

This interview first appeared in May 2008 in fluent~collaborative's e-publication '...might be good.'

*The Historian and Astronomer:
In Conversation with Eric Zimmerman and Michael Jones McKean*

The first time I had the opportunity to see one of Michael Jones McKean's pieces was in Houston while he was a resident at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Core Program. Ever since, I have been drawn to his sophisticated use of materials, objects, histories and our ever-changing attempts at understanding them. This conversation took place in April 2008 over email.

Eric Zimmerman: I've always thought of your work as a kind of beautiful archive. It seems like when you create work, you incorporate the history and mythology of a particular object, but you also strip some of the original information away and imbue that object with another sort of meaning. For instance in the pieces making up *The Discipline of Astronomy and Wind*, there is a 1967 McCullough chainsaw, a 1987 Promax boombox, a 5000 year old Del Campo meteorite, a piece of the Teignmouth Electron, and a handmade mono-chrome Dwight Gooden jersey amongst other things. Could you talk about what draws you towards specific objects and mythologies?

Michael Jones McKean: Lately the kinds of objects I've been using inside the work are becoming less categorically connected to each other. I'm beginning to understand a 5000-year old meteorite from Argentina, Dwight Gooden, the first 90 seconds of Cyndi Lauper's *All Through the Night* and a replica of a Sycamore branch made from clay all as coordinates within a constellation, which form a larger image. By placing these things in proximity, they can begin to speak about metaphorical orders, their humble origins as *things*, a shared belief (or disbelief) in what they represent, and our own yearning desire to try and find meaning and order in the stuff around us.

EZ: The metaphor of a constellation is a good one, as it suggests a structure determined by human longing and desire for the ordering of often disparate and expansive things. What influence do the material qualities of these objects have on your interest, understanding, and use of them?

MJM: The visible qualities of objects are the only constants within the equation; it tells us how to look and it's what lasts once all the footnotes and marginalia have gotten lost or simply stopped being relevant. In this sense, the materiality of an object is really the most conceptually durable and embedded feature of a sculpture. All the peripheral references that each discrete object makes are really not the point (although they are important). I think in some ways the process of collaging helps wash away the singularity of the objects, opening up the possibility for them to inherit other kinds of specificity and to live inside a larger gestalt.

EZ: I've always responded to that sort of "neutral" space that your work establishes. For me this neutral space is a space of possibility and contradiction that is always moving and changing with time. How are you thinking about time in relation to your work, and specifically, a piece like *The Possibility of Men and The River Shallows*, which seems to contain these instances of "real" time through music, things that operate on timers, etc. and a sort of historical time as well?

MJM: I suppose on a physical level, it's visually impossible to see a project like *The Possibility of Men and The River Shallows* from a fixed vantage point, so the element of time becomes a natural feature inside the work as one must actually move around it. But this kind of time, sculptural time, is so drastically dissimilar to cinematic time, musical time or literary time because it lacks linear sequencing. Sculpture can't option a dramatic

concept like the “end.” So time swirls around, looping back on itself, proposing but never privileging “the end” as a tool to construct meaning.

On a related note, I’ve always liked words that speak about time in really sly ways. “Possibility” is one. It suggests ‘becoming’ or an unfixated, yet to be determined moment in the history of things. ‘Else’ is another one. If you look up ‘else’ in the dictionary, a synonym you’ll find is ‘also.’ But ‘else’ and ‘also’ seem so far apart. ‘Else’ speaks about longing for things that don’t yet exist, like the stuff we haven’t found or are unable to see yet.

EZ: I like the contrast of the “placelessness” those words suggest with the material nature of the work. So is it fair to say that the work is a way to ‘image’ those things that don’t yet exist, a way to conceptualize future connections and possibilities?

MJM: The work is set up to aspire to these things, but I’m suspicious if it’s actually possible to “image” things that don’t exist. In this way the work is pitted against itself in what it yearns for and what it concedes.

More and more I’m trying to realize and acknowledge the profound “mereness” of art making and understand its borders not as barriers, but as places where meaning could fruitfully break down. Somewhere inside this process is where language and image collaborate and give us something mystical. This is so important, but it’s only half the process; at some point an unusual image that exists near the edge of meaning must report back to us when we are away from the margin. It needs to find us when we are calm, when we have the advantage of our trusted, tested nomenclatures, when we can refer to our bank of canonized symbols as we try to measure-up this weird anomaly. Art’s arrangement with this process is where we find its real, out of time value. It’s where we might stop misunderstanding sign and symbol as meaning’s endgame and begin to see them as discrete options for constructing a meta-meaning. In this way the content of an image is rarely found in the specifics of an object, but rather in the scaffolding that was built to support and embed image and idea.

EZ: I have been thinking about the idea of heterotopia in relation to your work and Foucault’s great metaphor of the ship as the space of imagination and possibility, “the heterotopia par excellence.” In certain instances I see you giving form to this idea, literally, metaphorically, and even metaphysically. In a literal way I am curious about your acquisition of *Teignmouth Electron*, the boat which Donald Crowhurst famously used in his botched attempt to cheat and win a round the world yacht race. How have you come to understand this boat in relation to your work?

MJM: The *Electron* is an object that I can’t really understand. For me it’s like trying to understand *tree*. On one level it seems quite simple to understand a tree; it’s only a tree, it behaves the way trees behave. But *tree* baffles me. People have invented some useful shorthand strategies that allow us to conceptualize images through somewhat efficient, perfunctory, customary ways: function, history, mechanics, specific lexicons, and to a lesser degree even poetics. That said, I think the *Electron* is quite easy to appreciate as an elegant metaphor about life, yearning, failure. But these concepts seem overly available. In this sense, it’s vital to not let our relationship with things default into passive, ugly connoisseurship. That’s like tourism. As I’ve grown to understand it, the *Electron* resists; it will not be sculpture, it will not be an artwork. It wouldn’t even be a boat. It’s more like an oracle; a beautiful siren song.

I can think about the *Electron* as a set of dimensions with a certain width and length and girth that displaces a specific amount of volume on the planet. After that it flows over what’s available to me and the conversation becomes way more difficult.

EZ: It might be presumptuous of me, but I think that in a sense the *Electron* exists within all of your work. It is at once a metaphor, a ‘thing,’ a point in history, a mythology, and this other ‘place’ that eludes complete understanding and unmoors our strategies for doing so. It has this quiet magnetism, this otherness, that I find in your work as well. I wonder how

you understand the conceptual and physical space that your completed projects occupy in relation to their sources and as 'objects' themselves?

MJM: I think your question relates to your mention of heterotopia earlier. For me, heterotopia opens up a way of thinking about space not simply as an area or a locale but as something liminal, temporal, and in the same breath still palpable and real. To understand space this way is to understand sculpture and art making in the most progressive way I can imagine. Objects don't just occupy space; they determine the nature of space. They can predict our behavior within a space. In the least fascist way I can imagine, objects establish the rules. They become proxies for what we believe.

This kind of space is also about scale and acuity. I often imagine the short space in between the outer surface of our eye and our brain and the physiological events that happen inside this distance when you see a person. During this moment we're visually organizing a complex aggregate of subtle facial traits to establish an identity—things like the angle of someone's jaw in relation to the pitch of their nose relative to the space between their eyes. A couple of millimeters can separate the most drastically different facial archetypes, yet we somehow manage to recognize people we haven't seen in 10 years quite easily. Incredibly we're also able to infer the subtlest emotions like doubt or remorse or empathy as they might register on a face with only the slightest elevation of an eyebrow or the most delicate tilt of the lip.

When I think about our eyes recognizing and ascribing meaning to subtle, barely noticeable, almost invisible variations of facial expression suddenly the specific arrangement of a few objects and their proximity to each other inside a sculpture have the possibility to articulate something slight and poetic, but also monumentally significant. Within this construct we also have the freedom, at any moment, to refocus our eyes and let these objects in a field revert back to simple matter.

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