

Javier González de Durana in conversation with Richard Deacon

JGdD.- I'd like to start with a question that almost connects us personally to one another. From 1969 until 1972 you studied art at St. Martin's School of Art in London; I spent most of 1969 and 1970 working in the basement of Foyles Library, only 100 metres from St. Martins School. While you were learning to become an artist, I was preparing sacks and packets of books for reship-ment all over the world, although I made the most of the opportunity to read as many books as I could (on art, literature, politics), which were unfortunately not allowed at that time into Franco's Spain from which I had fled. I'm sure that we must have passed one other or walked along the same pavement on the left-hand side of Charing Cross Road, on the way up towards Tottenham Court Road, to the school and to the book shop.

Although I passed it every day, I never actually went into St. Martins. What do you remember about the years you studied there? Was the effervescent life enlivening London in other fields, like music, fashion and theatre, reflected in art and, specifically, in sculpture? Did the inheritance of Henry Moore, Anthony Caro and others weigh heavily upon you or did you have lecturers who knew how to get round the risks of leaving you in the shade of these great figures of sculpture?

RD - The thought intrigues me that we probably ate lunch together some days at the Book Cafe alongside Foyles! I was probably more part of that '60s effervescence when I was at school and visiting London to go to clubs and to buy clothes. At St. Martins I was very lucky to be involved, from the beginning, in the first year of a course that attempted, in a radical way, to work from a-historical principles and to develop an attitude of working from what and how you knew things. I ended up realising that I didn't know what to make but that I knew what I didn't want to make. I also understood that what I wanted to make was material and that the physical manipulation of that material was a key element. I became very focussed on how you do something. This gave rise to works that were both performance and document based. There was a critical

moment in the period after I left St. Martins when I became dissatisfied both with the way in which documentation referred, in a secondary way, to the act of making and with my own presence in the act of performance. The other side of the coin was that I had began to make, in performance situations, things that I was interested in and that I felt had value in themselves. Public performance felt like a distraction from this.

JGdD.- Were those other things that gradually reduced the prominence of the "performance" already sculptural objects?

RD.- Yes, they were, but the important thing was probably my confidence in how they were made.

JGdD.- The recent exhibition on the 60s at Tate Britain portrayed the breeding ground of the time, the spirit of the period, a moment that openly welcomed innovation and all kinds of audacity; but I didn't think that sculpture was very well reflected at that exhibition.

Your work at that time wasn't sculpture, but performance. When and why did you abandon body action in space and start constructing objects with space? Are there any traces of that early penchant for performance in your subsequent sculptures?

RD. - The connection between the work I have made since 1980 and the work that preceded it is perhaps not so evident. Whereas I would suggest that my period at St. Martins was incredibly rich, productive and creative, during the '70s I rather understood what I was doing as trying to find some principles as well as to put them into practice. I worked very hard at making sculptures as if I were always 'in performance' and ended up with perhaps five that I was pleased with, which seemed like the seeds of something that could be developed.

In September 1978 I went to the States for a year. My then wife, Jacqui Poncelet, had been awarded a Bicentennial Fellowship from the British Council which enabled the three of us (our son was nine months old) to work and travel in the USA for the year. It was a fantastic period. We started in New York, which has this really big image for artists - yet from what I could discover of the art scene in our six months there, London was equally dynamic, the artists equally interesting. This was not a negative. I also realised that you could reinvent yourself. The dreadful tendency of the British to limit their ambition to questions of where you came from and what you had already done (class and background) did not apply. Thus rather than being a place where you had to succeed, America became for me a place where you could become what you wanted to be. I drew a lot, producing in New York a group of drawings titled *It's Orpheus When Their's Singing*, a line out of Rilke. These drawings were constructed, built up from a series of drawn arcs. The general format of each drawing was a single enclosing line containing a smaller enclosure. The vocabularies of form that the drawings presented, the importance of inside and outside, and the multiple allusiveness of the forms all fed very directly into the sculptures that I subsequently made. Later in that same year I began making pots on a wheel, finding in the wall of the pot a three-dimensional analogue to the enclosing line of the drawing. Throwing was a means of making an object with an inside as well as an outside.

JGdD.- I've got the feeling that your artistic evolution marks a continuous line consisting of fragments subtly connected to one another. Your sculptures occasionally appear to be openly different from one another as far as material and form are concerned, like the four big pieces in this exhibition, which, given their forcefulness, could be understood as the result of independent investigations or searches, as if you had followed very different paths in each case.

This said, they share a familiarity bringing them closer together, linking them with invisible ties, perhaps due to a question of language. Do you see your work as containing closed or independent

chapters, I mean, do you take a certain material, a particular idea, a spatial notion... and exploit it until you have extracted its most interesting possibilities, or is your work more like a flow of constant ideas and repeated regressions to a few similar, but set ideas, each in different circumstances?

RD.- I want to finish what I make. This has led me, at times to refute the idea of 'experimentation' as implying a provisionality that I do not want the work to possess. This is a different question from that of meaning. Changing materials from one work to the next was, for me, a way of beginning again each time (and thus of finishing what had gone before). By now I have made a lot of sculptures and, inevitably, connections between materials, motifs and ways of doing things are apparent. There are also works in series, united by intention, preoccupation, procedure or material - the 120 small ceramic works that we have in our show is such a series. Circularity or curvilinearity is a characteristic of much of what I make. A large number of works are self-enclosed, touching the ground on a curved surface. The origins for this are in the drawings I made in the States and in questions about the wholeness and autonomy of sculpture and its separateness from the self. These questions had become important for me after I stopped performing.

JGdD.- Your sculptures have the ability to transfer us from the abstract to the immediate, from the idea of space to physical confrontation, placing the onlooker, as you yourself have said on occasion, "somewhere between fiction and fact". Their presence is always extremely powerful, difficult to ignore, given that they impose themselves rather forcefully while similarly tending to strongly turn their thoughts in upon themselves. They trap you visually, calling you, later turning out to be the owners of an internal, exclusive logic which has to be unravelled in order to be able to understand them because in the real world as we know it they seem to have no other use than the understanding of the keys to their obvious mechanical or geometric construction.

Strangely enough, you tend to give them quite lyrical, narrative titles, thus creating a curious tension between the difficulty of interpreting and situating what you are observing and the specific evocation used to denominate what you are observing.

What do you value in this nominative tension? Don't you think, given the frankness with which your sculptures are physically presented for view and interpretation, that these titles point the observer in a certain direction? Perhaps the idea is to completely disorientate the observer in question, whispering a few suggestive words in his ear? Or perhaps for you words have a sculptural sense, in as much as they conceptually fashion the object we are observing in a direction as precise as any of the materials you use may have?

You often relate your sculptures and drawings to poems and have been heard to say that you made certain works like "literal representations of the aspects of poems", such as Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus. What else can you tell me about this relationship between words and your work?

RD.- The relation between words and the world has been a long standing interest - partly that of a shy boy finding it difficult to talk to girls! Whilst I was at St.

Martins my mother was very ill and I began to write descriptions to try and tell her what I was doing. This involved writing detailed day by day, even moment by moment, accounts which built up a picture without describing a final product. Mostly the descriptions, which only related to the periods between arriving and departing from the studio, centred on actions repeated daily with small variations as I built a plaster cocoon around an item of studio furniture. Other people in the studio, what I was wearing, cups of tea etc. were referred to *en passant*, but the main focus rested on actions on a single object. I wanted her to imagine what the thing I was working on looked like and to begin to have a vision of the studio and my activities within it. They were, after all, important to me. I read heavily in linguistics, cognitive science, perceptual psychology and philosophy. I was interested in the world generating capacity of language in tension with the materiality of that world - I use the word 'stuff' to describe an inchoate universe filled with differentiated matter that takes form as it is described. The act of making seemed (and still does) of great importance in that encounter and I have found some connection between making and the trans-subjective nature of language. Yes, the semantics of my titles does point the viewer in particular directions. I am interested in naming, in having title and work belong together in the same way as name and thing. Although in most cases titling is something I do as the last part of making a work, there are times when a title is very much part of the original thinking. "Bikini" is an example. A bikini, an item of two piece swimwear for women, was so named by the designer Louis Reard when launched, in (dis)honour of the first Hydrogen Bomb test at Bikini Atoll. The test had happened the week before, unleashing into the world a dreadful and devastating destructive power. The designer thought of his swimwear as, likewise, 'the ultimate'. The process of names entering into the language is extremely interesting, though, in this case, shockingly disjunct. I am also interested in language as construction itself, particularly in clichés, in metaphors and in aphorisms, nuggets of language where the lexical and semantic contents may be in tension. Other areas where an interest in language overlaps with that of making sculpture are in the subject/object divide and in words that are both nouns and verbs (that is doing and being). 'Like' (a connotation either of resemblance or affinity, 'Between' (a separation and a conjunction) and 'Us' (a connotation of community) are words that I have used frequently in my titles.

JGdD.- One substantial characteristic of your works is that, despite the strong individual personality, the nature of each sculpture, they don't conceal the fact that they were all very industrially produced, and even underline the most obvious signs of this process (screws, rivets, soldered joints, traces left by machines...). In short, the

signs of handicraft are not apparent at first glance. However, these pieces are mostly impregnated with an aroma of organicity and even sensuality, perhaps due to the graceful use of wavy, undulating shapes, broad curves, and a remarkably refined finish.

Sometimes they seem to be related to the airborne, opening in all directions, light and permeable, seeking dialogue with the changing light and the sky (if they are outside); on others they are solidly stuck to the floor (to the ground, if they are

outdoors), only showing continuous surfaces, demonstrating themselves to be timid, elusive and somewhat extrovert.

They sometimes seem to be little fragments of something much bigger, and yet this little fragment is already enormous in itself, while at other times logic would seem to suggest that a small sculpture is in fact the miniaturized part of an object which, given its nature, must be colossal.

It's as if you were constantly seeking to establish dichotomies in principle not particularly given to conjugation, visual or conceptual paradoxes astonishing onlookers; sometimes leaving them astounded and others smilingly astounded.

How are these sculptures born? I mean, are they the result of preliminary sketches, like drawings with no ulterior motive, but in some of which you finally see the possibility of a sculpture?

RD.- You've described qualities of finished objects - and I wouldn't want to disagree with such a wonderful description. I'm not sure that beginnings are the same as ends though. The starting points for sculpture are very varied - to give a partial list with no implications of precedence:

- a. From play with material.
- b. From found objects.
- c. From aspects of experience or sensation.
- d. From doodles.
- e. From rules or principles.
- f. From slogans or phrases.
- g. From formal or structural drawing.
- h. From models.
- i. From other sculpture.
- j. From samples,
- k. From memory

JGdD.- Is it true then that any aspect of reality (directly external or filtered by you in some way) is capable, in practice, of awakening your interest as a starting point in the sculptural sense?

RD.- It seems to be that way, yes. Thinking about it another way though, it would feel strange to exclude possibilities.

JGdD.- This interview has taken place repeatedly over the last year due to this exhibition, and at all of them I have noticed that when you were talking about anything related to the exhibition you almost always had a pencil in your hand that you used to draw on some piece of paper you had to hand, sort of automatically, apparently without concentrating on what you were doing given that you were talking about something else. I realised that despite the possible automatism or unconscious appearance of your drawing, it in fact looked very much like any other of your drawings.

Do you think your sculptures are in some way related to subconscious desires? I'm not asking if you find them surrealistic, but whether or not you think that the strangeness in which they seem to live is the result of not completely rationalized

thoughts, unspecific thoughts on the subject of which, precisely, sculptures are the clearest questions that can be asked.

RD.- The short answer to this is yes (not surrealistic) here I would point to the crucial role of the 'between' in my thinking about sculpture.

JGdD.- Do you refer to the same "between" of the titles, the one that separates and brings together at the same time?

RD.- Yes, this is a fundamental relation between people and between people and the world.