

Issue 04 – Ally Rosenberg

SOS / Sculptors on Sculpture is a series of weekly condensed interviews with early career contemporary sculptors.

Ally Rosenberg is a London-based sculptor from Manchester. A multidisciplinary approach took him on a detour into neuroscience research – since then, his playful, pseudo-anatomical sculptures are concerned with notions of ego, authenticity and the ironies of identity.

SOS: This is the fourth interview in a series that probably wouldn't have come into existence if not for the COVID19 lockdown and finding new ways of supporting each other. Are you able to get into the studio and continue making work at this time?

AR: Yes and no. I usually live in my studio, so would have otherwise cracked on without too much change to my making routine, but as things turned out, I'm not isolating there. Before lockdown started, I moved in with my boyfriend and his family outside of London, for the sake of being extra cautious due to a vulnerable family member. We're really lucky to all be together and we're especially lucky to be on/next to a farm, so there's plenty of surrounding outdoor space and almost no human life. Adjusting to the situation and being away from the studio has meant I have stopped making for a few weeks, and like many of us, getting stuck into materials day to day is the way we have trained ourselves to think. So I'm trying to adjust, by using what I have got, here on the farm. Weather (and land-owner) permitting, I'm hoping to make some large-scale sculptural pieces to install on the neighbouring land. I have been pulping all the cardboard from online delivery packaging and collecting hay and straw, to mix into concrete. I'm using corrugated barn roofs as a surface for

making moulds. In a sense, I'm roping myself into the most ambitious work (scale-wise) at the most restrictive moment, without a studio or anyone to view it, but I worry that the alternative is to just lose momentum altogether. So I'll be relying on good weather and the tolerance of loved ones, while I make a mess on the patio. Limitation can be liberation, but I appreciate that it's easy to see it that way if your situation allows for it. I miss my studio, but I really have nothing to complain about, given the circumstances of many others.



'Blue Legs (Squatting)', 2019,
Jesmonite, earth pigments, 80 x 82 x 65cm

SOS: You recently made some beautiful drawings as part of Matthew Burrow's Artist Support Pledge. Do you tend to make drawings as art objects in themselves, or are they more of a stage in making the sculpture?

AR: I think about drawing a lot, as the sculptural processes I use result in cross-sectional images. Casting and slicing often feel like kinds of drawing processes. I'd love to produce drawings as finished pieces, but recently, they are always either diagrammatical concept drawings as a precursor to a sculpture, or illustrative studies of sculptural objects in isolation. I draw digitally all the time, using an iPad, and I scribble ideas in sketchbooks, but the Artist Support Pledge gave me an excuse to commit to something on paper that feels more finished. Because of the situation, I liked the idea of the drawings being a series of prospective designs - 'Sculptures I Might Make' when I can get back to the studio. I have been thinking about composition and how I can bring more elements into my sculpture. I think I'll get there by engaging in more observational drawing. But perhaps also through these outdoor pieces I'm working on, by making more site-specific work and seeing what the landscape does to the objects.

SOS: You use a lot of different materials - plasticine, papercrete, Jesmonite and reconstituted foam to name a few. There is always an aesthetic continuity though, regardless of material. How do you choose the materials that you work with? Are there any new materials that you've been experimenting with lately?

AR: I'm really interested in materials that demonstrate their own structural or internal qualities. As colour and image have recently found their way into my work, I'm interested in how these properties can be used inherently, rather than as a surface finish. Materials that can be cast, sliced or pigmented allow for a cross-



'I Never Had an Imaginary Friend, But Sometimes Imagined That I Did', 2020, Reconstituted foam, epoxy resin, concrete and earth pigments, 155 x 115 x 214cm

sectional aesthetic, showing you something about the integrity of the stuff. This is why I keep coming back to bodily or pseudo-anatomical forms - the body is a 'pass the parcel' of colourful masses and membranes, wrapped and layered. But our understanding of it, from childhood textbooks, diagrams, pop-up illustrations etc. is cross-sectional and image-ly. I enjoy displaying these qualities of the materials and I suppose I want the subject matter and the medium to reflect each other in some way. I think you can pretty much make anything out of anything, so it's not that interesting to me to just paint a sculpture to give a desired effect. I like the qualities of my objects to be a condition of its materiality, not just a chosen exterior.

I was recently asked about what comes first, the material or the image, and I wasn't sure. I now think the answer is definitely material. The processes I use dictate the stylised aesthetic and the forms are always modular, with block-colours and flattened planes.

Guest Question: Adapted from an interview with Thomas Houseago and Rachel Rosenfield Lafo in the Sculpture Magazine in 2017. 'Your work offers a multiplicity of perspectives and combines two and three dimensionality. Why do you adopt these shifting viewpoints?'

AR: After my BA at Central St. Martins, I transitioned to studying neuroscience. Modes of seeing anatomy through technologies like MRI, where a three dimensional model of the brain/body is constructed through many two dimensional slices, I think shows itself in what I make now. It's not so much the looking at an object from multiple vantage points, like Cubism, that I'm interested in. But in the relationship between inner structure and outer form and the oddity of being confronted with your own object-hood. This disjointedness, I think, adds to a humour or awkwardness in the work. It isn't something I'm consciously aiming for, but it's an interest of mine and I think the childishness or brashness that I'm told comes across speaks to my ambivalence towards ideas of authorship, authenticity and identity. These are themes that I have always played with and this particular direction that my work is taking, seems to deal with those thoughts in ways I hadn't intended. It's a much more intuitive approach than I used to take, but I'm going with it.

The sliced forms, which started with plasticine, were the first objects I made that had this planar, split-dimensional approach. I enjoyed the process, as it felt like a weirdly biological way of generating multiple artworks. By making a long, tubular piece, out of various coloured clays, it could be cut –

like Blackpool 'rock' candy – to duplicate itself and show an image running through. It wasn't a way of replicating or reproducing work; it was more of a division, like mitosis, making several pieces in an edition that were both identical and idiosyncratic at the same time. The casting processes followed on from that and I have just kind of been letting one work lead to the next.



'Cardboard Venus', 2019, Cardboard and acrylic paint, 31 x 16 x 12cm

SOS: Is there a particular artwork you've made which marked a significant shift of direction or concept in your practice?

AR: All of the sculptural work I have been developing in the last couple of years feels like a new trajectory. But the most recent piece (*Some Compliments Aren't Worth Accepting*, 2020) shifted things a bit. I was going to make a load of bricks out of papercrete (paper pulp and concrete), cement them together into a wall and then jigsaw the inner, bodily shape out. This was impractical for many reasons and I decided to cast the brick effect, pressing the papercrete into a mould to make a hollow shell. I then piped the coloured 'grout' (pigmented silicone sealant) into the cracks. This felt like cheating, because all of my processes for the last couple of years have abided by some arbitrary 'rule' about inherent, cross-sectional integrity. By bowing to practical pressures, I have been pushed into other questions about authenticity and facade. I think a lot about art being artifice and I quite like the idea of art objects as props in the telling of a story or a signifier in a mode of communication. The idea of a 'brick effect' feels very theatre design, so the idea of making a prop object, rather than an actual object, came to mind. Saying that, I don't know what an 'actual' object is, in art terms.

When I was little I had a habit of trimming the labels off of teddy bears. I loved animals and I loved cuddly toys, wanting them to be real and alive, so I couldn't bear the distraction of a white tab hanging out of a bear's arse. I also find, even now, when looking at paintings, I gravitate towards the edges to see how/if the seams of the image have been finished or hidden on the side of the canvas. It's where the illusion begins and ends and I always want to know to what extent I'm required to suspend my disbelief and



'I Should Have Been A Dentist Like My Dad So I Can Talk Uninterrupted (Scan)', 2019, Reconstituted foam, epoxy resin, jesmonite, 26 x 32 x 6cm

see an object as an object, or focus just on the illusion. So, the recent piece of mine has thrown up some of these thoughts for me and I'll see how that influences what I do next.

SOS: To close, I'd like to ask you about your influences, both within the arts and outside of it. Is there anyone in particular who has really affected you as a sculptor?

AR: I find it a really hard question to answer. I'm sure my work, like anyone else's, is a soup of everything we absorb over time, but I don't consciously feel like I have particular influences or even touchstone artists/works that I come back to. I was recently given the opportunity to have a one-to-one tutorial with Antony Gormley, as part of a master class programme I was selected for by the Zabudowicz Collection. I wouldn't have

said that his work has been especially important to me, but his feedback and advice were really brilliant. It had been so long since I last had a tutorial and at art school they were always quite bruising experiences, even when useful. So I was apprehensive, but he was very insightful and generous in his guidance. He referred to a kind of 'distance' I create between myself and the work, by adopting these stylised, cartoonish forms, and I have since thought about this a lot. Art school (or at least, my experience at CSM) tended to encourage a stripping of the subjective experience in favour of higher, critical faculties. From what I can see, the people who go on to keep making art are the ones who were either able to defiantly retain that position, or embrace it again later on.

Outside of art, I'd say an influential moment was discovering the writing of Oliver Sacks. This was



'Some Compliments Aren't Worth Accepting', 2020, Papercrete, reconstituted foam, silicone, earth pigments, steel hinge
120 x 60 x 70cm



'Pink Legs (akimbo)', 2019, Jesmonite and earth pigments
57 x 83 x 30cm

definitely a first step towards neuroscience and how issues of perception, language and consciousness were at the centre of everything I'm interested in.

Right now, I'm excited by the work of young artists like Liam Fallon, Holly Hendry, Brandon Lipchik and Shinuk Suh. Check them out.

Interviewer: Josh Wright

