

A Conversation with Nick Hornby

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SM: What was the impetus for the new series?

NH: My practice over the last decade has been a very slow and systematic inquiry into authorship—the critique of authorship, methods of eliminating the personal subjective, and questions of digital reproduction. It led me to cool, calculated Boolean operations and slick high-production sculptures. This year—in the middle of lockdown, with the tenth anniversary of my mother's death, and when I watched my father's Alzheimer's reach a point he forgot his name and who I was—I split up with my life-partner and turned 40. I decided that I didn't need to critique authorship or eliminate the personal subjective anymore. In fact, I wanted touch, contact, and altogether more earnest connections with my work.

SM: Was the new technique of liquified photography a solution to a technical problem or just something you came up with?

It's an incredible process – we print onto a water-soluble film, that when placed on water dissolves leaving only the ink floating. I didn't invent this process—I simply appropriated and augmented an industrial technique, upscaling it for larger objects and subverting its imagery. It is extraordinary for me to suddenly be able to work with images so directly. Although my sculptures are referential, and in fact composed from images, the results often appear to be quite abstract. Images on the other hand are so legible—so laden, so impregnated and drenched in meaning. For me, directly using images felt like bringing a nuclear bomb to a knife fight.

SM: What is the substrate?

NH: The objects are simple resin fibreglass casts. They need to be light enough to handle during the application process, where a lot can go wrong. Some of the forms are digitally cut, others carved free hand and others (the dogs) are found.

SM: Why these three types of objects: dogs, portrait busts, and abstract objects?

NH: I'm interested in category errors—how you compare things which are seeming immiscible. It's easy to compare 23% with 73%, but how do you compare a meteorite with a vintage Porsche? The processes of digital manufacture, hand-made and ready-made, stand in for different and arguably contradictory sculptural propositions. Equally, the show is about figuration— each object type is in a different state of abstraction: the dogs are clearly dogs but abstracted through caricature, the busts are quasi cubist— legible from certain angles—and the abstract objects are abstract (if at times very bodily, like torsos etc). The show is about looking and being looked at. The heads have angular Picasso-like eyes staring out, the abstract objects have erotic body parts, and the dogs are a traditional Victorian ornament typically displayed at home on a mantelpiece above a fire looking out into the room. I was fascinated by the homogenising effect of the glossy images. Could I tie these disparate forms together to give the appearance of design, coherence, intentionality, and a single author?

SM: Do you think differently at all when making figurative works, as opposed to your earlier work?

NH: As far as I'm concerned, I have always made figurative work (or referential work). The figure maybe the outline of an abstract sculpture— but the work still points towards something that exists. I tend to think figuration / abstraction is a false binary—nothing can ever be completely one or the other. Which I suppose means that in both the older work and this new work I treat my materials very similarly, trying to triangulate meaning and open new ideas.

SM: Can you say something about the relationship between the photographic images and the shapes of the objects to which they are melded?

NH: There is a different rationale for each group: the heads, the abstractions and the dogs. The heads are derived from 19th Century portrait busts that are on display at the V&A in London. Those forms are overlaid with portraits by a photographer Louie Banks including models, queer and trans people. The abstract bodily shapes have images of boys in lycra and speedos and the dogs have images of “pup play”, a queer BDSM subculture that dresses up as dogs.

SM: Did you take the photographs? (I think you said they were taken by a well-known photographer, but perhaps you can elaborate a bit.)

NH: Apart from the collaboration with Louie Banks, yes, I took all the photographs.

SM: Do you draw? And did you draw out the shapes before working on them in CAD?

NH: My “drawing” stage (the moment of experimentation) is pre-image, normally at the point of words and ideas. I then draw in CAD, but by this point I'm modelling what I have designed in my head. Once the concept is set, the making is very pleasurable. Yes, I draw everything in CAD – because that's the tool I'm most adept with. It allows me to try different iterations, to explore juxtapositions very quickly and to shift scale.

SM: Thoughts about the relationship between images and objects today, in a time of image overabundance?

NH: Images are overabundant, but luckily galleries and museums still provide some space to edit out and let images speak. As I mentioned earlier—for a sculptor whose explicit references are buried beneath abstraction—introducing an image, so clear and so knowable, is like dropping a nuclear bomb.

SM: You mentioned you wanted people to be able to touch the works: do you feel that the tactile, the physical, is especially important at a time when images are so dematerialized.

NH: yes – I've made objects that are strokable but underneath the glossy lacquer might be the image of semi naked person, and I love the slight awkwardness that might yield at the moment you realize what your touching. Yes, touch is very important—but it also doesn't have to be literal: we say a kind gesture might be “touching.”

– Daniel Kunitz, Editor in Chief, Sculpture magazine. January 19, 2021