



Jason Ellis *Suppliant*, 2011, Portland limestone, Ht 14cm. Photo: © Ros Kavanagh

Becoming a Better Sculptor

JASON ELLIS DESCRIBES HIS TRAINING AND BACKGROUND AND REFLECTS ON THE MOTIVATION AND PHILOSOPHY BEHIND HIS ART PRACTISE.

THE first time I ever realised that such a thing as sculpture existed was during a visit to the Barbara Hepworth Museum at St Ives, near my birthplace in Cornwall, as an ‘A-Level art student. The three-dimensional world made much more sense and I was glad to abandon ‘flat art’ in pursuit of this vital goal. Painting was all illusion – sculpture was real, actual objects existing in space. I studied sculpture as part of an honours degree at the University of Chichester, where my lecturer was an exponent of Modernism and the British Twentieth Century School, having himself been taught by Caro in the 1950s.

During a college trip to Paris, I visited the studio of Brancusi, preserved outside the Pompidou Centre. I felt like I’d been struck by lightning, but this blow was to prove double-edged: when you admire the work of a genius, how can you possibly try to emulate that work without falling into pastiche? Whilst an admiration for the early Modernists helped me focus on abstract form as a means of expression, their overarching presence also became at times an obstacle to development.

I moved to London in 1986, where I stumbled upon an opening for an antique restorer and learned how to repair ceramic, glass and stone artefacts for the commercial market. I then started work in a larger conservation studio, specialising in stone sculpture, and was trained in restoring Roman antiquities, Buddhas from the Far East, nineteenth-century statuary and twentieth-century works by the likes of Josef Beuys, Henry Moore and Jeff Koons. Those eight years of training in an extremely wide range of media and styles had a lasting influence and expanded my college education exponentially. I still believe that exposure to other artists and other environments is beneficial and a trip to Paris or Rome, where they treat sculpture with great respect, can help enormously when struggling with a problem or developing a new theme. Before leaving London I carved a piece of Bardiglio Nuovolato, a decorative marble from Tuscany, and underwent another epiphany – stone was the medium that offered everything I wanted; technically challenging, unforgiving, permanent, beautiful and supremely suited to any Modernist discussions on material and form. I was hooked. Robert Jacobsen summed it up: “Material repays in inspiration what you have given it in your attempt to serve it.”¹

I came to Ireland in the early 1990s and set up in business as a sculpture conservator for twelve years. This was another part of my education; witnessing the skill of medieval stone carvers in churches and cathedrals across the country was a particular revelation. Overall, the time I spent in conservation was like an extended apprenticeship; art history, carving techniques, construction, repair and maintenance, geology, chemistry – all these gave me the chance to learn how sculpture is made. (Being self-employed – with insurance, VAT returns, deadlines, liaising with architects and local authorities and all its other delights – certainly helps in terms of running an art practise, too.)

After twenty years of cleaning and repairing other people’s artworks, I was finally compelled to start carving my own work full-time. Part of the process has been seeking justification within the context of making art today; how on earth can such an ancient practise as stone carving be relevant? I held to several Modernist principles for many years: material-specificity, form preceding concept, etc, a la Greenberg, but ultimately found his viewpoint constraining.

The tearing up of Greenberg’s rulebook and the cycle of Post-Modernism, Minimalism and all the other ‘isms’, each debunking the last in turn, has left a playing field with no borders; contemporary sculpture can be, as Rosalind Krauss puts it, “almost infinitely malleable”². However, I find that the philosophical arguments behind some of today’s art are often diluted forms of Duchamp’s original ideas from a century ago and there is actually nothing new in them.

I visited London in 2011 on a research trip to see the ‘Modern British Sculpture’ show at the Royal Academy and a few other galleries around town, both public and commercial. This five-day immersion left me in no doubt that I do not, nor do I wish to, abide by certain contemporary art practise norms.

My rather quaint hope is that I should be uplifted and invigorated when I visit an exhibition, but I often come away feeling empty and disappointed, with the phrase ‘emperor’s new clothes’ resounding in my head. Furthermore, the ‘art world’, aka the ‘art market’, seems to be so business driven now and the quality, even the nature, of the art suffers. Artists, critics and gallerists are wealthy celebrities, as are their clients and as seems to be their wish.

So, how to function in the art world today, the era of the ‘post-object-based’ art practise, where ambiguity and confusion are celebrated, where facile and derivative arguments that are ill-conceived and badly rendered reign supreme? I have had to learn to trust my instincts. My own appreciation of art is not intellectually driven, it’s more visual, perhaps even primordial – a visceral reaction that has, on a few occasions, brought me to tears in the presence of a truly great sculpture. I don’t want the work explained, I just want to look at it and be moved by it.

Equally, the sculpture I make does not need to be over-analysed; it exists purely because I’m compelled to make it. I have no world-altering message to convey, it’s more about a fundamental need to carve and a commitment to form, to the medium, to the work of previous masters – the Egyptians, Praxiteles, Michelangelo, the School of the West, Hans Arp, Peter Randall-Page – and to improving my skills. The audience isn’t offered a backstory, or my pound of flesh, as seems to be a current requirement, and I don’t use wall text panels filled with acres of written ‘artspeak’. I believe that an artwork should be judged on its own aesthetic merits and any pseudo-intellectual justification for it only distracts the mind from the ultimate question the eye is asking: Is it a good piece of art?



Jason Ellis *Seline*, 2013, Carrara marble, Ht 42cm. Photo: © Ros Kavanagh

While it is undeniably a great sense of affirmation when an audience appreciates my work and shows that appreciation even more by purchasing it, I am not making it to sell. Most committed artists I speak to agree that, during the making process, they don’t give a single thought to its future value; they make art because it’s a compulsion and they have no choice. They’ll do part-time work or anything else to facilitate their art practise. I don’t know a single sculptor who continues in practise for the money; our work is slow and expensive to make and sometimes goes unsold. Some stone carvers take on church work: headstones, inscriptions, etc, but many do other things such as teaching, geological analysis, running carving classes or, as in my case, taking on conservation work, and most continue to carve calmly and sell slowly. This small but well-bonded group of artists represents an important network of peers. We meet at openings and symposiums, give our time and advice to one another freely and tell each other about tools and materials for sale or about upcoming commissions. This network is complemented by areas of the stone industry: quarries, suppliers and artisans, who all play key roles in assisting sculptors in bringing large projects to fruition.

Several sculptors used to rely financially on Per Cent for Art commissions, but there are far fewer of these now. All artists in all media feel the same pinch, I believe. Amongst my peers, an average annual gross income from an art practise is between €10,000 and €20,000 – hardly enough to survive on, especially when you consider the cost of stone or bronze and the overheads of running a studio space.

Over the last two years, I have found joining a gallery very helpful: I work slowly, am uneasy with marketing (an aspect that any successful practise needs), receive few commissions and no public funding, so the encouragement and imprimatur of a good gallery have proved invaluable in getting exposure and recognition for the work. My recent show, ‘Corpus’, at the Oliver Sears Gallery gave me access to a whole new audience.

Thankfully, there are many strata to the art world, and there is enough room for old-hat object-based sculptors like me at one end of the spectrum and conceptual artists and their commentators at the other. There are as many audiences as there are branches of artistic pursuit: it’s Mozart for some, Motörhead for others. I shall never garner the fame or wealth of a Hirst but am happy operating in the narrow stratum of stone sculpting, where a small and appreciative audience still remains. I extract fulfilment from making the work, even when it’s a challenge or a struggle, and this, I believe, is a good reason to pursue anything. My primary aim is to become a better sculptor, to make work that is good and that resonates. It will take a lifetime.

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Notes
1. Jacobsen quoted in Carola Giedion-Welcker *Contemporary Sculpture - An Evolution in Volume and Space* Faber & Faber, 1954
2. Rosalind Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1978), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde & Other Modernist Myths*. MIT Press, 1985