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Interview With Matthew Day Jackson



Jackson's *Viking Burial Ship* at PS.1's Greater New York show (2005)

Isaac D. Peterson

Matt D. Jackson (P.I.C.A. artist in residence)

IDP:

I was interested in your use of scrap materials and discarded materials re-appropriated in creating art. Are you consciously working against the preciousness of art, the idea of art as commodity?

MDJ:

Well the first reason for using scrap materials was, even in graduate school, even in undergrad, 13 years ago, I found myself encountering moral dilemmas in making art. Making art became a moral dilemma. Basically, you had all of these useful materials and you assemble them into something that was essentially useless. It was difficult to justify ethically. Not that everything had to be useful, but with in acquiring materials I suddenly felt like this super consumer. A lot of times I didn't feel like ideas were good enough to be addressed this way.

Firstly, I found I could use scrap materials without encountering this weird moral dilemma. Secondly, it is a sort of political gesture in the sense that when you use these scrap materials, these things that are cast aside on the road or on the corner of the wood shop or literally in garbage cans (I'm constantly dragging stuff home), to make these things beautiful, to focus on the things in a sculptural way I'm trying to say that the things in society that we know, that move the world along, that our garbage service, people that pave our streets, those are the things that we don't think about, that we take for granted. In a way it's a gesture, to contemplate these trash materials. It's a way of saying that these things can be re-sculpted and beautified, elevated to higher ideals. I'm not saying that "higher ideals" in a moral or political way, but I think about them rather in a purely creative and intellectual way. These discarded materials can be raised up. It's the same way that constructivism functions, the larger form is the sum of smaller parts.

So the work I'm making here works the same way, I'm just asking people if I can have their garbage. The only thing I've purchased are a few pieces of wood and some bamboo plywood. So in being aware of these materials, I'm saying "I don't want to purchase everything from Home Depot. I don't want to continue to contribute to these archaic ways of using building materials acquired through destruction of the land."

IDP:

I've encountered this same dilemma. Sometimes as an artist you feel like you are creating the ultimate commodity, the ultimate luxury product, and it's nice to think of taking that idea apart, or really scrutinizing it in your practice. It seems like using scrap materials really ties art to the infrastructure of society, like art becomes as necessary to everyone as having your trash taken out, for example.

MDJ:

Well, that's what I was getting to earlier, the use of these materials is a way to re-think the formal structure, because ideas never really change, they just re-occur. The stories of our lives don't really change. We love, we hate, we have relationships and families. The baseline of human experience is always the same. Those things don't really change, but how those ideas come together constantly changes. The way those basic elements are structured constantly changes, this is one of the effects of technology, that it has rearranged the structure of those basic elements. So I think of using the structure that I live in, of bringing those structures into the way that I work in the studio and into the work. I'm trying to create a microcosm of the world around me.

I mean, it's totally subjective, I'm not saying that the world is in these things that I'm making, but it's the world as I encounter it. My use of these materials is my attempt to come to a better understanding of the world that I live in. When you take these things that are bits and pieces and scraps, and glue them back together again, and totally dismember them from where I found them, that's when the ideas start to come in. The scraps develop into formal structures in a way that has become almost automatic, and those forms begin to communicate ideas.

IDP:

I really like the idea of leveling art, reclaiming it as a communicative practice, rather than one that is entrenched and elitist, making it something that can be more connected to real experience, something everyone can access.

MDJ:

It's the opposite of elitist practice, the opposite of the Black Painting. But, simultaneously, if money was no object, Ad Reinhardt's Black Painting would be the first thing I would buy, because he was kind of one

of the first punks in a way. He was a popular culture punk. He was a punk in the truest sense.

IDP:

The Black Painting was an act of defiance.

MDJ:

Yeah, but also he was drawing from the precedent of artists like Mondrian or Malevich who were trying to develop this formal code that would only reference itself. The only referencing itself part is where I'm kind of lost. Now I think everything exists in synergy. A giant synergistic structure.

IDP:

I used to really hate that word because of the way it was appropriated by corporations to describe profit dynamics. I thought it was totally meaningless and a form of capitalist euphemism, but it annoyed me so much I looked for its definition in the OED and I found out that it was invented by Buckminster Fuller to describe what he intended for his architecture, the way that his structures would address every dimension of human life. It means that the combination or interaction of two separate elements creates greater energy than those elements would in isolation.

MDJ:

And the most beautiful piece of writing that I've read recently was by Buckminster Fuller. He wrote a poem that he dedicated to his new sailing boat, the Intuition. *(Buckminster Fuller, Intuition, 1972, ISBN 0385012446)*. He wrote a poem addressed to his boat before he set out to sea in 1968. The book is called Intuition and its about the synergy that exists between things which seem separate from each other, the relationship between experience and the universe.

IDP:

That's what his geodesic domes were, they were synergistic habitations that connected everything about living. They were Utopian models. He inter-related every human need, and he needed to compose a new word to describe what he was doing.

MDJ:

It's almost another name for God, in a sense, the acknowledgement that everything is connected.

IDP:

You were talking about when art refers to itself, viz., Reinhardt's Black Paintings. They begin to become self-referential and it becomes a closed system. It leads only to itself. Although you are interested in these self-referential forms, you seem to believe in the possibility of art to really communicate directly, viz., concerns about the environment, political implications, etc. These become elements that you are able to co-opt aesthetically or formally. Do you think that this is something radical, using art as direct communication?

MDJ:

No, I think that most people are concerned with these issues. Art is an act of the imagination and imagination spans everything. I think that I've just found away for myself to tap into my personal creativity that is unfettered by definitions of what should or should not be explored, or what is inside or out of bounds. I think that really, in making art, I'm trying to give my creativity complete free reign, and acknowledge my location. We are products of this technological age, where things no longer move in a linear pattern. The linear model has changed. In making art I'm trying communicate many things simultaneously: my political concerns, taking responsibility for the art as a self-portrait, amateur history

lessons, etc. I'm interested in making art that can be a mirror of the time that I'm in, art as a microcosm.

There is a way of reading images, all of these separate elements come together in a single structure, and I try to think about how the structure as a whole can be read. I try to be responsible to the standpoint of the viewer approaching the work and reading it. I try to clarify the read to give the viewer access to the work, a way into the work. I do this by using familiar iconography, a story they might know, materials they might use every single day of their entire lives. I mean, really, I very seldom use art materials, I'm more interested in a piece of plywood, or flooring, things that everyone understands immediately.

Just recently I went out to my family's property, a dilapidated house that no one has used in years, and I took an old pillar from the front porch. This pillar is highly decayed, but it absolutely, unmistakably has a sense of place.

IDP:

It's a way of reaching the viewer. If the average person approaching this says "Well, I don't understand art!" that's fine, but if that same person sees this pillar with such a tangible history, they can understand the history of the pillar.

MDJ:

It locates the work. It locates the ideas. It gives everything a sense of place and a sense of history. It is a political gesture: you don't use this shiny, sparkly thing, you use something that time has eroded away, lack of human care has essentially made it useless. It's totally rotted, there's a hole that a bird had drilled or pecked away.

IDP:

So these materials have the significance of their History.

MDJ:

Yes, some materials do, or maybe they all do! You can think of Particle Board or Plywood as having narrative potential. At the turn of the century you could find a plank of wood that was 16 inches wide! Now, you can find these things but it's not readily available, it makes more sense to build these things out of plywood. So a simple thing like plywood has embedded into it the entire history of our depletion of resources. Our history is built into these materials. Particle board progresses this even further: it's the remnants left over from making the plywood.

IDP:

The particle board is discarded from the plywood and then it's often discarded itself.

MDJ:

If you look around at condemned buildings, here more than the eastern US, you see these structures made primarily of particle board. The history of the building itself becomes written in the particle board. I mean, I don't expect people to know that or to read into the work the history of a particular building. Often times I use it in such a way that it becomes kind of beautiful. It is formally beautiful although it is made of scrap.

IDP:

There are notable sculptors right now who create plans for work and send it to a fabricator, but for you work seems kind of essential, as if work is a way of processing concepts.

MDJ:

Well, as part of this sculpture I've been making these forms based on Brancusi's Sleeping Child, and I've been crafting them entirely from memory. In working through the form I've found a way of knowing the form completely without having to analyze it. It becomes your own form. I mean, I'm not going to make any grand gestures, comparing myself to Brancusi, but it's almost as if I know this particular sculpture as completely as if I'd made it. I know the sculpture through the work.

IDP:

The labor itself legitimizes the appropriation.

MDJ:

Yeah. But as far as work is concerned, my sculptures mostly consist of taking all these tiny little pieces, gluing them back together and then carving them, but there are some pieces where I don't touch them at all. I just chop off one end and use it as it is. So ultimately, the labor is not so important to the work. When I'm making something, I'm just trying to create the things that I imagine. With sculpture, I can already imagine the completed form, I already know what it looks like. So I just go through the world and I see things that are parts of the sculpture, and I pick them up. It never strays very far from the image I've imagined. So the labor is just functional. It's like, you've got a house to build, you need this many people, here are the plans, here are the materials, and that's what you do. I feel like I have to do a lot of the work myself but the labor is just a means to an end. The labor creates the structures and the structures communicate ideas. I really believe that there are no old ideas. There are only new ideas. But the work is good exercise.

But labor is a way of communicating with Brancusi. I'm getting to know his forms.

IDP:

The labor is a way of experiencing empathy with the artist.

MDJ:

Yeah, I mean I love those things! I saw the Brancusi show in London when he and Donald Judd were at the Tate Modern. I saw those two sculptors juxtaposed against one another, and I was entirely blown away by the Brancusi show. I had never really looked at it closely, but his understanding of how the materials play off each other, and the forms that he used. He would make very precise decisions on when to leave a form unfinished, or when to polish a material. I'm not a Brancusi scholar, but I know that that was something new.

IDP:

He had that theory of bringing every material to its utmost potential. Because bronze took polish so well, he would polish it to a mirror finish. Because of wood's capacity to express texture, he would take that to its logical endpoint. He didn't try to mask what the materials were or subordinate them to representation. Sometimes that would be the whole sculpture, the polish of bronze vs. the texture of wood. Nothing more than acknowledgement of the materials.

MDJ:

And stemming from that is where the material narrative comes in, reading something the way that it is. In the piece for TBA I'm using a tree whose form is so totally strange, its almost as if it never grew out of the ground. That object has its own material narrative, one of natural creation vs. construction.

IDP:

I wanted to ask you about the use of trees or objects from nature. You mentioned being interested in discarded materials, do you think that natural materials have the same role? Natural materials are discarded materials?

MDJ:

Well, they're all natural materials. Plywood is a natural material. Everything that we know, we live within this atmosphere. Everything that we know comes from within it. Essentially we are dealing with the synergy of those elements, how those elements are assembled into something else. Natural materials, like a tree, are totally procured the same way.

IDP:

I think this comparison between you and Brancusi is interesting.

MDJ:

Maybe Forty years from now it will be!

IDP:

Well, if you think of Brancusi as heightening the inherent properties of materials, your work operates in the same way, except it includes a narrative dimension. It is not only the meaning of the materials themselves, but the inherent narrative those things suggest.

MDJ:

But I'm going to argue that a lot of those things are products of this age. If it were 1950 and you were Clement Greenberg, we would be talking about materials containing an inherent narrative.

IDP:

Narrative would be impure.

MDJ:

I think it's a product of our age, because we go to the computer, and we search Google, the implication is that everything contains a narrative. I think these things are changing the structure of developing brains. Our generation is a little bit backward, in that we still look for linear patterns. But the younger generation, they have a completely different structural understanding of how information can be disseminated. I want sculpture to follow that route.

IDP:

Like the book represented a linear model which is slowly being replaced by hypertext. The formal equivalent of hypertext. Like Wikipedia isn't a book, it's a self-complicating virus that just grows bigger and bigger, a biological model.

MDJ:

That's how I want ideas to be. I want no walls between ideas. Information is just like money, it's a resource that separates or unites people, a power source. And that is one of the political aspects of making art that is open and interconnected.

IDP:

Do you think that's an idea that has recently come to art? Connectivity?

MDJ:

No, I think that communities of artists have always operated in the same way. Like those gathering places where all of the artists converged, like the Cedar Bar. The Internet is like the Cedar Bar for millions of people at the same time. Although there is a lot of misinformation within that system the possibilities are incredible. Wikipedia is amazing, it suggests a new structure for history, different than the linear model in which you and I learned history. I mean, if we could have information breathe, or become an open sphere!

IDP:

It's funny how the connotations of emerging technology are often cold or dystopian, technology is often seen as this de-humanizing force, viz., Terminator, but in many ways, the opposite is true. The internet in particular can be seen as this sensitizing instrument, democratizing communication, and very humanizing. You have access to everything all of the time and you can make up your own opinion about things.

MDJ:

I get a lot from this book on Giacometti by James Lord *(A Giacometti Portrait : James Lord : ISBN 0374515735)*. It isn't very long and it's a book everyone should read. Giacometti is constantly talking about this thing that he's doing which is entirely impossible, and he should just give up on it although he continues to persist. He talks about trying to make this thing that breathes, this thing that is human and capable of self-contradiction, or it can believe in things, or it can be ugly.

IDP:

Giacometti always intrigues me for that reason. It's like, he was always attempting to make a true portrait, and then he would lose it. It's like, any rendering he did, any representation of how someone looked would not be enough, could not possibly communicate who that person is. So to express this loss, he begins to remove material compulsively, until he's left with that elongated figure. It was supposed to be a portrait, but instead it communicates how an individual can construct a spiritual space around them, how identity can be nearly dissolved by a tangible spiritual field. And he felt like every sculpture was a failure.

MDJ:

Well, I don't know, I read those sculptures now as nearly photographic in a sense! Like they are constructed with an understanding of how they will be seen, along the curvature of the eye. The forms change very specifically as you move around them, even if they don't make sense three dimensionally. He understood the way form is broken down by perception. When you look at someone's face, you don't need to look at is a three dimensional object because you can understand it as a flat form, and as they turn their head the profile also communicates as a flat form. What Giacometti did was construct those flat forms into a single form without engaging it three dimensionally. I think in that sense they are very representational.

IDP:

They are not accurate as three dimensional rendering but they are accurate in some basic channel of human perception.

IDP:

I was thinking about what we discussed earlier about the new structure of information, and I noticed in one of your sculptures you made this connection between Punk Rock and a Viking ship. This is one of those associations that couldn't normally exist in a linear structure but clearly Punk Rock culture may have some Viking undertones.

MDJ:

That piece was really a suicide piece.

IDP:

It was a funeral pyre, right?

MDJ:

Well, it wasn't historically accurate, but I'm not even concerned with that, I'm concerned with maybe the Hollywood representation of Vikings. Basically I had come to the point where I realized I was fulfilling someone else's legacy of making art. I was operating within this formal strategy that was completely developed by my predecessors. You know from Modrian to Reinhardt to Philip Guston to Jonathan Lasker. Basically what they were making were super-narrative abstract structures. I realized that what I was doing was something that was not entirely a part of my generation, and that my ideas and creativity were constantly struggling against this. I wanted to put it all to rest, so I started making this funeral vessel for my own ideas and it took the form of this very heroic funeral practice. Of course the whole idea is pure Hollywood myth, there would be no artifacts of these ships if they had all been set on fire and pushed out to sea. I would say that that definitely didn't happen, but I wasn't as concerned with that. I was more concerned with heroic death and how it was represented in the media. I wanted to focus on death in relationship to all of this iconography. The sail refers exactly to a pattern from a specific Mondrian painting, and that leads in to the idea that these modern icons have narrative potential.

IDP:

That seems pretty radical to think of Mondrian as having narrative potential.

MDJ:

But it is! We've gone there! It's on clothing, it's on swatches, it's on furniture!

IDP:

Regardless of what Mondrian intended, the work has acquired a narrative.

MDJ:

Yes, and that's the world that we live in. I think of the Brancusi heads I'm making now, they are stacked up like cannonballs. The original sculpture was called the Sleeping Muse, and its eyes are closed, but in my version their eyes are wide open! The Sleeping Muse has been awoken from its slumber of the last 83 years. It's a statement about modernity to think of Brancusi used as a cannonball. We are at the tail-end of the industrial revolution, and that thing that was calm and banal is essentially being used to knock you out.

IDP:

I wanted to ask you about your interest in Bosch and Breugel.

MDJ:

Well, in particular I think of the Garden of Earthly Delights, which is another one of those pieces, if you had unlimited funds you would absolutely have to own. What's interesting about that painting is how morally complicated it is. In Hell you basically re-enact the most intense experiences of your life. That is why people are tortured on musical instruments, they are re-experiencing as intense pain what was formerly intense pleasure.

What really interests me is Bosch's architecture, the shape of all the structures in the background. If you look at the Garden of Earthly Delights you can see that the main architectural structures are arranged

along a pentagram. If you look at the structure of these buildings they kind of look like Frank Gehry, actually, and that was my interest in them, it seemed odd that Bosch's buildings should look exactly like the forms that rule architecture now.

Bosch has a kind of plural, weird, kaleidoscopic, hallucinogenic reading of text that is really fascinating.

IDP:

Bosch's depictions of music in Hell are nice visual metaphors for heavy metal, especially when you think of the one guy that is pierced upside down on the strings of the harp, so that when the demon plays the harp the strings vibrate in his wounds and cause him pain. How do you translate the aural structures of Heavy Metal into visual forms?

MDJ:

My interest in metal is that it's all at once, all the time, simultaneously and you get this well of information. It's that immediacy. If I could make a piece of work that had that immediacy, but maybe that's like saying "If I could fly"

Beyond the stories and the narrative of metal (which most of it is totally questionable) it's the sound and the way that it's disseminated. That you have these people that are extremely proficient in using their tools, but it's fused to this thing that's incredibly furious and dissonant. Extremely gifted musicians casting all taste away, and casting aside the formal structure of the songs they were educated in, and just unifying, playing it all at the same time. All of the chords that they know create pleasant songs for society, they've cast it away entirely. I appreciate that, and that is a formal structure I try to approach visually. Like the visual equivalent of turning on every faucet in a building until it was filled with white noise.

With Metal, I'm not so interested in knowing the guitarists, or the narratives, or the lyrics, but Metal is something that is very present in my forms. Metal is honestly so beautiful. When I play Slayer's Reign in Blood in particular, it is 37 minutes of pure fury. It's so dynamic and contradictory, and in a strange way quite beautiful. Often times when I listen to it on headphones I just well up with tears. It's not as though it makes me sad, I am just totally overwhelmed by life. It communicates on a very pure and primal level.

IDP:

It's paradoxical that Metal can be considered an expression of nihilism, something null, but also can be seen as such a powerful expression of pathos, like pathos and catharsis pushed to their ultimate limit, viz., Greek Tragedy specifically Medea, an extreme state of human consciousness. Like Metal can also be a sensitizing instrument. Maybe it expresses what the experience of a bomb is like. And why shouldn't we be asked to empathize with that experience?