

An Interview with John Newman

By Dan Nadel and Pali Kashi

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Dan Nadel *These drawings were done in France in the summer of 2017: 65 drawings for your 65 years. It's a sort of retrospective, right? Could you talk about the impulse to draw your own objects, and also in negative.*

John Newman I don't keep a sketchbook. Or a pile of papers stacked up where I work. I haven't really let myself make quick, immediate drawings. But while I am working I'm constantly making notes, rough sketches, diagrams, and even writing on little scraps of paper, bits of tracing paper, pieces of wood, whatever is at hand.

For a very long time, I have been hoping for a chunk of time where I could be away and just take all these notes and scraps done over the last 25 years or so and stuff them into a bag, get away from the studio, review them and see if I could make a different kind of drawing from what I usually do. When I went to the Dora Maar House residency this past summer, I did just that. I had this idea in my head, a kind of metaphor for this longing to see what would arise through a retrospective view, like developing old found negatives. And the idea of reversing the black and white arose from that. Then, yes, just exactly what you said. Some of the drawings are of existing sculptures; many are not. Some are ideas for component parts and some are drawings of speculative sculptural ideas in a kind of non-space. I never really learned to draw. I began as a conceptual artist. When I taught myself rendering while I was travelling in the '90s it was so thrilling. I then started occasionally drawing the finished sculptures in the studio as if they were live models...and often drawing them from peculiar angles. I really enjoyed being able to make these black and white drawings quickly. My sculptures and other kinds of drawing take a very long time. So there was something very refreshing about this all, and particularly affecting when I decided to make 65 of them after my 65th birthday while I was away in France.

Dan *Because the sculptures from the very beginning have been very production intensive in terms of your own making of them?*

John I didn't always make them directly. I have always been involved with fabricators and artisans as a part of the process. For *Throwback* I made a full-scale cardboard version of the piece and I soaked it in wax, and I brought it to the foundry and they burned it out and cast it in aluminum. And for *Accelerated Grimace* I made full-scale drawings and cardboard mock-ups and worked with a welder who was moonlighting from Lippencott. And with the newer work, I feel that I have a broad range of possibilities from handmade to computer generated, from found objects to artisan made.

Pali Kashi *Are there painters that you look to that might inspire you-that you feel like, I want to capture that feeling in that painting and you put in a sculpture?*

John Well, there always were and continue to be. When I went to Oberlin in 1969 I wanted to write poetry, but for a number of reasons that just didn't seem to work out. A friend of mine showed me the very beginnings of conceptual art and I thought it was the most radical thing I had ever seen. And because of its connection to language it was not a big leap from my interest in poetry. And only after that did I start to look at contemporary art and then the history of art. I learned about art backwards! I remember in 1971 there was a retrospective of Barnett Newman at MoMA. He had just died. I never saw anything like it. And I felt what seems now to be that old fashioned idea of "the aesthetic emotion." I was just stunned, and I still love Barnett Newman.

Over the years, I have rediscovered artists for myself. Let's say somebody like H.C. Westermann or Ken Price. Initially, I had no interest. I was steeped in Bochner and LeWitt. Then 30 years later when my work changed it was like getting a new prescription for my glasses! I think all artists do that for themselves. You are rebuilding the work and your world from the priorities of what you want and need at the moment. I like all kinds of painters. I actually think my work has always had a great deal to do with painting. I couldn't say there was one painter in particular but I have had this running conversation with Tip Dunham over 35 years. And I think in many ways, even though our work looks quite different, there is a trajectory beginning from a certain kind of reductive, even schematic, abstraction that has shifted into another dimensional invented world that unwittingly becomes a subject, and there arises something like an image.

Dan *That's interesting. Do you think of the sculptures as images?*

John Absolutely. First of all, I know this is going to sound too simplistic, and this is just because of the conventions of language: I don't think my work is abstract but I don't think it's representational. I think it hovers in this other space. It's just like the way a metaphor works in poetry. I think of them as images but they are not named. They are almost aniconic. Of course, at the same time they are very specific and formal but I think they elicit a lot of potential subject matter of varying kinds.

Dan *The thing that drew me in initially is how intimate they are, and how close they are to psychedelic worship objects.*

John That was my big shift. When I left Yale in the '90s all my students, along with the art world, seemed to be making these research-driven installations and high production spectacles involving entertainment or even the entertainment industry. I went and lived in India, East Africa and throughout Asia. I was so impressed with the way small intimate objects clearly had a very big significance and I thought that was missing from current sculpture's lexicon and could therefore be a radical move for sculpture today. I was interested in the emotional range that intimacy provided...the vulnerability, the modesty, the up close and personal. And now I have extended that idea into what I call the "scale-less object", an information object like the DNA model or the globe of the world. And this comes directly from our recent understanding of space not only as shared but as an imaginative projection...and the internet, virtual reality, quantum physics and cosmology theory, let alone new-age spirituality, have all played a part in that. Anyway, traveling about and living in different cultures was again like getting new glasses ...or even a way to hop out so as to then hop back in again refreshed and enlivened.

Pali *Yes, I think the the sculptures have a lot detail work and I feel that makes them uniquely yours. It feels like you've created your own form of communication, and it's seamless like Westermann or Price.*

John The seamlessness is really interesting to me. In combining different materials and, for that matter, different processes. Each component part has a lot of intrinsic meaning (along with the possibility of associations): glass versus lead, wool versus wood. But to me the interdependence between how the parts behave or fit together is just as important as the independence or autonomy of the component part itself.

Pali *What are your thoughts on ornamentation? Your work doesn't come across as ornamental but usually detailed work like that does. How do you navigate that area?*

John That's a good question. I contradict myself all the time, right? Even in a piece like *A Small Monument for Heliotropism*, a lot of times the details make themselves.

The stripes in there came from the fact that I laminated the wood and masonite, and a computer milled it. I didn't know what was going to happen. A lot of times I have no idea what is going to happen, which I like. As a matter of fact, I was at first disappointed when the pattern resulting in concentric circles and it wasn't more complicated. In my sculptures there is a lot of detail, a lot of subtle moves that are not seen at first glance. There is no gestalt. They can't be memorized; I am really interested in that.

I'm also really interested in something that hasn't been addressed in sculpture for a long time: illusion and magic. I love Bernini, especially *Apollo and Daphne*. Sometimes, if you see something in a painting that doesn't make any sense, you easily accept it no matter how absurd because it is in the remove of the picture plane. Painting space is mutable. But if you see an object in whatever peculiar nonsensical position, you accept it as real because it's *there*. But in fact I often have to fill some secret pocket with lead to counterbalance a sculpture and engineer the piece to make sure it looks the way I want, and yet that's not the way it really wants to be!

Dan *Talk about the new piece you just finished, The Foggy Lens Needs Adjustment, which has an Obsidian ball. The thing that you do that interests me a lot is using something that, in somebody else's hands or even on its own, could be seen as a little hokey. You sort of wince for a second, but then it works because of how you use it. So there's sort of balance between having all the meaning that's embedded in an Obsidian ball and dealing with that in your world. What is that process like?*

John I can't say I'm interested in hokey but I am interested in challenging my taste. I used to like to say of my early work that it was a bit like a chicken bone stuck in your throat: it doesn't go down easy. Sometimes I look at my work and I think, *Did I make that?, Can I accept that as my work?* Part of that discomfort is something I find really interesting and challenging. I always say, *I'd like to make something you've never seen before.* Part of that is going to include discomfort. When things are unnameable, naturally associations and the desire to identify references come up. But that is just one layer of entering the work, and a fairly obvious one at that. I am very interested in the identity and even anonymity of the parts and the way they work together. A kind of spectrum between the literal and the nonsensical. Not unlike experiencing the world at large!

Dan *It's a metaphor for living.*

John Exactly. An instrument of thought, of meditation, of reverie.

Dan *But what's so interesting about The Foggy Lens is that it's almost like a few different things are happening. On the one hand, you want to say that the Obsidian ball is leashing this cloud form so that it doesn't float away, but on the other hand you want to say that the cloud form is protecting the Obsidian. There's so many different ways to think about it.*

John Indeed, this is crucial for me...I even titled a sculpture *Many Entries*.

Pali *That one looks like a flower or a lion's mane.*

John When I first made it I thought it looked like an African mask!

Dan *Is that plastic or glass in Foggy Lens?*

John It is actually blown acrylic that was frosted. It's a foggy lens, and that is a metaphor, too. I also wanted the "lens" to be held up in mid-air because I'm really interested in anti-gravity, in illusion. There is a forged iron "rope" holding it up. Like those Indian rope tricks.

Pali *Some of the words that come to mind at first glance of your work are peculiar, unusual, quirky. I'm wondering how much you push that aspect, if you ever make something and you're like this is not bizarre enough.*

John A sensitive question. I can tell you that every piece has to have something I feel that I've never done before so I can stay interested. I don't work in series or permutations. I want each piece to have a singular character. Also, I'm really interested in the fact that even though my sculptural vocabulary maybe somewhat recognizable, every piece is radically different. This seemingly old-fashion idea about uniqueness or originality being difficult to process at this moment in time is a conundrum! I'm just trying to figure out how to make something fully engaging. I rarely would say *it's not weird enough*, but I might say something like that.

Dan *The work doesn't lend itself to that anyway, it's not didactic work. It's not telling you what to think about it.*

John Although, that's an interesting word, because Minimalism and early conceptual art did have a didactic aspect.

Dan *It was pretty didactic.*

John Honestly, and I realize this is a very cheeky thing to say...possibly ridiculously hyperbolic. But my work and someone like Judd's work, in terms of certain formal relationships, have a lot do with each other, and yet they seem worlds apart. Or more importantly, that the premise with which the work begins is fundamentally different even if some of the moves and elements have correspondences. For example, the three shapes in *Red and Wooden Span* are in essence almost identical in structure. Their differences raise a kind of syntactical relationship. But I don't want it to be didactic. I want it to fit together on its own terms and in some way be legible even if it initially appears difficult to define or even otherworldly. Quirky to me sounds a little cute, and people often say to me, and this is a big problem for me, that my work is whimsical.

Dan *I wouldn't say that.*

John I really hate that because it makes it all sound lightweight. But Calder was whimsical and quirky, and I love Calder and have rediscovered him for myself, again. He made something no one had ever done before...that a sculpture could be lightweight, anti-gravitational, made of parts with high key color. He was a genius of engineering as well. But his work was so good, so accessible that it has been absorbed into the culture! One thing I learned from rediscovering Calder is how tired I was becoming of didactic, defensible, ponderous, theoretical insider Entre-Nous art about art jokes and I wanted to include in my work something like *joy*. You look at African, Indian and Japanese art, even though you can sense they are weighty with cultural and spiritual significance...there is a lightness, as Calvino would call it. Oceanic art is hilarious and dangerous at the same time, and I love that.