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Open to Possibility: Jesse Wine

By Cassie Packard, January 15, 2021

The process of making, breaking, and remaking ceramic sculptures.



Jesse Wine, *The Ecstasy of Saint Tokig*, 2020, detail, ceramic, graphite, paint, 37 × 56 × 47 inches. SculptureCenter, New York, 2020. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of the artist; Simone Subal Gallery, New York; and the Modern Institute, Glasgow.

British-born, Brooklyn-based artist Jesse Wine has optimized for neither efficiency nor functionality. Working in the “slow,” accident-prone medium of ceramics, Wine sculpts playfully anti-utilitarian objects such as model trucks incapable of moving forward, oversized detached legs with no bodies to support, and buildings that fuse with the human body parts that they are normally built to house. The artist’s idiosyncratic lexicon is currently on display in his first US museum solo show, *Imperfect List* at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, and at his solo exhibition, *The Players*, at Simone Subal Gallery in Manhattan. We spoke about feeling stalled, encountering sculptures on their own terms, and reserving the right to be functionless.

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To me, a fundamental aspect of clay is that it remembers. On one hand, the material itself has an innate memory for touch. And on the other, there's the medium's collective memory, as it's a material that's been vital to human civilization since antiquity—and back even further, to the late Paleolithic times. As a contemporary artist, how do you navigate the weight of that memory?

Jesse Wine

I love it. I love the weight of the memory and the absolute importance and constant use across history and civilization; clay, in a way, is a leveler. What I mean is that although I'm using a different "clay body"—manufactured clay as opposed to the naturally occurring kind—to what is used in different places or at different times, the execution and goal is in many ways the same. Execution: I am using a few very simple hand tools and an electric kiln whereas in ancient times it would have been a few simple hand tools and a wood-fired kiln. Goal: successfully get this thing in and out of the kiln without breaking it.

CP

There's a timelessness to that. I'm curious about the role of accident—accident of the aesthetic variety—in your work. When you put a work in the kiln, do you know what it will ultimately look like after firing?

JW

I used to be a lot more precious about my work in general. But as what I made became more complex and, more importantly, physically bigger and heavier, there were a lot more breakages and explosions. A few years ago, I started to embrace this and fix the breakages using traditional sculpture techniques. Usually, the breakages are on the hands and feet, and so I learned to reconstruct these appendages with metal rods and glues, which I sometimes leave in the work so you can see where it has had surgery, so to speak. These are often my favorite parts of the sculptures. Tishan Hsu emerged in 1980s, when the East Village was a burgeoning hub for artistic celebration of body politics; however, Hsu's tech-infused approach to corporeality was considered too obscure for its time. Three decades later, the art world and Hsu are finally on the same page. The artist's sleek sculptures that have long investigated the mysterious relationship between the body and the machine, tapping into our post-Internet-era sensibilities and anxieties in elegant forms.

CP

Musical chairs! I like the sense of play and mania tied up with that characterization of precarity. It's starting to sound like your works have lives of their own.

JW

Yes! Or at least that's the intention. My exhibition *The Players* had huge, brightly colored curtains running throughout the space. They operated as backdrops for the sculptures, so that it feels like you're backstage with the cast—the cast is the sculptures—and the curtain is about to be lifted.



Jesse Wine, *Calcium*, 2018–20, installation view, ceramic, graphite, paint, 27 × 31 × 61 inches. SculptureCenter, New York, 2020. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of the artist; Simone Subal Gallery, New York; and the Modern Institute, Glasgow.

CP

There's a layer of frustration to your work in that you are working in a medium that has historically been utilitarian to make artworks that are hyperbolically nonfunctional. I'm thinking particularly of your recent model transport trucks. Made from ceramic, they can't go anywhere, much less transport anything. You also sculpt warped vessels that don't hold anything, skeletal umbrellas that can't shield anyone, etc. I'm wondering about the extent to which this espousal of uselessness is explicitly responding to capitalism.

JW

It's not a direct response to something as specific as that. I think the work is aware that it is art and that it reserves the right to be functionless. I think this could lead to a dialogue around terms like "futility," but I don't mean it that way. What I mean is that the function of the art relies on *it* knowing that *it* is functionless, and that from this place there is a gleaned freedom: the work then becomes loose and open to possibility. And I want to distinguish this idea from futility, as I think the work is extremely active.



Installation view of Jesse Wine: *Imperfect List*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2020. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of SculptureCenter, New York.

CP

Yes, “futility” feels wrong here. Instead, these objects are more actively anti-utilitarian. I get the sense that they like to be seen on their own terms.

JW

Yeah, I think you’re right. Maybe a good way of describing in a more tangible manner is through the scale of the work. I’m now making at a scale that is slightly bigger than human scale, which defines the space between you and the sculpture in the sense that it is clear you are entering the sculpture’s domain and not vice versa. I also think that it’s important to say that the continuous question of “utility” is fundamentally irrelevant to my work; I happen to work in clay, but I have never engaged with it to make utility objects. Clay is a sculptural material, and I am an artist who uses it.

CP

What’s next for you?

JW

After closing my shows at SculptureCenter and Simone Subal Gallery, I will be doing an exhibition with the Modern Institute in Glasgow, Scotland.

Jesse Wine: Imperfect List is on view at SculptureCenter in New York City until January 25; The Players is on view at Simone Subal Gallery in New York City until January 30.