

## Damian Moppett Interview with Aaron Carpenter

AC: Today in preparation for this interview I was listening to *Tattoo You*, which as far as I can tell is the only piece of music we share a mutual affinity for. At the very end of 'Start Me Up' Jagger alters the choral chant to say, "you make a dead man cum," and I had this strange vision (I was stoned) of you digging up Caravaggio's corpse and giving it a hand-job, ostensibly to garner some kind of inspiration.

That got me thinking to what measure resurrection figures into your practice. You are prone to dragging your creative progenitors out from the grave: Brancusi, Hollis Frampton, Carl Andre, and re-animating them as figures in your work. Of course we know from fiction and film that raising the dead is a dicey practice with oft-disastrous results. This is a strange question, but do you think that some of the problems associated with resurrection might be what lends many of your works their macabre vitality?

DM: Any, or actually, all of the problems associated with resurrection would only lend credence, stamina, and determination to my particular venture. Perhaps they're temporary benefits and not liable to lending their particular characteristic enhancements to a long-term relationship similar to the one I'm offering... but I'm happy with the results so far. There must be more than that in terms of our musical crossover?

AC: I don't know. We probably both like Nitzer Ebb? I only say that because that's pretty much the nastiest music that I like, a lot. So when you talk about these temporary benefits, are you saying that you're concerned when you bring something up from the past it might be nice to see it again at first, but should inevitably be filed away again before it starts to what? Rot? I'm really going to stretch out this zombie metaphor as far as I can.

DM: Nah, not rot just, at the risk of sounding fantastically corny - last forever in my imagination. I really can't speak for anyone but myself. I guess I always believed that all artists (contemporary artists) use something authored by another as a point of departure. This *thing* could be a text, as I guess would have been more prevalent in the late 90s and early 2000s, or in my case, a work of modernist art. I suppose that I usually come back to the initial point of departure or at the very least, make it an integral part of my work's structure. Perhaps a better metaphor would be of a haunting, or possession, as I have incorporated elements of role-playing in certain works. Please god,

don't bring up Dungeons and Dragons. Even losing a month of your teenage years to that confounded game is enough to make you shiver at the thought of having to talk about it again many years later... I'm surprised you didn't bring up the fellow who frequents your pet food store with the tattoos of all his lovers names on his face in regards to *Tattoo You*, and how it could relate to my work. That could be the best metaphor...

AC: Your presentation of your idols is almost as blunt! There seems to be a point at which you run out, specifically when you start to focus on yourself. Though I don't think of your representation of yourself as being aggrandizing, in fact, quite the opposite. There seems to be some kind of slow-burning, self-consumption going on. Here I'm thinking of *Toe Picker* (in a literal sense), and some of your many forms you have concocted which seem to be circular (self)-digestive systems.

DM: Nice question... I guess I'd say yield rather than run out. Although I'm thinking of Hadley Howes' response to my last exhibition at Catriona Jeffries in March last year when she said the show had a strange sense of myself fighting against something. She said the show had a sadness and struggle which came through in the paintings, which I found initially odd since the paintings in regards to ease of creation, came long before the sculptures. Her comment, or rather observation, has stuck in me. I know it to be true but the struggle was outside of art. Anyway, her observation and now your question point to an element in my work which I never thought would be obvious. I can't say I don't like it... it's strange as I've felt a bit as though I've forced certain autobiographical elements into my work through the inclusion of certain images in my drawings and watercolours, and now to know that this deeper, let's say *unease*, is sneaking through the cracks, makes me think my work is far more personal than I once thought. Indeed, self-digestion or some circular, slightly downward spiral makes perfect sense. My only hope would be that the outside references which I bring in (Caro, Calder, etc) would degenerate alongside. Which is what I'm working on now - unseating or wrecking a specific historical work and using that wreckage as my only intervention against that work.

AC: We were talking once and you accused my 'calloused generation' of 'solipsistic anachronism.' After I looked up those fancy words and understood what you meant, I really thought about throwing that back at you in terms of your work so I'm glad that came up. However, there is a kind of spectral third party lurking the peripheries of this discussion, that being the audience - the reader, your viewers. You

seem to have such an ascetic, studio-bound practice, and although we often see your exhibitions in Vancouver as compendiums or accumulations of works, I can't help but see your individual works as being oblique transmissions, something I find is fortified by your recent endeavours with Twitter, which I was completely shocked to see you using. But that's just my observation, how do you perceive your relationship with your audience, or do you?

DM: My work's probably far more solipsistic than anachronistic. I've made a couple anachronistic works but only a few out of many, which are not. Your question is very difficult to answer... I guess my relationship, or my interaction and understanding with my audience is entirely up to it (them), and not me. It's only when these beautiful observations are passed on to me that I have any understanding at all of how my work translates, or lives outside of my own, sometimes one-sided, understanding of my work. But back to your question - I do see my work as accumulations, each work having a specific number of sibling works, that ideally would be seen together.

AC: Do you consider *Fallen Caryatid* to be one of those anachronistic works? It doesn't look like contemporary art. I had a unique reaction when I saw that piece, which was a jag of nervous laughter. I felt self-conscious finding such a sanctimonious-looking object so funny. It was so out of place yet familiar, gorgeous yet ridiculous. Greek caryatids, in my understanding, are architectural implements, female forms that act as columns, burdened beauties. Your version is squatting beneath the weight of absolutely nothing; in fact, the fingers seem to be grasping for something to be burdened by. I'm not probing for you to unveil some kind of subconscious misogyny, unless you want to go there. Maybe we should go there? I was thinking more of futility as a point of inspiration, the supposed weight of history, and what kind of freedom we might deign from its perception.

DM: Yes, it's one of the few, and the most anachronistic of those few. The unseen burden is all that surrounds it, including you, the viewer (and myself of course as well). I first exhibited it with all my drawings and watercolours surrounding it, representing the burden of history. Of course, I see that as an unavoidable and inspirational burden, but a burden no less. The figure is female because it's derived from Rodin's *Fallen Caryatid with Her Stone*, which is one of many figures in his monumental *Gates of Hell* sculpture. In a funny way most of the sculptures that I've done since, maybe all, are versions of that same work. The idea of something carrying something else, sometimes a balance, or as I'm moving towards now, an imbalance, and eventual collapse.

AC: I often find myself assessing the ingredients of an artwork by noting the wet-to-dry ratio, which you could also call viscera vs. structure. Does that make sense? I mean this in a formal sense but also figuratively (because I'm being thoughtful). I would say that the earliest work of yours I've seen was already running about 35% goeey, and it's been pretty steadily oozing throughout the years. I have wondered if it ever might present itself in a fully puddled form. Of course a puddle still has the earth to hold it, unfortunately.

DM: I'd have to say that I'm more dragging myself out of the primordial ooze as each day goes on. My student work and the work

I did in the immediate years preceding were far more formless in their nature. I've been trying very hard to tone down my love of sludge. Perhaps if a push/pull exists, then I'd say that I tend to lean towards the blobs sculpturally, and am trying to pull some hard-edged abstraction into my paintings. Perhaps an analogy that would work better for us both would be "wet" as effects on a voice or guitar, and dry being clean and undistorted. I'd say that your work is all about *being wet* and *about wet* while remaining dry. Your work undercuts your own pretty explicit sense of humour. I guess for myself I'd say I swing between jumping on the proverbial pedals and noodling on the acoustic... This would go right back to your question about my audience, in that I don't have a good idea of how 'funny' my work is. I guess it's like life (my life that is) in that my jokes don't crack many people up, but I get laughs when I'm dead serious. I'm gonna ask you a question now: do you find yourself toning down your sense of humour in regards to your work? I ask because as I said before, I get the sense that although your work is very funny that it is, in a way, trying not to be *that* funny.

AC: Well, apparently when the members of Monty Python conducted their writing meetings there was rarely any laughter. They were so professional they just solemnly assessed what was funny or not. That's kind of how it works for me, I realize at some point that something is humorous, or *about* funny, if that makes any sense. I'm not actually all that crazy about funniness. I value wit, which is hardly the same thing. So now that we have our lugubrious/arid analogy/dichotomy in action, lets talk about sex. Do you ever find your libido manifesting itself in your work? It's a horrifying realization I've come to in some of what I consider to be my strongest works, and I'm genuinely curious if you've ever had it.

DM: Oh absolutely... when I look at the photo works I made through the 90s I can't help but see these images as various sexual surrogates for some kind of libidinous desire. I think at the time I probably was able to justify these images with all sorts of complicated theoretical relationships, and then with the passing of time there is an inevitable distillation or purification that occurs and one finally sees, and admits, the simplicity of an image or object. Maybe not necessarily the simplicity, but there is finally a moment when the dogma and rhetoric of authorship fades to allow a slightly more objective view of what one has done. The five-years-later return to things you have done is a wonderful thing, although I confess there are times when it's less wonderful and more akin to a sleepless night in a cold sweat!

AC: It's embarrassing and enlightening, kind of like this interview ...