
*JUSTIN MATHERLY Interviewed by HOWIE CHEN,
September 2009*

HC: What type of materials are you using for the exhibition?

JM: I am using concrete, ambulatory products, inkjet transfer, oak flooring
And tree gators.

HC: Why sculpture?

JM: Sculpture is the way I engage with everything, everything as block, whether we are talking about literature, film, music, etc. I understand everything under a general rubric of dimensionality. Sculpture is also something that is there, the physicality inherent in nature. And finally the material presence; someone once said, and here I have to paraphrase: 'materialist that I am, I'd prefer to owe it to my ass than to my ideas.'

HC: In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer describe Sade's appropriation of Enlightenment reason towards a different end – a misuse that radically confronted social values but at the same time demonstrated its emancipatory limits. Is this contradiction a concern in your work?

JM: This is actually a concern that has been present for some time now (conscious or not) as I have almost always noticed elements of a totalitarian nature within the work. This occurs sometimes in the forms themselves or in the way they 'exist' and within their relationship with the viewer. At the same time there exists a vulnerability within the work (both within the forms and within the relationship to the viewer) that contradicts an overall authoritarian reading. It seems for Adorno and Horkheimer that this contradiction is inherent to Enlightenment as such, for example: "Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings", and for them already contains "the germ of regression". It is essential to 'reflect on this regressive moment,' otherwise Enlightenment "seals its own fate". Sade's reason, his unyielding and intransigent use of reason, is meant to shed light on the totalitarian aspect of reason unchecked. It is in this pursuit of the 'implications of reason,' that Adorno and Horkheimer see a laying bare the utopia contained in all great philosophy, that is the utopia of a humanity no longer distorted, hence no longer needs distortion. As this is an important concern within my work I have hopefully answered to the best of my abilities the question posed, but this is not to say that I have fully answered the question.



"The set of means arranged in conformity with a plan; a little organized matter disorganized; a few compositional changes, dispose the group, unassemble them. T'was an agreeable episode, now we'll essay another."
Ambulatory products, concrete, 2009.

JUSTIN MATHERLY

*Be so kind as to dilate upon the mechanics
of the thing (we came more and more to feel
that, motion being inherent in matter, the
prime mover existed only as an illusion, and
that all that exists essentially having to be
in motion, the motor was useless)*

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"Death; death? It's certain death, but with what speed and with what dash!" Ambulatory products, concrete, bronze, 2009.

JUSTIN MATHERLY Interviewed by GABRIELLE GIATTINO August 2009

Verneuil makes someone shit, he eats the turd, and then demands that someone eats his. The one who eats his shit vomits; he devours her puke... –Sade

"I'm very, very attracted to this sentence as it forms a circular movement and in this way intimates the idea of perpetual motion... The sentence is, as well, something that can be repeated ad infinitum, it is an open loop; for if it is repetition it is not a simple repetition but a complex one - never the same exactly." (Justin Matherly, as told to Birgit Rathsmann.)

GG: You often use literary motifs or linguistic patterns maybe to form a kind of framework for physical aspects of your work. The borromean knot, for example, was used as a model for the interlocking of the crutches that form a support structure for many of your recent sculptures. Or, you talk about Sade and using from his writing the idea of perpetual motion: a looping of a sentence gives way to an attempt at a formal expression through sculpture. It seems to me this is the biggest challenge you make for yourself in your work: to take something that is malleable in language: loops, paradoxes, even descriptions and ideas, and render it with a physical presence. What is the pathway from linguistic to formal?

JM: This seems to me the point or logical follow through of an idea or concept, that is Praxis. When reading an especially difficult passage, whatever the source, I work to envision what potential physical form this may take. In the case of fiction it may be a matter of trying to visualize a complex assemblage such as Sade may describe, or attempting to understand a theoretical concept by making it physical. The important point in each is to visualize this description or concept in terms of the structure in which it is described, in this sense it is a rational undertaking. Sade, for example, constantly oscillates between theory and praxis for this is the only way for his characters to fully understand. This, of course, always remains within language; but as someone has said, this oscillation is intended to form a 'new language', one that is no longer spoken, but acted. The pathway from linguistic (language) to formal (physicality) must always include an abstraction or bastardization of source material. There is no one to one ratio and although I tend to think very literally, this literality is always mired in pure abstraction of thought made concrete.

GG: Concrete, eh? Is there meaning for you in the double entendre? And can you talk a little more about the idea of bastardization of source material?

JM: Well, yes, literally, but not limited to that. To pervert, subvert, demoralize, debauch, debase, profane, vitiate, deprave, misdirect. To corrupt by adding new, possibly discordant, elements. Much in the way a term or phrase is borrowed from one field and put into use in another with a slightly altered meaning or purpose, to re-purpose.

GG: In your work then there is a distinction, but also an adherence between body and mind, thought and extension. And I think we can see in your sculpture usually a body and its extensions. Even as far back as the work that we exhibited together at the Elizabeth Foundation. More presence than attendants in a class of schizophrenics, where there is a weighty body with somewhat anthropomorphic appendages in the form of the poles of microphone stands....or, the wooden legs of Vertov's camera's tripod. Even then, in 2004, this formal prosthesis seems quite central to your work. And, more recently, you have moved from tools rendered in wood to the found metal and legs from crutches or medical equipment. Do you see these as appendages or prostheses as they relate to the main mass of your sculptures?

JM: Every aspect of the sculptures are appendages, meaning there is a necessity to each part, one informs the other, which informs another and so on, it is the relationship between that I am concerned with, a large mass is nothing, perhaps, without its

connecting elements. A torso is not so much without its appendages and likewise appendages without a torso are so much for the scrap heap, though there is no hierarchy between the elements. I think, at least from Vertov's Camera on, the sculptures all have a direct relationship to a body and there is always a fragility inherent within its separate parts. I do think of prostheses in relation to my work; prostheses as tools or extensions, much in the same way I use ideas/concepts as prostheses to a physicality not yet existent. But the mass could as much be an appendage as, for instance, a part of a walker or quad cane which would be its support (one contains the other as much as it is enveloped by it).

GG: And following that, can you talk about your recent interest in using materials from hospitals and for the infirm?

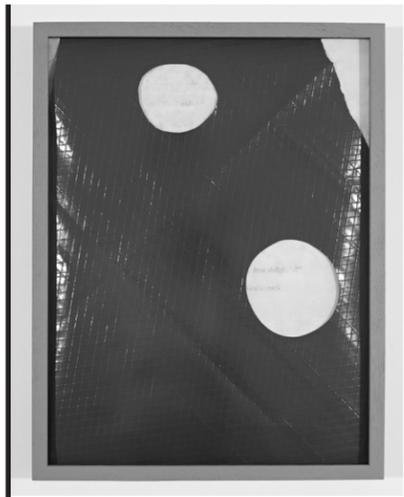
JM: The first use of crutches were of a homemade variety, somewhat simplified and iconized. There was an idea of craft still tied to these early incarnations which no longer interests me. Looking back this emphasis on craft seems to have a relationship to an idea of beauty that I no longer find important, more precisely, I no longer want these simplifications of beauty. Utilizing actual ambulatory equipment, which have a deadness to them that the homemade crutches couldn't achieve, seems a logical step in creating a base object. More and more these items are chopped, broken and reconfigured in an attempt to take them outside their literal use value, while still referencing what these things are (or were). The focus is on the part as opposed to the whole, which, I think, the pervert would be proud of. But again, these parts are connected to other parts in order to create a new whole. They are broken down, mutating into new assemblages or body/apparatuses. Although I think it quite difficult for them not to read within the generic framework from whence they came (and all that is associated with that), it is my desire to push them far enough into a new realm that they have a chance to break with common notions of usage. Lets define ambulatory broadly as life giving (specifically: movement), but ambulatory also means capable of being altered.

GG: While many of the appendages or extensions seem to relate to arms or legs, in my view, the main masses are usually torsos or even, we could say, hearts. The only instances we have really seen the form of a head is in the Vertov's Camera, where the eye and brain are clearly referenced, and more recently in the form of Sade's portrait head from your piece shown in Turin. In this case it was a decapitated head, or even a death mask. I see this as a kind of decapitation implicit in your work. Can you talk about the opposition of central body form of the torso/heart versus head/brain?

JM: This, I think, goes back to the distinction between Thought/Extension (or mind/body) and which, following some, I find there not to be a distinction. It is really more a matter of a composite of the two. I don't consciously think of the sculptures in this bifurcated way, although this idea of mind/body has interested me for a while. An example that I think may be useful (I have used it many times) is of the filmmaking techniques and theories utilized by Vertov and Eisenstein. This is, of course, a bit of a simplification but we can understand Vertov in terms of Mind and Eisenstein in terms of Body (they of course share both between them but as far as their dominant theories we can put them into two camps). Simply put 'Kino-Eye' and 'Kino-Fist', respectively; eye being mind while fist being body. I think what is most potent is that which acts on both mind/body, through both thought and extension. Persons must be mind-bodies and by extension, all things are mind-bodies (with a varying degree of complexity inherent in both).

GG: While the sculptures are constructed often in relation to body, either as their own beings, or as in relation to you, and the viewer, they can also be seen as inanimate as desks and tables, ottomans, machines. Whether we think of them as animate or not, is it your intention in creating what you call a 'base object' to create pieces that embody being both?

JM: Yes, and somewhere in between.



"Platitudes" inkjet transfer on paper, linseed oil, tree gator, oak flooring, 2009.

GG: We have often talked about the barrier, or the blockade in relation to your work, in terms of formal deflection in your sculpture, and in your print work we see many filters and patterns that obstruct a clear view of the depicted image. There is a push-pull with all the work, because often the form is recognizable, but there is a turn or a turning away from clear depiction or embodiment. And following that, there are distinct methods used in forming those blockades for sculpture (with mass) and print (with obfuscation). In many cases, you've used a material from your sculptural process in your print process, giving that material its own visibility, while at once rendering your supposed subject invisible. The gator bags obscure the photograph, but we see for the first time the texture that has given form to your sculptures... Do you see this as a relative blockage for the viewer, in this case in obscuring rather than impeding as it relates to print versus sculpture/object?

JM: It is my intent for a relative blockage for the viewer, indeed. Regardless of form, concept or image it is most important to me to create things that are most obstinate in regards to their reading/understanding by a viewer. A blockage can be physical, mental or quite possibly both. With this in mind, I think it is a matter of different strategies for, in this case, the sculptural work vs. the 2-d print work. But I envision them as serving a similar purpose in each: that is to (dis)orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure an interaction between the work and the viewer. Overall this is a strategy of 'speed and slowness', as outlined by Deleuze in "Spinoza: Practical Philosophy". Speed and slowness is, quite outside of theory, a mode, a capacity for affecting or being affected. This is to say that no longer does one define a body, for instance, by its form or function but by its capacity to affect and in turn be affected. I am not sure how to define speed and slowness any clearer, although I think one way to further understand it is to think of ways in which one interacts with anything really: the slowness will slow down, or in some cases stop one cold in their tracks but only momentarily, the interaction will then be restarted, although this momentary 'block' will remain in mind as further investigation takes place. Deleuze states "it is by speed and slowness that one slips in among things, that one connects with something else." It is never my intention to impede completely, only to set up roadblocks, if you will, detours that act to open space and thought.

GG: And following that, you have said of your titles, "titles are my preferred way to (mis)direct, but always with the hope of communication, a desire for connection." To me the titles seem just as much a shield or deflection. And your use of parenthesis in this statement leads me to believe that you are interested in diverting a direct communication with your viewer. Can you talk about legibility and deflection specifically as it relates to your titles?

JM: The titles are meant to be somewhat obtuse in relation to the piece almost to a point of contention. But, much as the relative blockages above, the intent is to open a reading of the piece, albeit with confines set in place. Titles are as important to the activation of the piece as any other element. My goal with the titles, which are often both hyperbolic and austere, is to set up a general framework or lens within which the work can be thought of. And while they are usually quite specific in their own way, they are, as well, of such an obtuse and abstract nature as to invite interpretation. I see this as a deployment of a speed-slowness strategy.

GG: In this way, despite your intent to mislead, there is a kind of generosity in your engagement with your viewer. While there are many stops, there is a leading in misleading.

JM: I aim to be generous. And all leads must be followed.