



Prospect and Refuge

Artist Q&A:

Jonathan McCree

David Surman: I have a couple of questions that I'd like to ask each artist in the show and then some more specific ones. The experience of artists has diversified greatly in recent years so it's always intriguing to get a sense of where and how they're working.

The exhibition is inspired by the ideas of Jay Appelton, particularly his observation that our ingrained comprehension of the landscape influences our aesthetic sense. Could you describe your journey to the studio or place in which you make your work, the place itself and your view from that place.

Jonathan McCree: My studio is 49 paces from the back of my house. I walk along a path through my garden to get there and I was involved in the design and construction of the building. It is a large, simple space with a couple of storage areas (never enough)! I find that the way it functions changes, I don't have a particular wall or area I like to work in, and everything gets moved around periodically. The daylight light comes from high up and is diffused and not direct. There are some windows at the front of the building, which I keep blocked off. I'd rather not have a view.

DS: Should a studio be a comforting place or an antagonistic zone with potential artistic hazards? Do you clear away obstructions to make a clear way toward opportunity or do you trap yourself in order to find new intensities?

JM: When I start a project, I'm never clear in my mind about where I'm going to end up. I think of this uncertainty as a kind of energy.

If my studio is a refuge, it is so because I feel free to jump into this zone of not knowing. I suspect that my desire to leave things unresolved and open for as long as possible, leads to strategies, which might be considered antagonistic. I like to unmake things, cut things up and move them around. I like to draw on sheets of paper strewn across the floor, allowing edges of drawings to overlap and suggest new starting points. This feels exciting and probably not comfortable. For a while I moved a sofa in, thinking I might lie on it and muse! But I found that as soon as I sat down



my eye was drawn and I was up and doing something. The sofa lasted only a few weeks. Collaboration is an important part of my practice and I have worked with dancers, musicians, architects, film makers and designers, using my studio as a workshop environment to try out new ideas. I like to give up something of what I think I might know in order to see where someone else might take my ideas. This is often about learning the language of another artist's practice as a way to discover something.

I like the feeling of being immersed in the space, activity and material possibilities of my studio, overwhelmed even.

DS: When we first met you had been making collages and furniture, then you went back into a period of drawing and painting, and now most recently you've been making sculptures in card, aluminium and steel. There is a through line of colour and shape and scale across all the work. I was wondering how you saw the development and connections leading up to these most recent sculptures?

JM: I find that ideas constantly circle around and come back to me looking for new contexts and materials. In 'High Folly' my last solo show with Sim Smith Gallery, this meant allowing myself to exhibit a painting I had made 8 years ago alongside newer sculptures.

For these, most recent sculptures, I made a conscious decision not to repurpose the language of my paintings. Instead I wanted to make something that doesn't require an expressive gesture for energy, but rather a kind of sensitivity. I wanted a surface that could hold colour and I made the surface semi gloss to reflect the space around them. I think of the colour relationships as a way to embody memory. It occurred to me that this sensitivity needed 3-dimensions, it needed to share a space with it's audience to create a more tangible interface with the environment.

I learnt to work with wood and make the furniture you have mentioned during some time I spent living in Florida with the US artist Richard Warholic. In early 2020 during the first covid lockdown in London, I decided on an impulse to make some small pieces of furniture from a lot of cardboard packaging I had in the studio. First came a small cupboard and then some mini benches and chairs. I found that I could apply the same structural logic to the cardboard as I could wood, and I enjoyed making something that looked familiar and as though it could be used but was in fact quite non-functional because it was about half sized and made of a non durable material. Although they had a strong sculptural feel, the problem was that I knew too easily where it was all heading. The strong sense of domesticity didn't interest me. I wanted something more architectural and where the outcome was less clear and resolved. This is when I started to think about modular components, building blocks if you like. I wanted a set of things that could endlessly be deployed in new and evolving arrangements. In some versions, I have experimented by allowing

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the audience to participate in the gallery installations by inviting them to move things around. I think this also touches upon your question about the nature of studio activity. I find that painting is an anxious task. Pushing and pulling to resolve something with a sense of rightness. With the sculpture, I wanted to find a way to take the uncertainty out of the studio and put it in the gallery, and take a break from the anxiety.

I think that there is an implicit challenge in these works, which isn't serious, there is very little at stake. There is an inherent playfulness for both the body and the imagination; they can be configured one way and then if you change your mind, another. I think the colours are about this as well. Both the colours and shapes play and interact to become more than the sum of their parts. I like it when I can step away and things can keep going, when the piece has its own momentum.

DS: The sculptures you've made in cardboard, I've seen you stack and manipulate them but also destroy them to push things further. This seems to be a new phase in your work, the productive-destructive phase, am I right?

JM: Yes, very much so. The crushing and manipulation, started as a part of a collaboration I was working on with Jonathan Goddard and Joe Walkling, both dancers. I have worked with Jonathan and Joe for over 5 years on a number of projects and we often end up discussing how a body could inhabit a visual and physical space. The first thing we tried with the cardboard sculptures, was to have Joe fall onto a sculpture, which was laid horizontally on the floor. Simultaneously, this was a way to preserve a choreographic gesture, which would usually be lost to time, and to make a new and unpredictable form. The fall created dents and bends, which allowed me to think again about how to play with and install the sculpture. I really like how the material receives and holds the memory of the gesture and I'm starting to look at ways of using aluminium in a similar way. Another method has been to bend the sculptures around the corner of 2 walls. The fragility and non durability of the cardboard clearly works to my advantage here. I've also started to recycle and repurpose some of the sculptures by opening them up, recutting them and folding them differently.

DS: Art history seems to play a role in your work, whether in a shape or form or through your titles. I was wondering what the place of art history is in your practice as an artist?

JM: Art history is a great source of pleasure for me. I look at books sometimes for no other reason than for pure enjoyment. And of course this also gives me clues to how other artists approach a problem I might be encountering in my own work. After my art school foundation year, I decided to go and study art history at the University of Sussex. I think I wanted to be in an environment, where there were people doing all sorts of things; science, languages and the broader humanities. But I think my



interest in history has given me a way to think about my reference points and how I might want what I make to sit in relation to other things.

In my final year, I did a course and wrote my thesis on French art in the C18th. This happened quite by accident because I really wanted to do something on the late C20th but that professor was on a sabbatical! At the time I felt a deep antipathy for what I thought the C18th was about, but out of this dislike has come a life-long love and fascination. I think that I still use this strategy of learning to love the things I think I hate. I like the tension that comes from the antagonism, it's a useful kind of friction if you like. I have worked a lot with the colour yellow recently, a colour that always gave me trouble!

The structural references for the High Folly sculptures came from an interest I have in C18th architectural follies. I am drawn to their purposelessness, the joy and the dubious decadence. I like the word folly as it has a double edge. It can be something light and for pleasure, but also it can be a criticism, a foolishness that you can be condemned for. With 'high' I think of it as a reference to the idea that these sculptures can be stacked up and with height comes fragility and precariousness. For me, the prefix 'high' also conjures a sense of exaggeration or stylistic mannerism.

DS: You've spoken in the past about how narrative and memory are important to you. The work is for the most part abstract, with figurative suggestions, and I was wondering if you could explain a little the implications of narrative and memory on your method and resulting works?

JM: My recent sculptures are based on a set of memories that don't quite exist, the memories are invented like daydreams.

Growing up, my parents were members of a fundamental Christian community called Christadelphians. I remember the white cube church, the boredom, sterility and empty feeling. I would sit on the hard chairs on a Sunday trying to daydream myself to another time and place. To replace the emptiness with something more fantastical, something that my imagination could inhabit.

Daydreams render time fragile.

I think that one of the key ideas in my practice is to find a way to imagine a future based upon a present, which doesn't quite exist yet. 'High Folly' and the subsequent sculptures are about wondering how we might inhabit a space. Our task if you like, is to try to understand how to approach and choreograph ourselves in the present alive to the set of possibilities proposed by the sculpture.



I wonder if it is about making new kinds of sense. If we come back to the furniture that I first made, we all know what the future looks like if it is made up of chairs and cupboards. Whereas, with the structures of High Folly, if you extend them into the future, you don't know what that future might look like. Maybe it requires a subtle adjustment of behaviour in the present to embody that, to implicate that future. I'm not proposing a kind of utopian modernism, or a better world. It's more about pointing out alternative ways of being and alternative realities. Working with a dancer was a way to do that, touching on something that isn't quite real, but seems like it could be. Through the movements in their body, they are almost trying to articulate a desire to understand something. It highlights tensions between fiction and reality. It's like a photograph. We think about photographs recording memories, but in actuality they destroy them. I often find that childhood photographs erase any sense of the memories I may have had, and the object starts to stand in for that memory.

I think sometimes my memories play out in the colours and their relationships. I'm instinctively aware that it has to be a brown next to a particular shade of orange, which I think comes from a memory that I can't quite pinpoint. That makes me wonder whether the memories are abstract, maybe they are about emotions and desires more than specific narratives.

DS: Thank you for your time in answering these questions!