they enabled me to open-up, as well as broaden my vision and approaches.

JG: We seem to be living in a time of inexorable pluralism. Do the many different kinds of art we see, in the form of remarkable individuality, distance artists from each other? Or does this situation reflect the constant travel and movement of artists from one place to the next?

JM: I think you are describing a paradox, so this has a yes and no answer. I do agree we are in a time of inexorable pluralism. This is reflective of the incredible access to so many things at any one time. There are more artists, more intergenerational artists, more cultural representations, more histories and redefined histories; it's just a much larger scene. This is all good of course. That said, we still identify and empathize with each other through art. I often tell my students that, as an individual, if you care about something and speak to it through your work, chances are someone else will identify and relate to it. We are not alone in this regard. Think of this as each artist acting as a de facto representative of a group or tribe, all sharing similar concerns, be it conceptual, esthetic, etc. These groups or constituents certainly overlap, and continually expand and contract; nothing is fixed. This is the paradox; extreme plurality offers access and identification for many. If you care about something, and something is important enough that you commit an artwork to it, chances are someone else will identify and see themselves in it. This is as much about the workings of empathy as it is about identification of self. I think this is a human exchange. This is the ineffable power of art.

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