Jonathan McCree in conversation with Kira Wainstein and Holly Pollard

High Folly
Jonathan McCree
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Sim Smith

Kira Wainstein and Holly Pollard, the curatorial partnership *Emerging Fields*, sat down with Jonathan McCree (virtually, of course) in his studio, to talk about his current exhibition *High Folly* with Sim Smith, London.

Presenting a selection of cardboard spatial-interventions, meticulously glossed in brilliant colours, McCree's *High Folly* is a crowd through which we are invited to frolic, manoeuvre and navigate. Though mediated by the screen, the physicality of the work is not lost but rather reframed within the online space, with new possibilities and infinite realities. The exhibition also includes paintings and a video work, in which a dancer spins somewhat endlessly in mid-air among the sculptures. Taking a leap outside of the expressive gestures that characterise much of McCree's practice, *High Folly* joyfully interrupts convention to instead posit a reconfigurable past, future and present.

Wainstein and Pollard first worked with McCree during, *public notice*, a show curated by the pair last summer, and were excited to catch up and chat about this new body of work.

Emerging Fields: The title of the exhibition is *High Folly*, can you talk us through the thinking behind this and how it relates to your work?

Jonathan McCree: It's a number of things really. The structural references within the work come from an interest I have in eighteenth-century architectural follies. They have no purpose. The work is effectively a fantasy that comes from childhood daydreams. The purposelessness of architectural follies somehow touches on that. I like the word folly as it has a double edge. It can be something light and for pleasure, but it also 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.

EF: This project grew from you playing around with making half-sized furniture out of the endless cardboard delivery boxes that would arrive at your house. How does this material inform the sculptures of *High Folly*?

JM: My background in wooden furniture-making played very nicely into working with cardboard. These earlier cardboard furniture works have a contradiction, they look utilitarian but you can't actually use them. With *High Folly*, I wanted to escape the domestic and somehow tie these sculptures to my paintings, which are far more about space and a form of choreographed movement. When it became clear that the majority of people would experience the show online [due to the pandemic], I decided to move the sculptures around and repeatedly rechoreograph the space. As the material of cardboard is light, it was very moveable. You stand back and the sculptures look quite solid but when you're up close you can sense a flimsiness and tell they are made of cardboard.

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I started working with cardboard because of its 'to-hand-ness'. I began making the furniture using delivery boxes but ran out these quickly and had to buy sheets of cardboard, this is how the sculptures developed. There was a logic to how the sheet would divide into four and fold, so cutting out the shapes was the next instinctive step. If I had to make all these things out of plywood or metal it would take forever, or someone else would have to do it – I'm actually working with metal fabricators on this now. Working with cardboard gives me the opportunity to think through the process. If you don't know what you're doing, cardboard is a very convenient medium for making mistakes. I really didn't know what I was doing when I started.

EF: You have shown through the documentation of the exhibition that the works have multiple configurations. Combined with the elementary shapes and colours, they evoke children's building blocks, how does playfulness contribute to your practice?

JM: My playfulness is about creating a set of problems and impediments that are overcome for their own sake, for the joy of overcoming if you like. There is an implicit challenge in these works which isn't serious, there's very little at stake. They can be reconfigured and if you change your mind, they can be reconfigured again. There's an inherent playfulness in that, for both the body and the imagination. I think the colours are about that as well. I didn't want to just repurpose the expressive language of my paintings. Instead, I wanted to create something that doesn't require an expressive gesture for its energy, but rather a kind of sensitivity. It occurred to me that this sensitivity needed three-dimensions, it needed to share a space with an audience to create a more tangible interface with the environment. It's almost about me stepping back so that the playfulness between the pieces can form their own relationships. The colours and the forms play and interact with each other and become more than the sum of their parts. I always like when I can step away and things can keep going, when the piece has its own momentum.

EF: In your painting practice, your works are often characterised by your human touch, the sculptures of *High Folly* are also tactile, but in a different way. Can you speak about the finish of these sculptures in comparison to past works? Would it be too much of a stretch to draw parallels with Coronavirus and our loss of touch?

JM: One of my starting points for these sculptures was that I didn't want to make three dimensional versions of my paintings. There is a distinction between expressiveness and sensitivity, the expressiveness of my paintings and the sensitivity of these sculptures. The finish of *High Folly* is important in this way. They're not high gloss, but sufficiently glossy: so that the reflectiveness takes in light and the environment, and the surfaces become sensitive. As I was making the works, putting the show together and certainly after I'd finished, I realised that one of the major elements and materials in my work was time. Perhaps that relates to Covid more than anything. Across the past year and a bit, I've found it very hard to access the trajectory of time and meaning. There's been a peculiar feeling of suspension and weightlessness, but also of time passing very quickly. Where do we sit in this pandemic in terms of the timeframe? That's very much part of the work.

In relation to 'Covid time', if we look for the genesis of it, growing from a possible incident with an animal, in a lab, or whatever you believe, how far do we have to go back to see the beginning? Do we go back a year or do we go back to an eighteenth-century idea of empire and how that created inequalities in society which has had a subsequent impact on our ability to deal with this pandemic? Those trajectories are all the things I'm thinking about. Time wasn't on my mind, but it's become really obvious that it's what the show's about. For example, much of the work comes from childhood daydreams and daydreams render time very ambiguous. The fact that I'm referencing memories that happened 45 or 50 years ago is quite a leap, alongside the paradox of referencing a memory of something that never

existed. The eighteenth-century references to Jean-Honore Fragonard in my paintings and architectural follies in the sculptures are other ways of rendering time fragile. The exhibition also includes paintings I made ten years ago, whilst on a residency in Northern Italy. Revisiting this older work allowed me to notice how ideas in my practice circle around and re-emerge, another example of collapsing time. When viewing *High Folly* and wondering how you might inhabit the space, I like the idea that our task is to understand how to approach and choreograph ourselves in the present, alive to a new set of possibilities. Perhaps this is way to imagine a future based on a present, which doesn't quite exist yet.

EF: Your works often seek to expand our understanding of space, investigating the multiple ways we can inhabit and perceive the world around us. Did you adapt your practice when it became clear that many people would be experiencing the exhibition online?

JM: In one sense not at all, because we're all so adapted to thinking online. But in another, I had to think about it a great deal. It became an interesting challenge to communicate something really physical for an online space. Manipulating the series of documentation photographs and being able to move the sculptures around between each shot, so they're standing up, lying down, and then double height. It becomes documentation of an exhibition that almost never existed. It is fun to question what is the work's authentic form, maybe there isn't one. Similarly, with the suspended dancer in the film, it would have been impossible to have a live performance with dancers endlessly spinning mid-air. I was very keen to force these elements, things that can only exist on film or in virtual space. I wanted it to become a thing that you could have only ever experienced online in this form. That was important. My practice is also based across different mediums and it occurred to me that sound could be an important element in an online exhibition, in this case a soundtrack to a video piece. Sound is the only sense which isn't interfered with when transmitted online, it passes unmediated, straight into the room of the person looking at a screen, it enters their space and is shared directly.

EF: For the few people who have been able to visit the exhibition in person, how would you hope they might engage with your sculptures in the space?

JM: My hope is always curiosity. I want people to bend down, stretch up and peer through the sculptures. To interrupt their usual flow of movement so that they become choreographed as they discover how to inhabit the space. Whereas paintings sit on a wall, sculptures occupy and share a space with an audience. I was thinking about that choreographic relationship and so it became important to cut holes and see through the work. To make structures that have no clear use and to push them into the world of fantasy and folly. I'm curious about how to relate to these sculptures and about the ways we might need to mutate ourselves to inhabit this fantasy space. I was also thinking about making an environment that my paintings could inhabit. I often talk about my interest in the kinetic possibility of painting, how when a person approaches a painting it gets remade. As soon as you start thinking about the relationship between an audience and a painting as being about an embodied relationship with an object you have to consider the space around an object and what goes into that space.

It would be great if there was a system where the audience could move the sculptures around themselves, engaging in the curating of the space. I think that's something for the future, so it's not just look and don't touch, but look and touch.

EF: You collaborated with a dancer to create a video work of your sculptures in the exhibition space. The editing in the video creates an impossible temporality, with the dancer spinning endlessly. Why did you choose to contrast reality and fiction in this way?

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JM: I wonder if it is about making new kinds of sense. Perhaps it goes back to the idea of time as a memory of something that never existed, a proposition. 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're almost trying to articulate a desire to understand something. It highlights those tensions of 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 my own memories I may have had, and the object starts to stand in for that memory. I think that's one of the issues with abstraction as well, it constantly alludes to something just beyond reach. You've destroyed a set of possibilities by making it concrete and the form then represents impossibility. It's almost the failure of abstraction, which is a beautiful failure if you like. And maybe I'm working with the dancer in a similar way.

EF: You mentioned that these forms 'take from and are reflective of the world', like vessels for memory. How have your own memories shaped these works?

JM: Very little probably. I think instead about how my desires for particular memories have shaped them. I have memories of my parents: the white-cube church and the community that they belonged to, and how I wanted to replace that set of memories, replace that sterile environment. You imagine the church environment to be full of meaning or ecstasy, or whatever religious spaces are supposed to contain. I wanted to replace that sterility I experienced with daydreams. To replace the emptiness with something more fantastical, something that my imagination could inhabit. I think sometimes my own memories play out in the colours and their relations. 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.

EF: Some of the works in the exhibition are from your residency at the Tavoletto Chapel in Italy. Repeatedly, sacred architecture has been both the location and subject of your works, how have you engaged with these sorts of spaces in your practice?

JM: I'm very attracted to the idea of the altarpiece, which was never part of the religious space I grew up in. There was no altar, there was nothing, there was just a table that someone stood behind and talked. I'm interested in how we are meant to relate to sacred architecture. Are we supposed to bow down in front of it, peer up at it? I'm curious about the effects it has on emotions, our imagination. It's resonant for me because of my background. I guess it's a challenge as well; I'm intrigued by these forms but I also want to generate my own meaning around them, rather than being subject to the meaning they already contain. The residency was extraordinary, not only because of the physical space, a 16th century chapel, but also its relation to the Italian Renaissance and the DNA of western visual art. Catholic Christianity had such a profound effect on our imagination and our visual culture, and I wanted to work with it in a way which reconfigured it. I wanted to put something in the space which borrowed from it visually, but was something else. Part of the work was a sound piece called 'no ground under my feet', I just used my own voice and cut it up so that it became this rhythmic chant. I was drawing on a Buddhist idea that you're on fertile ground when there is no ground under your feet, that's the juiciest moment

if you like, when everything is uncertain. It struck me that the space of the chapel was about imposing this peculiar conceptual certainty: the perfect symmetry, the perfect form, it was telling me this narrative of the early history of western art and the bible story. I wanted to question that by bringing in other perspectives. As if to say, there's no ground under your feet, this is all up for grabs.

EF: You quote the German artist Charlotte Posenenske when speaking about your work, *High Folly*. What is it about her practice and philosophy that you find useful?

JM: I find it useful how she created forms out of familiar materials, such as her famed air-conditioning ductings, and would set about placing them in the gallery in ways that could be reconfigured, like elements on an assembly line with different sets of possibilities. It is interesting that the two artists I find myself referencing in *High Folly*, Charlotte Posenenske and Jean-Honoré Fragonard, both stopped working as artists at some point in their lives. They had that in common. Charlotte Posenenske left her practice to start working in socially driven spheres, whilst the painter Fragonard found himself so out of step with the aesthetics and politics of the French eighteenth-century he stopped working as well.
Again it comes back to this time thing. Fragonard certainly, he was very out of time. In a sense, all the paintings he made used time as the subject, but more importantly, with the French Revolution and the rise of Neo-Classicism, he found himself on the wrong side of a particular line. I guess Charlotte Posenenske felt time in a different sense, an urgency, that she could be more urgently engaged with her surroundings.

EF: Can you see any possible futures for this work, or ways in which your sculptural practice might develop?

JM: I think there are different routes, one is to play with the materiality of it, the possibilities the cardboard holds. I'm also intrigued to see what happens when I start using other materials that would allow these works to exist outside, pre-fabricating the sculptures out of metal for example. I think I'd even play with the cardboard outside to be honest, it wouldn't last very long but I like the idea of the wind playing a part, just putting it outside, leaving it for a month and seeing where everything ended up! Let the elements scatter it. Then again, if it is made out of metal they will develop a different set of relationships with the environment. And plywood, I'm intrigued about working with wood, like I used to with my furniture, just to see how that surface might hold a different language of marks. Alongside playing with the materiality of it, there's also utilising the forms in different ways. I'm quite interested in using them, maybe not these but other pieces, to interact more with the architecture of the space. To take forms that exist within a space and build off them, whatever that might be, a beam, door, roof or pillar. To create extensions into the space from the existing architecture. I guess we'll see.

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