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A Sculpture Looking at You Whilst Touching Itself: Jesse Wine

By Kathy Noble, February Edition 2021

SculptureCenter



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Jesse Wine and I are both British people living in New York, a city of immigrants in which nearly 40 percent of the population was born abroad. I fortuitously ran into him in September 2020 at the opening of his exhibition *Imperfect List* at SculptureCenter in New York, having not seen him for years. There we talked about how freeing it is to leave the country of one’s birth, and how it had changed us both in different ways. I’ve known Wine’s work for many years, yet was slightly astounded at how much it has evolved—from smaller glazed ceramic works to life-size figurative sculptures. His recent production interweaves autobiography and existential questioning, alongside a critique of British Modernism and classical sculpture, underpinned by a large dose of humor. The interview took place in November 2020 at Simone Subal Gallery in New York, on the occasion of Wine’s show *The Players*.

KATHY NOBLE: Talk me through your exhibition *The Players*.

JESSE WINE: At the entrance I’ve installed two large sculptures, titled *Ooo* (2020) and *Jesse’s Fading Hair* (2020), surrounded by floor-to-ceiling orange curtains. Like

JW: Yes, as with most things. When I moved to New York, I started to reevaluate those questions: Moore, Barbara Hepworth, et cetera. Context is everything. I went to Toronto a few years ago and saw at the Art Gallery of Ontario a room full of Moore's plasters. It was so much more interesting seeing them there than my experience of Moore in the United Kingdom, especially because they were not cast in bronze. When you look at a bronze, there is a sense of industrial production, and all the magic can seep out of it. The plaster pieces are pretty exquisite, but we don't often see them.

KN: How does all this specifically inflect your practice?

JW: It's really simple: it has caused me to re-look at Moore and Hepworth, and to reconsider my work. I became fascinated with it again—consciously or not, the formal considerations impacted me. It sounds like ancient nonsense, but the formal qualities of Moore, especially the line and shape, are so arresting.

KN: And how does this function with your surface treatments?

JW: All of my surfaces are the antithesis of industrial production, although I like to play with the solemnity of what looks like a patinated bronze finish. For example, I use copper powder, which is then oxidized, turning the surface from orangey brown to greens and blues, and gives the impression that the sculpture is a patinated bronze that has been sitting outside for years. Alongside the handmade ceramic production, I'm trying to poke fun at the weightiness of Modernism. It is a ruse.

KN: What do the holes in the surfaces symbolize?

JW: An interiority, an independence from me. As if the gaping hole is an entrance point to the feelings or emotions of the sculpture: *What's inside?*

KN: There is a large landscape sculpture that includes an exterior of a house, a mattress, and more limbs.

JW: That sculpture is called *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (2020). The house is actually my dad's old house. Another piece I made, titled *11:10 am / 15.10.1983 / 75 Heath Lane / Chester / United Kingdom / CH3 5SY* (2020), depicts my mum's house, and is being shown at SculptureCenter. They've separated, but they used to live in Chester, ten minutes away from each other. It's funny to think that both of their houses are on display at the same time in New York.

KN: Why did you want to remake your father's and mother's houses?

JW: Because I was going—or I'm still going—through this period of trying to unravel the archive of my life through making art. During the period of COVID-19 and the time of living in another country, I have become more objective about the history of my own existence.

KN: I think living in another nation gives you a perspective that's impossible to have in your birthplace—specifically, for us, an understanding of English culture from afar, and of US culture as an outsider.

JW: The distance always enables me to look at memories in a different way. I sent an image of *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* to my dad the

other day. His response was quite funny. He said: “It’s perfect. What’s it for?” As if he was unaware I was a sculptor, and that the way I think is always through objects. In a way, this makes sense with him, though; he is a truly objective person, but over the past few years he has become remarkably emotional when he comes to my shows. He has now reached a point where his emotional state is very tender, and the fact I made his house might be enough to trigger him. Asking “What’s it for?” sort of protects him from directly considering why I created it.

KN: It’s beautifully sad as an object. As is your father’s reaction. All the emotion contained in this house.

JW: Yes, about eight years ago he moved out of this house, but that’s the place he lived from when I was three until I was twenty-eight. It is certainly a house where a lot of life happened.

KN: The mattress in this sculpture looks very real, very squishy. I want to sit on it.

JW: The mattress is metaphorically useful because it is such a viscerally sensitive object, and ever-present in the history of art. I wanted to gently reference the mattress in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Ermafrodito Dormiente* (1620).

KN: Is it “metaphorically useful” because you can play with weight? And, in this case, suggest the heaviness of the limbs standing on it?

JW: Yes, precisely. The sculpture is aware of its own of materiality, and it’s playing with you in relation to what materiality itself is. It is at once light and heavy, defying the fact that it is actually rock-hard. Charles Ray talks about sculptures making and unmaking themselves in real time; here you have the sculpture pushing down on itself, and in the other corner the sculpture pinching itself. They are as aware of themselves as they are of you. It’s a beautiful and perverse idea: a sculpture looking at you whilst touching itself, a role reversal of sorts.

KN: What do you want viewers to take away from the show as a whole?

JW: I remember Phyllida Barlow talking about making an exhibition in a white cube, and the need to acknowledge that you’re presenting a project in a such a space. You can’t just let it go without saying, because the white cube is just another idea—a good one, but an idea nonetheless. It has to be intentional. Part of me always wants to make shows that are as flamboyant as this. When I started making work that goes directly upward, and the sculptures became so human-like, these theatrical characters with different personalities, a theater production was actually a rational place to explore them. And to finally answer your question: I want people to have an experience that is totally absolute and definite.

KN: It’s very otherworldly and all-encompassing. Can we talk now about your show *Imperfect List* at SculptureCenter. I think it is very site-specific, particularly because you worked in the basement, which is a raw, bunker-like, slightly claustrophobic space, formed from corridors. It’s very easy for an artist’s work to become squashed by the long, dark hallways. Yet the combination of the different scales you used—the convoy of tiny trucks running down the corridors, as if on a freeway, with the larger, figurative, almost anthropomorphic sculptures that were lit

theatrically—creates stark contrasts that are beautiful. First, where did the trucks come from?

JW: Most of the things I do come from a direct experience. I had a studio in Red Hook in Brooklyn, right by the port. Trucks were constantly picking up cargo, and as a result there was always a truck idling outside my workplace, preparing to depart. I had this nonstop soundtrack of incredibly loud engines outside. I decided to record them. I shot hours and hours of boring but kind of beautiful footage of trucks idling. I imagined the film to be in the exhibition, but in the end, I made the convoy of trucks. I think this is how I process most things—by making them physical in some way. They are at that scale because, as with my father's house, I wanted to process the idea of a huge, immovable object—the idling truck—by making it toy-size. You can literally pick them up to look under them. This is a simple way of rethinking them and the experience that provoked making them.

KN: The monumental becomes childlike. The toy size of the trucks in those tunnels with the curved arches works really well.

JW: They transform the corridor into a highway. You have the trucks running down the highway, then in the middle of the space are two sculptures. One is walking across the space, titled *The IRS* (2020). The IRS is an entity that resonates with everyone, cuts across life. That's a universal idea, just about. The other sculpture, which is in this virginal white and called *Imperfect List* (2020), is walking down the corridor in the same direction as the trucks, trying to proceed with the moment/life. The relationship between the trucks and the sculptures is all with movement, the inertia of life and the ways in which that can be broken.

KN: The figurative sculptures are beautiful, surreal objects.

JW: The figures disappear beyond the height of the arch. They are growing out of the space, whereas the trucks are in the highway of the space, underneath the figures. The intention was to create two colliding worlds. Things that do not belong together, yet somehow coexist in that space. Beyond that moment, there are a few ideas that run throughout the show, for instance around rest and activity. How impossible it is to rest well and work well.

KN: I'm so tired today, I just want to go home and lie on my bed.

JW: But lying on your bed, you will still hear that truck outside. What is ambient sound to city dwellers is actually a real personal affront. If your phone is on, you can't relax. You have this relationship where you are desiring the idea of relaxing but unable to achieve it. You desire the idea of working hard and well, but you can't, as you're being interrupted all the time. And you are stuck in this interim space. There are mattresses and sofas in the show; it's all about reclining but not being able to fully sleep or relax. Then there is a head that is asleep with a building on top of it. Instead of being absolute, we resolve to live in compromise, neither on nor off. Because we are city dwellers, we have accepted it.

KN: It's white noise, everything moving all the time. It's relentless.

JW: And that's why they have to exist together—the figures and the trucks—to communicate how much these things don't belong together, but how much you've accepted it as your life.

KN: At the top of the stairs is a pair of sculptures, one with the rusty bronze finish and an orange one. They looked remarkably different back in the white cube. Could you talk about the couplings in the exhibition?

JW: Throughout the exhibition there are these iterations of couples. I was considering how pairs are treated differently than singles—mostly given advantages, such as the tax breaks married people have here in the United States. It drives you to conform to societal rules that are totally arbitrary and senseless, just to have the financial benefit. It's a remarkable and inane discrimination. It plays out in the exhibition as a series of coupled sculptures, which is funny to me because I was always *told* that sculptures live in odd numbers! But the broader intention of this coupling is to allude to the work of being independent, having a social life of one's own, making decisions on one's own. Between this and the exploration of the interiority of the sculptures we spoke about earlier, I'm creating a structure for the art to be released from production and the impermanence of the studio or a gallery.

KN: What's next for you?

JW: I'm currently working on a show for The Modern Institute in Glasgow. It's my first exhibition in the United Kingdom in nearly four years. My work has developed so much since moving to the United States that it feels almost like a first show in a new place.

KN: What shape will it take?

JW: I'm still working through the themes we've been speaking about. But, most excitingly, I am producing a series of life-size glass heads. They will lie on the gallery floor on their sides with closed eyes, as if sleeping. In the backs of each of them there will be a hole cut away, exposing the interior "headspace," which will be filled with things from everyday life. I think one will be filled with junk mail, again coming back to the idea of how one's resting time is continually marginalized and punctuated by the detritus of daily existence.