



Originally published in *Glass of Water*, 2011

## TONY MATELLI INTERVIEWED BY HOWIE CHEN

C: I am really interested in something you said when you approached me to do this interview: you mentioned that we thought about art very differently, and that it would make for an unexpected conversation about your work—I'm curious how this will unfold.

M: Yeah, you have a background in economics, and a kind of critical art perspective. I have a background in mostly just art—I like playing in the studio. I wouldn't say I'm an intuitive artist, but I probably feel my way around more than you. Since we have fairly different interests, I thought it would be fun to see where they overlapped. Let's try.

C: First, let's set the stage and talk about the process of selecting the works in this exhibition, and how you see them together in terms of narrative and chronology.

M: The idea for the exhibition was to codify the last couple years of production, and to indicate a direction forward with my work. The oldest work is *Fuck It, free yourself!*, which is the burning money piece from 2007, and the sentiments embedded in it appear throughout the exhibition—I see that work as a kind of emptying out. Actually, the exhibition shows stages of that process. The tentative plan is to have people walk in and see *Glass of Water* first, and through that piece they can engage with the whole exhibition; it's a sort of portal for the show—a lens—so you move from that work through the exhibition. The first room will have the *Yesterday* pieces and *Double Meat Head*. The next room will have *Josh*, across from *Fuck It, free yourself!*, and both capture this kind of change of physical state, a moment of sublimation, from a solid to a kind of vapor, and then *Untitled (99¢)*, same sort of thing. Finally, in the last room are the *Idiot* sculptures, which are the completion of the emptying out process—they are just shells, packaging. They've been reclaimed by other things. They have completely transformed into something else—birdhouses. And then everywhere in the show will be the mirror paintings, which represent a state of constant obscuration and revelation.

C: How would you describe the specific themes in the works you selected for this exhibition?

M: I don't spend a lot of time thinking about that. It's one of those things that seems best unidentified, or like a stone that maybe is best left unturned. If those interests are revealed too explicitly, my attraction to them is diminished.

C: Do you consider the space and context of the exhibition (i.e., the type of reception your work receives in Europe or Russia versus the U.S.), or is that something that doesn't figure into your decision-making?

M: Of course I consider the space, but I'm not sure this would be a different show in the U.S. or Russia. I feel that in this exhibition, I'm most interested in showing myself where the work can go. It's a forward-looking show in that it highlights an aspect of the work I want to pursue in the future. So I wanted to leave out the things that I feel restricted by, to not include anything that would shut down interpretation. If some of the more sensational things were included, they would be the only things people saw—they would overpower the other work. I wanted a kind of balance. I didn't want to overload the show. I wanted there to be lots of space and get maximum output for minimal input. I wanted it to feel light—not in content, I mean a sort of floating, untethered atmosphere—so that's how you're introduced to the show. I wanted works that commanded lots of space; for instance, *Sleepwalker* is one of those works that is able to fill a giant room.

C: Now let's get heavy and begin talking about what's at play. In certain terms, *Abandon*, *Squalor*, or *Meat Head* critique the labor required to maintain appearances in society, and the value associated with this achievement. It's perhaps a labor against entropy, and in effect, a project contrary to natural phenomena such as decay. What is the difference between keeping up appearances and the effort of producing an artwork?

M: I'm not interested in critique—I never saw *Abandon* that way. I intended it to be about how things are valued and how we assign value in culture. What is a weed and what's a cultivated plant? What is acceptable and unacceptable behavior? What belongs here and not there? For me, it was more about situational or contextual correctness, and other things, too, like feeling out of place, or persistence. These things all have a deep personal resonance for me. This work presents a spirit embracing rebellious thought—I see it as motivational in that sense—but there is also an aspect of doom in the work. Depending on what the viewer brings to it, it can be both things.

C: Doom?

M: Yeah, there are contradictions embedded in the work. *Meat Head* is a story about doom and hope; there is decay and gore, but there is also new life and hope represented in the maggots—a kind of resurrection story. In *Old Enemy; New Victim*, which really represents two sets of victims, how the viewers see the work depends on their position in life. In *Fucked (Couple)*, there's the representation of violence and love, society at our worst and best, and so on....

C: ...and Squalor?

M: Squalor was more academic. I was just trying to see how little or how shitty a work could be and still contain a large idea, still have a lot of impact.

C: This may be a weird question, but what justifies the labor of art amidst entropy and decay?

M: To objectify those things. I mean, typically, labor just staves off entropy and decay, and in some of my work that relationship is twisted. The actual labor is not the point, of course, but it's sometimes necessary to achieve clarity. Since I've always thought a lot of the ideas in the work are really simple, and even kind of stupid, I needed a way to convince people of the work's seriousness. I think that taking these simple ideas all the way, realizing them in as much detail, as elaborately as possible, is one way to bridge that skeptical chasm with the viewer—you can achieve a kind of sincerity. I want to have a certain kind of relationship with the viewer. I want there to be a kind of trust. The labor is sometimes required to give the work a kind of authority, so viewers have to reckon with it, so the work can't be easily dismissed. People are suddenly thinking about something really simple or silly and are considering it seriously. I really like this friction in the work.

C: I am interested in this friction you mention, and perhaps it comes from the way you construct and deal with appearances; it produces a thing that is effective at representing something mundane and potentially profound at the same time. Also, it strangely requires a lot of effort to look at the kind of mobilization in culture that naturalizes and suppresses appearances.

M: I think so. I want someone to look at a sculpture of mine and know that everything is intentional, and to do that in a way that's not academic or fussy. And I think that someone can really feel that in a work, you know, you just feel when something is realized and when it's not. You need a kind of philosophical distance from the work because these are objects of philosophy.

C: They are not just illustrations.

M: No, the work remains open. They are connotative and denotative objects. These things balance on an axis, you know, and there is an elasticity in representation. The Idiot is a beer box but also a face, and therefore an image of man. At the same time, it's acting as a birdhouse, so that's another layer, and so on. To create this sort of speculative distance, the thing needs to be rendered very deliberately—I guess in this respect they are like illustrations; they have that initial image specificity, but hopefully move quickly away from that. For me, it's about clarity.

C: I think realism and illusion operate in your work as an introduction to a necessarily mediated encounter for the viewer; it's mediated through sculptural form—the idea, work, and materials reveal themselves simultaneously, so it's a nice vehicle.

M: Well, the order of that reveal is sort of different for each thing. Like, with the Weeds, it's really important, because I wanted them to be experienced at first as weeds. I didn't want them to be experienced as art — I hoped there would be very little art mediation. Actually, that's true for a lot of my work. The Weeds really work this way; I don't think people initially engage them as sculpture, I think people initially engage with them as real weeds. No one experiences the Mirrors as paintings initially. I know they do eventually, and I know that this is sort of a leap here, but initially, they are not thinking "painting", they are not thinking "sculpture", they are thinking, "That thing is strange," or "out of place," and hopefully engaging on that level.

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, horrible Alex Katz, you turn the corner and the Janitor is right there, 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 aware 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. So a lot of my work has that kind of spirit in it.

C: I want to push more about the idea of intention in thinking about notions of emancipation versus abandonment in your work. Does it speak to the idea that an effective position needs to be an active one? Like, emancipation (i.e., Fuck it, free yourself!) is an active horizon—it requires intention and work rather than a passive abandonment associated with surrender.

M: Exactly.

C: You have described the weed pieces as "rebellious forever". Is this located in their ability as works to affect their context and surrounding objects in a certain way, or in their resistance to appropriation?

M: Both. The thing is, that sounds like politics. It assumes only a political idea can get co-opted, but somehow an attitude cannot. I mean, the failure with the '68 generation is that individualism got co-opted, right? It got marketed—advertisers figured out a way to market individualism and the idea of rebellion, or the style of rebellion. I think the power of the Weeds, and what I was trying to get at, is that style has been almost totally purged from the work. There is no stylistic link to an era or specific ideology; there is very little to appropriate. There is no aesthetic rupture in the work. It takes all of

its power from its context and its viewer; it's like a container that way. There is nothing in that work to get old.

C: There seems to be a kinship between the mirror pieces and *Abandon*, but also a shift; it seems the effect is more layered for the viewer.

M: The mirror paintings use some of the same aesthetic strategies, you know, and they are rendered in a really tight way. What I like about that way of working is that it is explicit. When I was younger, I was really interested in being very direct about what I was speaking about, what the work was about. I was interested in how I was putting the work out there, not in any kind of interpretation. However over time, I began to feel that way of working was stifling the work, and so the *Mirrors* to me indicate—though they employ the same kind of strategies as before—a diffusion, a kind of intellectual or artistic diffusion. For me that diffusion is a portal to a more interpretive space.

C: The challenge is to maintain communicative clarity while introducing other levels of access to the work—is that what you are calling diffusion?

M: Yes, like a palimpsest. I talked about the *Mirrors* this way before and it's a good analogy of how other works can function, too—a bunch of layered texts, all of them legible, just in different degrees of prominence and recession, so it's this constantly moving thing. Clarity is always shifting in a way, you know, and there are layers of clarity; what was clear a week ago is now fogged out and obscure.

C: Why do you describe the mirror pieces as paintings—why not sculpture?

M: I describe them as paintings because they are paintings.

C: I am interested in this, because most people would associate your practice with sculpture, and would perhaps read the *Mirrors* as sculptural objects. Is it about appropriating painting, or transposing concerns of sculpture to another genre?

M: No, no, I couldn't care less about that stuff. I am an artist. People think of me as a sculptor because I make a lot of sculpture, but I don't think of my work in terms of sculptural language. I don't think about sculptural space and pictorial space and push and pull and volume or whatever language these people use. I like sculpture because it's unwieldy, and there is a resistance to decoration in sculpture that I like, the same way I like painting because it hangs on a wall. I do not care about painterly space or any of that, whatever painters think about—canvas, weave, structure, and the support, who knows? That kind of thinking rarefies art, and ultimately kills art. The *Mirrors* just needed to be done in this way, and any of those genre-based interests are just completely foreign to me. Genres are at the service of ideas, not the other way around.

C: The ambivalent status of the object seems to link up to what you are describing as creating a series of diffusions in your recent work, opening up interpretation.

M: Good point.

C: But you can see how it touches painting discourse in a way. They are surfaces, they are supports that you're putting gestures, or content, or marks on, or making images on top of. So you would understand why people would enter you into that discussion.

M: Ok, that's cool, I'm just not too invested in that shit. I paint all my sculptures; are they paintings? If so, fine with me.

C: Painters don't think that way.

M: Terrible....

C: Yeah, like making a sculpture for them is like having a sex change, you know....

M: It's just a different way of working.

C: You know, there's that Chris Rock joke, that if a bullet cost five thousand dollars, people would think twice before shooting somebody. I was wondering if the mirror paintings present a new way of producing for you, compared to the resource-intensive work in the past that required certain conceptual and aesthetic aspects to be resolved before you went all in.

M: Not really. The process is more or less the same, but they are iterative in a way that makes the process a little more free. I can cover more territory and try more things out. If one turns out badly, it's not a huge loss; I can just kill it. With the sculptures, I feel the pressure to have them do a lot. If a particular mirror painting doesn't accomplish everything I had in mind for the series, I can just make another one.

C: Your source material is graffiti, or anywhere somebody left a mark?

M: Mostly I am just making them up as I go. I appropriate the handwriting style from images of graffiti, but not usually the content—sometimes, but not too often. Each mirror has a sort of dominant text, and that's always my invention. Most of the things are pretty simple anyway: hearts, names, smiley faces, dicks, etc.

C: Technically, how do you achieve such real dust-on-mirror effects? It looks so casual that you almost can't think of it as anything but a neglected mirror.

M: First I make a basic drawing on the computer. Then, after preparing the glass, I lay a series of resists down in the shape of whatever it is—let's say the word "Bob". Then it's sprayed very lightly with auto paint, and that process is carried out a few more times to create the layers of dust, text, and images. Wherever the resist is, it appears as a negative mark on the mirror—a fingermark. Once I have what seems like enough paint on the surface, all the resists are removed, and I go in with a brush and start painting

all of the fingertip accumulations of dust and whatnot. Also, I go back in with airbrush to push some texts back or emphasize others. The last part is what gives it its character, and makes the dust feel kind of alive on the surface. The mirrors sort of reveal themselves differently depending on the position of the viewer. From certain angles, you see no painting at all; from other angles, light makes the dust (paint) appear vividly. Also, while you walk around the painting from, say, left to right, you not only see the dust slowly change, but you are also constantly seeing the reflection of the room, of other works, of other people and yourself, all of this combing and layering with the painting.

C: So it's really not about the actual thing.

M: To me, the dust isn't the point—the point is the person or the humanity in the thing. It's not time passing that's interesting, it's the effect of time on the human mark that's important.

C: Using dust as a subject is not to fuck with value?

M: No, the dust is not the point—the fingermarks are the point.

C: And your work is not about the immateriality of art, right?

M: Not at all. Anyway, I try never to make art that speaks about art. I hate that.

C: Why not use the literal materials and call it a day?

M: Because of the speculative distance generated by a represented thing—simple. Why is the Charles Ray tractor solid milled stainless steel? Why isn't it cast plastic? Because it's incredible that it's solid stainless steel! There's a poetry to it, and this brings us to the really simple, dumb stuff that art is sometimes, but that actually has lots of power. We have connections to certain materials and certain efforts. A painted plastic thing does not register the same as a painted bronze thing, it just doesn't. It's not because it looks different, it's because we understand the materials differently. When I was making *Glass of Water*, I was talking to glass fabricators, and they tried to convince me to make it in plastic—there would be no visible difference, it would be faster to make, and far cheaper. But I knew it had to be solid blown glass, otherwise the work would not have that authority I was talking about earlier. Also, there is a poetic and conceptual resonance to the purity of its material translation; *Glass of Water* needs to be made of glass, you know, because the original thing is glass. There's a beauty in that. Lenses are made of glass—that work is a lens.

C: Earlier, you mentioned a trajectory of “emptying out” in your work. Is there a conscious effort to take yourself or your image out in recent work? *Sexual Sunrise*, *Total Torpor*; *Mad Malaise*, *The Old Me*, *Veg. Head*, and *Meat Head* are varying portraits of you. With the *Mirrors* you are obviously not there, and in some ways you replaced yourself with the reflection of whoever is looking at it.

M: Yes, I like that. My idea of self-portraiture has always been kind of loose—my very first self-portrait was a sculpture of an open cardboard box, I actually consider that my first real artwork too. It was an opening and a kind of declaration: this is how I want to be—like an open box, empty and ready to receive. So then I rendered myself and began putting my image in the work, and then I put approximations of my image in the work, and now I think of the Letterheads as a kind of self-portrait too.

C: The Letterhead series underway seems to work as a surrogate of a type of artistic space, right?

M: Exactly—a surrogate of the studio space, which is a projection of my mental space. I think of the Letterheads as a type of grotesque because the idea is that within the field of the letterhead a lot of disparate things would go on, and would add up to an incoherent grouping of images and ideas within that framework, so an incoherent identity, a loss of self.

C: How do you answer when people say that your work seems to be autobiographical? Is it part of the practice, or the read of your work throughout?

M: It's part of the practice, but it's abstracted. I want my autobiography to be just a starting point, an entrance, an example of subjectivity. I really want the work to engage the viewer's biography. The reason I was interested in doing self-portraits to begin with was that I always wanted to be communicating directly to someone, so that they felt like they were receiving something from a specific person. Since my work has very little style and is so objective visually, this was one way to bring in the subjective. I wanted there to be a kind of Romantic attachment to the work. A lot of the impulses motivating my work come from personal feelings, emotions, and attitudes, and not so much from detached ideas, you know? I am not interested in making work about universal ideas. I'm not a theoretician, I'm not a sociologist— I'm not that person. I wanted to emphasize my subjectivity and make clear to people that distinction.

C: What would a work be like if it was divorced from the specific subjectivity you describe?

M: It would be an industrial and sinister object. I want an artwork to feel different than an iPad—I want it to be in a lot of ways as seductive as an iPad, but I don't want it to be just an objective thing. I want there to be a bond between the viewer and me, and between the viewer and the work. People have connections to objects in all sorts of unproductive ways, but with an artwork there can be a connection with the subjective that is powerful and freeing. Someone can then engage with the work differently than with an iPad. They can have a dialog with it. I really like the Martin Kippenberger model too, where you see a thing and he is so wrapped up in the production of that thing, his image is so integrated into the work. When I see his work I get a feeling of connectedness, but, you know, that's not exactly what I'm up to.



C: Going through critical texts on your work, and interviews, morality as a subject appeared a few times, to my surprise. For example, you describe sculpture as capable of creating a “direct moral exchange”, and Ronald Jones focuses on the “moralizing intentions” embedded in your work in relation to art historical precedents. How do you explain this?

M: It is something really worth talking about. I wish I had more to say, because I have strong feelings about it, predominantly because I think that just the act of being an artist is a kind of moral endeavor.

C: I mention this because morality is a rare discussion in contemporary art—it is usually implied but not actually declared as a driving condition or motivation. I get a sense from you that it’s not so much about right or wrong judgments, but rather about looking at art from the perspective of moral philosophy, investigating man’s nature through self-reflection and pleasure.

M: Yeah, the exertion of will. What I was getting at when I said that art is capable of direct moral exchange is that it’s a one-on-one experience: the viewer confronts a work, and, if engaged, enters into dialog with it, and the viewer’s morality is activated when they engage with the values embedded in the work. Do I agree with this or not? Do I believe in this or not? Does it speak to me or not? The viewer is active. Artworks are propositions. They should be questions, and I think there is a moral component to this communicative realm. I am not talking about prescriptive morality, which is linked to critique; I am talking about a kind of self-investigation.

C: In these terms, can you describe the lens or moral perspective through which you reflect on things?

M: I guess I see this linked to class, so for me, a kind of middle class perspective. I don't believe in dignity, or pride, or virtuous hard work, or any of those Christian things that enslave people, but I guess the contradictions and friction in my work can be seen as manifestations of a middle class perspective. I am not Terence Koh, who I see as a kind of aristocratic artist, and who I happen to like a lot.

C: This is interesting for me, to hear you connect morality to a class perspective in relation to your work.

M: Dave Hickey has this great quote: “When I was a drunk and taking a bunch of drugs, I thought that the middle class was completely insane, and a completely perverse group of people. And then when I got sober, I realized I was correct.” I understand what he means, but I don't really see it from the outside like he does. I don't have that distance. The middle class is full of contradictions, which I find actually kind of useful and interesting. I guess I’m interested in the friction that comes from those conflicting aspirations because I recognize it in myself.

C: I think it's because, from a sociological standpoint, the link between artists and the middle class is not as strong—perhaps the market has created new aspirational realities for artists.

M: And so artists adjust their values to fall in line with patronage? I don't know. There is real access to social mobility in the art world. When I was first getting into the art world, it was impossible as a young, ambitious kid, struggling at a job, trying to get into this art world that seemed completely foreign—how could you not think of things in terms of class and privilege? It is just so obvious. And so early on and that line of thinking was an easy way to explain my frustrations, sometimes hostilities.

C: For example, Fuck the Rich.

M: Yes, well, Fuck the Rich was more about the impotence of certain attitudes—it was about the domestication of radical thought. I suppose there was some hostility in there, but mostly frustration. Lost & Sick, many works—A Fucking Mess, On the Ropes....

C: But does this necessarily make you a political artist?

M: No, I don't feel I'm a political artist, but obviously I think there are politics in artwork, there are politics in perspective. I think what distinguishes me from a political artist is that I am specifically speaking from my point of view instead of making universal claims. I don't want my work to be an extension of ideology or an extension of theory; I'm interested in giving form to subjective thought and feeling. So yeah, those were ways for me to express those feelings of being outside. That's primarily my identification as an outsider.

C: Speaking of the outsider, people may not be really familiar with works you have made in the past, such as Distant Party, in which you use sound recordings to delineate feelings of exclusion and difference.

M: I was thinking about how communities are formed—spontaneous communities—and how they advertise themselves; I saw a great example of that in the house party. A party is the best expression of community; it's a kind of erotic communion; it's community having sex. A party is something that you can't wholly plan. You can set the stage, but if the mood isn't right, it won't happen. It's organic. It's an awesome thing, but certain parties are for certain people, and they have their own set of codes and rules, so I wanted to make something that made you think about those social parameters. The work exploited people's desires for a temporary utopia—fitting in and having social connection. But it was a mirage; the party was only sound, and it was set up in the streets with hidden speakers so you could never find it. It was a Chimera. I get a lot of motivation and inspiration from the friction that comes from these social negotiations.

C: I think friction is a good word, especially because now there is a lot of smoothing in the social sphere—antagonism is actually discouraged and placated on many levels. Your work seems to invoke these frictions, and be inspired by them.

M: Mm-hmm.

C: Another way of looking at it is that you are positioning your practice with the notion of a morality that closes critical distance or its failure.

M: Yeah, totally. I see a lot of work, and I just think that it's reactionary work, that it is rooted in puritanical critique. This always fails. It's actually anti-humanist, basically intellectual work—a kind of game playing—and I guess part of the thing is that I consider my practice to be more life affirming, humanistic, visceral, and sometimes even erotic work.

C: And this differs from critique?

M: I find it depressing that in contemporary art and criticism there is an impulse to read everything as critique. How pathetic is that? I think critique is a boring avenue for art to go down. Critique seems to seek out solutions; it is prescriptive; it seeks to correct and close things. I want art to be open. When I was a kid I thought satire was interesting. I was really into Hogarth and Bruegel. There is a very explicit kind of allegorical morality at work there, and as a kid you get it. It seemed like that was an interesting thing for art to do; it really appealed to me. Now I think it's kind of a boring thing for art to do, but I sometimes still think about it. Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* strikes me as a great example of this because it throws the reader into a kind of moral crisis, but it is not a critique in a direct way; you're lost in the fiction. You don't feel the critique, you just feel the art. Art should have that seductive quality.

C: You spoke of humanism earlier, and the importance of individual subjectivity. How do love and erotics figure into your work?

M: The representation of love has been dominated by kitsch, so in some work I have tried to resuscitate it, usually by coupling it with its opposite force, violence or pain. In my piece *Couple*, you know, it represents an extremely mediated ideal of love, a Disney kind of love, grafted on to what was, for me, the totality of human suffering. I thought that the conflicting forces would apply and invigorate both. It focuses on the redemptive power of love, same with *Fucked (Couple)*.

C: Yet the fucked couple continues to walk ahead, despite everything. Earlier, you mentioned looking at your work in a forward direction. Can you give us glimpse of what is on the horizon?

M: Yes, I want to be moving toward abstraction and the gestural. I want the work to lose some of its focus.

C: The process of emptying out seems like an intense project. Is there anything easy in your work?

M: It depends. Some things don't need to be hard. I try not to let hard or easy guide any of my decisions.

C: So yeah, wow, how differently do we think about all this stuff after all this?

M: I have no idea.... Howie Chen is a curator and co-founder of Dispatch, a New York-based curatorial production office and project space. Chen also launched Collection of, a new online platform for presenting the diverse creative productions of international artists, art producers, and art spaces.