

ALUMNI: JONATHAN KIRK



in conversation with Mary Murray, Curator,
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica

Mary: You came to the United States for graduate school at Syracuse University after having studied in a strictly formalist program in London. Your sculpture incorporates many visual references to subjects of interest to you, like engineering, machinery and ships or other nautical topics. When did you realize that these allusions were important to your subject matter? What lessons of your early training do you, conversely, continue to value?

Jonathan: I studied at St. Martin's School of Art in London under the aegis of Anthony Caro. The Abstract Formalism dogma was rigid. No narrative content of any kind or reference to real world objects was permitted. The rules were very strict! As a result, after leaving St. Martin's, it took me quite a while to break away and chart my own course. It was at this point that I slowly started to embrace the idea of narration, a notion that seemed radical and heretical at the time. I never thought about abandoning formalism, in fact I have to say, that "formalism" as I see it, remains an absolutely essential ingredient for any sculpture if it is to exist as a meaningful and compelling work. If a sculpture falls down in terms of formal integrity, then for me, it falls down in every other way. By "formalist" I mean a sculpture's real three-dimensional presence in the world, and how it competes with every other object. It has to have a certain formal "rightness" that compels the viewer to make multiple return visits in an attempt to have the sculpture reveal its secrets. This word 'rightness' is of course also horribly vague. William Tucker makes reference

to it as "thingness"—even more unscientific! But whatever it is, I've spent thirty years looking for it, and it is as compelling, elusive, cogent, and exciting a quest for me now as it ever was.

M: Your current exhibition is "Machines: Fragments and Reveries" at the Clifford Gallery, Colgate University. There is much evidence of fragments; it's my understanding that your table of bits and pieces is included here because these present a teaching opportunity for Colgate students. You fashion small forms in cardboard and wood dowels with glue, and this process functions as drawing for you, correct?

J: Yes indeed. This is what I do in place of drawing. I start with an idea, usually a simple form or tableau that has narrative and formal qualities that I find compelling and intriguing. I make this shape or assemblage. Then I play with it, looking at it from every angle, turning it this way and that, and in the process a sort of dialogue ensues. This could last minutes, days, or weeks. I add, I subtract, I change scale—I'm all over the place. With luck though, at some point, peripheral concerns fall away to reveal the essence of what it is I want to say. All this has to be worked out in 3D. I have to have the object in my hands. Drawing just does not work for me, and I've never found a computer to be a useful tool.

M: Talk about your reveries in sculpture. There are some fantastical pieces, especially the upended steam engine in a state of suspension in the middle of the gallery. Some of your sculpture seems at once a tribute to and a cautionary tale about industrialization.

J: I like to put together seemingly disparate references. I tell partial narratives—stories without endings. The piece that you are referring to, *Old King Cole*, is one of my more narrative works. It closely resembles a real object, in this case, a $\frac{3}{4}$ scale steam traction engine that one might have encountered in the latter part of the 19th century. A period when steam was king and electricity was yet to transform the world. My steam traction engine—mightiest of beasts—representing at the time the zenith of industrial power and man's dominion over nature now lies here, broken, defeated, upside down, a relic of the past. The work does represent a dichotomy. It is both tribute and cautionary tale. Something is clearly terribly wrong. I am thinking about our seemingly unquenchable thirst for things material, the resultant and ever-growing carbon footprint, climate change, and our hubristic attitude towards the consequences of our actions.

M: Many of the machine-like pieces seem to transform into something else as one walks around the sculpture. You are masterful in creating three-dimensional forms that move the eye steadily onward. *Ashes to Ashes*, for example, is all bent engine parts that transform into something cubistic on its other face. Can you please talk about how you conceive the compositions of your sculptures? And how does the thought-process differ, if at all, depending on the sculpture's orientation or scale?

J: I am totally committed to sculptural objecthood where the piece "works" in the round as much as possible. By that I mean the sculpture holds the eye as one walks around the piece, with no one view dominating or representing front, which of course then implies back and side views. I'm putting together disparate elements in a kind of three-dimensional game of chess with its resultant compounding levels of complexity. Every compositional move has implications for every other viewing angle. I want it all to flow together and feel cohesive. This is a challenge I have set for myself, and it is a technique I employ regardless of scale or orientation. You mentioned the piece *Ashes to Ashes* – I can certainly tell you where this work came from and how the composition was conceived. I woke up one morning with an image in my head. It was a dream-like image of a steam traction engine going up in smoke, rising, twisting, disappearing as it ascended. This idea morphed, smoke lead to chimney, chimney to tumbled blocks of stone, and the machine, rather than floating skyward became partly grounded and trapped within the rock. I was also making reference to 19th-century civic monuments and possibly an art historical nod to Tatlin's Tower.

M: Speaking of scale, certain forms recur in your work, in varying sizes. How does scale change meaning? Are you thinking of human orientation with your larger forms? What are the benefits and pitfalls for very large or very small work?

J: Scale is of course crucial. Several smaller pieces in the "Machines: Fragments and Reveries" exhibition incorporate a spiraling ratchet or cog motif. On a much larger scale this same motif might read as steps or spiral staircase, quite a different interpretation. I choose overall scale carefully. Too small, and a work might appear toy-like or trivial, too large and it may become ponderous or dull with expanded surface area failing to hold interest. My largest pieces have never exceeded human scale, and to date I have not undertaken any monumental works. Working with human scale, one always has an advantage because the viewer is invited in, psychologically at any rate. So this provides an additional level of engagement that may bring sculpture and viewer closer together.

M: Why do you choose one material over another, steel or wood, for example? When or why do you decide to paint a surface?

J: Surface treatment is something I struggle with, especially when working on the smaller pieces. I use an array of materials in the construction of these maquettes. I use whatever is at hand that best suits my needs – materials are a means to an end. The building process leaves the work scarred (gussets, splints, splines, scarfs, fillers, etc.). Half of these marks are attractive, the other half, ugly! My solution, and it is a compromise, is to cover up the whole lot with a unified surface treatment. I have not managed to find a way to hide the unattractive scars while at the same time leaving the interesting ones—those that nicely reveal the history of construction. I have attempted to remake the work without these "alterations," but invariably spontaneity and freshness are sacrificed. With some large pieces the compromise is more to do with materials. For the most part, I'm making these larger sculptures for myself. I don't have them sold, where, under normal and ideal circumstances, a substantial construction budget would be available. For instance—cast aluminum might be a desirable material, but budgetary constraints dictate a substitute. Wood might be used as the next best thing. Perhaps aluminum paint could be applied in an attempt to suggest metal.

M: You've been a professional artist for more than thirty years. What excites you at the moment as a new challenge? What are you doing now that keeps the work fresh for you?

J: Quite frankly, and to be totally candid, I have to say it is very difficult to keep the work-practice fresh – habits are comforting. By way of an answer, permit a philosophical digression. As one grows as an artist, insights strengthen, and hopefully maturity results. But conversely, and in equal measure, staleness and torpor can set in. As focus narrows much else by necessity is cast aside – it is sort of a cruel double-edged sword. Also, I'm a firm believer that one can try too hard in an attempt to embrace the new. If this is the case, and it is at the expense of authenticity, then I say one has nothing. As with all things in life, it is a question of balance. In many ways, the hardest thing for an artist to do is edit. For example, deciding to discard months of work because you know in your heart of hearts that it is flawed, for whatever reason, takes real courage. It is, however, the most profoundly liberating course of action available to one. Unencumbered, and a little lighter in the baggage department, the lure of the new, the fresh, seems just a touch closer. I don't know what the new challenge is yet, but I'm certainly excited and eager to be back in the studio.



Jonathan Kirk was employed as the Sculpture Space studio manager from 1980 to 2000. Working closely with Executive Director Sylvia de Swaan, Jonathan helped establish the philosophical underpinnings that are the foundation of the mission statement today, and played a vital role in securing Sculpture Space's international reputation.



Jonathan's work can be seen in the upcoming "63rd Exhibition of Central New York Artists" opening at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute on Saturday March 2, from 5-7pm, on view through April 28. To register for a tour of his Broad Street studio (shared with Sculpture Space alumni Takashi Soga) on Saturday, April 6, 10-11:30am, contact the MWPAI Ticket Office at 315.797.0055; space is limited.

For more information:

www.mwpai.org/museum-of-art/museum-of-art-calendar/63rd-exhibition-of-central-new-york-artists/

www.jonathankirk.net/

<http://merz.colgate.edu/>

