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PRECISION OF PRACTICE

Tony Matelli interviewed by Marie Nipper

MN: Often when I have encountered your work, I think of a certain painting by the Flemish painter Pieter Aertsen. The work is called *A Meat Stall with the Holy Family Giving Alms* (see attached photo); it's from 1551 and depicts a meat stall with an abundance of meat spread out. Sausages, a cow's head, and freshly slaughtered poultry dominate the foreground of the painting, leaving us with only a few glimpses of what is going on in the background. If we look closely, we can see two pictures with scenes from the Old Testament: one shows the Holy family giving alms and the other depicts the Virgin Mary fleeing to Egypt. Aertsen's painting is a so-called "inverted still life" that on first glance seems to be an essentially secular image because the Christian motifs are superseded by the avalanche of meat in the foreground.

I'm not entirely sure why your work makes me think of this painting, but I guess that it has something to do with the fact that you also, in some ways, create inverted sculptural still lifes: the sensuous reality of your sculptures overwhelm us, containing or hiding an existential dimension. How do you see the relationship between the formal aspects of your work and the story they tell?

TM: I don't really see any distinction. The way my work is rendered can't be separated from the idea. I have always thought that my approach to object making adds to its clarity and precision, rather than obfuscating the subject matter. I want to engage the viewer and to present my subject as clearly as possible. I've always thought that for an artwork to be successful, it needs the viewer to become invested in it. Ideas need to have seductive power in order to be absorbed and considered. This is the ultimate lesson of religious art, and even Hollywood— the viewer needs to be seduced. So when I'm making something, one of my first objectives is how to make the viewer care. How do I bring them into the universe of the work? Sometimes the motivations behind my work are pretty simple and direct, so the high production value of my work is one way of convincing the viewer of the works' seriousness, my seriousness. Once viewers accept this they are

more likely to consider the subject in a way that they might not otherwise. They become absorbed in the work.

MN: The “inverted still life” was also used by Aertsen’s contemporary, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. He used it in his landscapes, satirizing the gluttony of peasants. You seem to take up this tradition of critical satire in your art in works such as *Total Torpor*, *Mad Malaise* (2003) and *Old Enemy. New Victim* (2007).

TM: Yeah, I’ve always loved Bruegel. But what interests me the most is the amount of visual information and the narrative flow. You can read the paintings in a narrative way: they are really involving, and strange, but not in a fantastical way. I feel the weirdness and banality of Bruegel’s time through his paintings. Now, though, I honestly no longer really care about satire. My interests have turned more toward the Romantic.

MN: Why the transition from satire to what you call Romanticism?

TM: Because satirical motivations are external and prescriptive, and I have no interest whatsoever in social critique. It might be more accurate to talk about my work within the tradition of black humor, which has so many contradictory qualities but almost always result in an empathetic connection to the main subject. *Total Torpor*, *Mad Malaise* is a great example of this because of its combination of grotesquely reified body dysmorphia and its somehow comically stoic disposition. There is an almost anxious identification with it.

In any event, my interests lie more with the intersection of internal desires and external forces—how we manifest ourselves in society, and the friction that may produce. These are more personal interests, things I feel.

MN: You often use motifs that evoke the tradition of still life, such as vegetables and meat, but you also incorporate modern vanitas symbols such as cigarette butts, pizza boxes, beer cans, and so on. The technical and aesthetic perfection of your work stands in obvious contrast to the cultural status of such items, which are normally considered leftovers or waste. What does sculpture bring to these materials? Or maybe the question can be posed the other way around: Why are these materials interesting as sculpture?

TM: I don't see myself as rendering these objects in contrast to their actuality. I'm not really interested in any high/low discussion. Maybe some viewers will identify some friction there, but for me the depictions are always meant to be fairly seamless. I want someone to initially experience the subject rather than "reading" it. I want them absorbed in the work. Therefore, I feel the transmission of the idea needs to be direct, neutral, and even artless. The Weeds are a great example of this. I wanted them to be experienced, first, as simple weeds. I didn't want them to be experienced as a sculpture—I hoped there would be very little art mediation, and that's true for a lot of my work. The Weeds really work this way; I don't think people initially engage with them as sculpture, I think people initially engage with them as real weeds, which allows them to function in the mind of the viewer as real interlopers, strange and out of place.

This goes back to my experience with Duane Hanson. I think the best Hanson piece is in the Milwaukee Art Museum; it's a janitor leaning against the wall. This is one of my first art experiences too—I would go there as a child on field trips, and right there, next to this giant and horrible Alex Katz, is the Janitor, leaning against the wall. And it is incredible because it does so many things at once; it takes you totally by surprise. Janitors are supposed to be completely unseen in museums--their labor is supposed to disappear--so it's sort of surprising on that level, and then you realize it's a sculpture, and become conscious of how you are looking at the thing. You become aware of that perceptual shift, so what was a seemingly real-life experience becomes a complicated art experience, and that approach to art is really powerful and cool. It made everything else seem like a prop that only pointed to an idea. The precision of praxis had a great impact on me, and some of my work operates in that spirit.

MN: In your earlier works, you seem more focused on picturing the repellent aspects of human life and society: the boy scouts are vomiting (Lost and Sick), the chimpanzees are fighting (Old Enemy. New Victim), and the male body is mutating and decomposing, the result of a general malaise or a plague (Total Torpor, Mad Malaise). In these works, you foreground the obscene. But in your later work, this interest seems to be replaced by one in society's waste products. In some ways, waste products

such as cigarette butts, pizza boxes, beer cans, and so on seem to evoke the category of the heterogeneous as set forth by French philosopher George Bataille. For Bataille, the heterogeneous is what is expelled from the “normal” (homogeneous) body, be this body political, textual, or corporeal. When one looks at your collected work—which develops from an interest in the obscene to a materialization of the heterogeneous—one sees you consistently transgressing the limits of the “normal,” whether these limits are social, psychological, or physical. What about transgression fascinates you? What potential do you see it holding?

TM: No fascination, no potential. The idea of transgression has been so romanticized and perverted that I’m not sure I can see it as anything more than a kind of stylized acting out. Like political art, transgression has become kitsch. Furthermore, transgression implies a willful act. My subjects are most often not willful actors. Yes, the Boy Scouts are vomiting, but that’s all we know—we don’t know why. Same with Total Torpor, Mad Malaise: this character is a kind of proud victim, not someone engaged in a rejection of normative culture. He is a casualty of normative culture, not a transgressor. Almost all of my subjects are. As for the obscene, I don’t believe that exists within art.

MN: And how would you describe the dynamics of the culture your figures inhabit? It seems to be one where basic needs, such as those for food or sex, have become the only needs, a society where the need of the individual never evolves beyond the lowest levels of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Maslow’s theory suggests that the most basic necessities—breathing, food, sex, sleep, excretion—must be met before the individual can attend to needs such as love, esteem, and self-actualization. But it seems that the character in Total Torpor, Mad Malaise does not want to move beyond the fulfillment of basic needs even though he, as a member of a Western society, has the means to do so.

TM: My interests lie in the friction between what you described as the heterogeneous and the homogeneous or, more accurately, between internal desires and external forces. So that puts my interests at the top of Maslow’s list (incidentally, I would rank sexual competition much higher on the list than he does; I would place it somewhere near the “achievement” category). This is the real paradox of an individualistic culture.

It's why I'm interested in alcohol as a subject, because alcohol is one way to amplify our sense of individuality, to create a temporary zone of autonomy and escape the confines of society.

MN: You also seem interested in a society where the individual focuses only on fulfilling his or her own needs, where the need for intimacy or human relations is gone. Obviously the figure in *Total Torpor* does not care what anyone thinks about his bodily state; his search for self-actualization and fulfillment is reduced to masturbation.

TM: Masturbation is self-actualization. As with alcohol, it generates a kind of freedom and autonomy, however implicitly unproductive. This obviously has a dark side: this kind of autonomy is a mirage.

MN: Are you pointing toward this dark side by titling your series of beer boxes *The Idiot*?

TM: Yeah, more or less. I liked the idea of turning those boxes into heads, empty heads, because that parallels the effect of the beer they once contained. In addition, it is sort of in keeping with my recent interest in the dissipation of subjectivity. I started thinking of a body as a container, as packaging, like Josh. It is a desirable and terrifying state.

MN: How is it desirable?

TM: Because it's open.

MN: Empty.

TM: Yes.

MN: With the title *The Idiot* I also see a reference to Dostoevsky's book of the same title, in which man's seemingly positive, even perfect, traits—personified in the good and always honest count Myshkin—collide with a corrupt world. Though Myshkin is infinitely morally superior to the Saint Petersburg society he enters, he ends up being perceived as an idiot, which makes his effect on this world a mix of positive and negative, or ultimately zero.

TM: The first time I showed that work was in Moscow, so I sort of knew what I was getting into with the title. I saw that it paralleled the book's combination of sweet naivety and drunken distortion, but didn't really think about that too much. I named the piece after it was made and the title seemed to make sense to me.

The Idiot works were actually made to be bird houses. All the iterations have interior compartments for food and water, and nesting space for several finches. Given the right circumstances, birds would live inside the boxes, entering and exiting the head through the eyes and mouth holes. I wanted to give the impression that the vacuity of the effigy was so complete that other beings took up residence. The birds signified a kind of transformation or positive reclamation of the container.

MN: In some way you seem an American in sheep's clothing, in that you often seem to draw more upon a European artistic tradition than an American one. It's obvious that you are formally connected to an American sculptural tradition, but at the same time you also break with this history and take sculptural realism in new directions. The irony in much postmodern American sculpture, which one sees in the work of Jeff Koons, for example, does not seem present in your art. Your works seem much more linked to a European, especially French, cultural critique, revolving around existential questions.

TM: I've actually never considered my work as having any kind of European character at all. And as an American, I find it impossible to ascertain whether it is American or not. As far as my investment in critique, cultural or otherwise, it's virtually nonexistent. Mainly, I'm interested in my personal intersection with society and in giving shape to my own frustrations and joys. For instance, when I was making the Meat Heads and Veg. Heads (which are vague self portraits), I was thinking abstractly about resurrection. I was feeling frustrated with certain aspects of my life, so I envisioned my own death and rebirth. Death was represented by the rot and rebirth by the freshly sprouting tubers and the maggots.

MN: But I do see an element of cultural critique in, for example, Yesterday, the large tower of cards. It seems like a negative version of the Tower of Babel. In the Old Testament, man was condemned for the divine

aspirations that building the Tower of Babel signified, but the structure nonetheless symbolizes a striving for something. By contrast, your card towers do not seem motivated by otherworldly ambitions; instead they seem the unplanned products of indifference or infinite boredom. The title Yesterday also points toward the past, rather than suggesting something in progress or a looking forward.

TM: The series of card towers are called Yesterday because I wanted them to embody a regret: they are unstable monuments to wasted time. Locating those works in the past opens up the possibility that the present can be different. I like the idea of an artwork that anticipates a more hopeful future on the part of the viewer.

MN: So you see this work as containing optimism?

TM: The negativity of Yesterday is backdated by its very title. It optimism is not represented, but it is implicit.

MN: This reminds me of what I was trying to get at in mentioning the tradition of the inverted still life. In the case of this work, the optimism that you mention seems to exist as a subtext of the sculpture.

TM: I see them as both things, pessimistic and optimistic, equally and simultaneously. These conflicting orientations are in a lot of the work: the Meat Heads, The Old Me, Fucked (Couple), and so on. In the Yesterday works, these polarities are mirrored by the objects themselves: the loss of agency represented by the beer cans is balanced, literally, by the mastery and control implied by the card arrangements.

MN: This kind of balancing act also seems to take place in another sculpture, Josh, in which a young man floats in a weightless or trancelike state over the floor. He makes me think of transcendental meditation, whose practitioners seek to levitate the body through meditating. Some describe this experience as one accompanied by feelings of exhilaration, lightness, and bliss. I see references to such physical and mental liberation in Josh, but at the same time the figure embodies some terrifying possibilities—a kind of emptying out and a loss of subjectivity.

TM: Yeah, I was thinking about the Buddhist idea of the non-self, the rejection of an empirical self. I wondered what would happen if those ideas were abstracted and distorted to include even the nullification of personal relations, family ties, and social and moral responsibility—a total annihilation of the bourgeois self. I imagine that the radical neutrality of that position would be both wonderful and terrifying, liberating and imprisoning. The image I imagined was an empty cup floating on the water, and I wanted to personify that precarious situation.

MN: I remember you calling him a “barely-there kind of person.” What do you mean by that?

TM: What comprises an individual ego? Personality? Character? Experience? Accomplishments? Family? Morality? Whatever. Sometimes the weight and inertia of our own personhood can be unbearable, so I was imagining someone without any of that. A person without a self, a simple container, a ghost.

MN: You also seem to take up the idea of subjectivity or identity as a prison in some of your newest works, such as the series of rubbings taken from the walls of your studio.

TM: I learned about the technique as a child, taking field trips with my middle school to the local cemetery and doing grave rubbings, if you can believe that. Later, I learned about frottage, which Max Ernst pioneered as a collage-like means of image making. But to me, this technique was always associated with archeology: it was a way of recording ancient ruins and hieroglyphs before the invention of photography. I see these paintings as a kind of archeological manifestation of my intellectual parameters. They are representations of the mental confines of my identity, confines created by my own self-image and by the expectations of others.

MN: The rubbings seem to be a way of making something invisible visible, and in that sense they seem to be a way for you to visualize the non-representational, an aim you mentioned earlier.

TM: It’s actually the reverse. Instead of representing, say, an emotion or mood—something intangible— these are literally impressions of the walls.

They are a kind of printing or direct transfer, and through that simple telegraphing of surface to image, they somehow start to resonate with a kind of doom.

It was totally by accident that I came upon this. I was working with these letterhead paintings based on my studio's stationery. I would reproduce my letterhead, enlarge the size, and treat it as a field of experimentation and appropriation. It functioned as a surrogate of my studio space. Whatever occurred within the framework of the letterhead would be mine, even if it incorporated other people's styles or wildly incongruent ideas; I thought of it as a kind of stylistic colonialism but also as a rejection of the idea of a coherent artistic and personal identity. Since the letterhead is the ultimate cliché of professionalism, a projection of corporate identity, I wanted to use it as a way to re-imagine the projection of my own identity. From there, I started thinking about the actual space of the studio as both a literal place of production and as a site of artistic identity. So I began doing rubbings directly off the studio walls onto my letterhead. As I shifted to larger surfaces and moved to canvas, I abandoned the actual letterhead but kept the proportions the same (8.5 x 11 inches).

These rubbings occupy a weird place. They are archaeological records of a contemporary time and place. Visually, they might be photographs or computer prints, but they are as analog as a cave painting.

MN: The rubbings are in some ways psychedelic in the actual sense of the word, "to make visible the mind." They represent a change of perception on your side, or the mental operation of you defining your identity.

TM: That's interesting, because in this body of work I was thinking a lot about what defines a practice (especially since it all grew out of the letterhead works, and thinking about the outward projection of identity). The rubbings developed into a weird kind of self-portraiture: they became a meditation on my practice and its limits, and in that broke through to a new way of image making for me.

MN: Some of your newest works, the series of windows, also seem connected to this kind of spatial self-portrait.

TM: Those started out that way, but have since been abstracted. When I was doing the wall rubbings, I laid a canvas over one of the walls that had a window and started doing the rubbing. Once the image of the window started coming through the canvas, I began to see it as just another part of the wall, another fixture, another confine. At that point it seemed obvious that I needed to make the window sculptures.

MN: It seems that the series of windows should also be seen in connection with your mirror pieces. As the reflective function of the mirrors is obstructed by the layers of dust covering their surface, so are the potential views through the windows blocked. In this way, you negate the function of both the mirror and the window alike: the possibility of self-reflection and introspection in the case of the former and the ability to look out onto the world in the latter.

TM: These are frustrated objects. I think the power of the mirror paintings come from the objectification of the viewer, and they also complicate the viewer's subjectivity by means of the imagery cut into the many layers of painted dust. I wanted them to operate like those simple handprints on the wall of a cave, as a way of seeing the past while simultaneously seeing oneself in the present.

In the mirror paintings, the primary functions of the mirror, clarity and fidelity, are violated. This is more or less also true in the windows works: I wanted to subvert the Romantic idea of the window as a sort of portal or a symbol of yearning. I wanted to represent it as a kind of false promise: the window as an obstacle rather than an opportunity.

MN: There is a whole tradition of Romantic paintings in which windows act as portals of possibility, but your windows function almost as self-referential modern sculpture.

TM: Mine are monoliths.

MN: Yes, they emphasize the demarcation between inside and outside, between private and public, between the space of the artist and the world outside. Here, again, the question of your identity as an artist emerges.

TM: Of identity in general. To some degree, we are all bound to our egos. The inertia of our lives is sometimes unbearable and seemingly impossible to escape. I sometimes wish I was someone else, someone with a different history, different looks, ideas, morals, friends, and job, but it's impossible to see past oneself. That's where these works are coming from.

MN: It sounds like the same impetus as Josh.

TM: It is.