

A CONVERSATION JANUARY 1995

Juan Muñoz/James Lingwood

You're interested in an experience of stillness, this kind of condensation of experience.

In Seurat's drawings, each figure seems to be standing still, standing in its own space. Seurat creates the quiet of the very early morning or very late at night. Everything is frozen. The figures are detained. Sometimes I would like to achieve that.

It's like the idea of a frieze, a frozen moment which has the stability of architecture. The courtyard *Conversation Piece* you made in Dublin was like this. We talked about there being perhaps one sound, a sudden noise which animated the whole arena of the work. Either the figures were turned towards it, or they were indifferent to it. The courtyard piece made time three-dimensional. There was a suspense to the work.

What do you mean when you use the word suspense?

The normal passage of time is held up, or as you say, detained. It enables you to create a certain tension, the kind of tension that you might get in a Hitchcock film. Somehow the stillness of your sculpture seems from the century of film, the century of movement.

The fiction of a noise in the courtyard was a device to organize the figures in space, given that there was not really a subject matter, nothing being discussed between the figures. A non-existent sound became the reference point. We used something invisible to organize what it was not possible to see.

Your sculptures might be about things that you can't see.

Perhaps the more successful things I have made have always been about something other than what you're actually looking at. And this other, this reference, this impossibility of representation that you try to describe is a boundary which confronts the sculpture. The limit that is pointed to by the object. When I made the dwarf, I was not so interested in the physical presence of the dwarf. It was more a reference to the question of strangeness than the problem of size.

So the subject becomes the person who's looking at it as much as the dwarf who's being looked at?

It's also the sense of being uncomfortable. When I meet a dwarf I feel uncomfortable. I don't know why because it's not my fault. But I feel strange.

So you want your work to engender this feeling of discomfort?

I build these works to explain to myself things that I cannot understand otherwise. The work should somehow remain enigmatic to me.

It should resist attempts to contain it.

It should also remain separate from you. So no matter how much you look at it, it's still outside of you. You like to talk about my work in relation to theater. I'm not so sure about that. But if I have to use your terminology, maybe what's interesting in theatre is that you cannot answer back. And then the curtains close and you leave. A piece should have the capacity, that you cannot answer back to it.

Why I use the analogy of theatre is not because I think your works are theatrical per se. I'm more interested in a very specific tradition of theatre which is exemplified by Beckett. It's concerned with the spaces between things, the pauses between efforts at communication, the gaps. And I think your work creates an incredible charge in those spaces. It's not that they look like theatre, it's that they dramatise the act of looking.

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I can agree with some of that. The work is involved in a dramatic relationship with whatever is outside of it. I like to believe that the best work can exist without a spectator. If it's anything to do with theatre, it's more to do with the rehearsal than the performance. It's happening between the players, it has nothing to do with the audience.

And if there's just one figure...

It's a monologue in a room. One continuous monologue. I think that the experience of the artist in the studio is like an unrecorded monologue.

A kind of interior landscape.

Yes, but a very flat one. With one figure, nothing much is happening because nothing much can happen, and there's nowhere to go. Time is moving, and then at a moment, it stands still. The figures are like statues, not sculptures. It's always about a position: the statuesque.

Was the figure always there from the beginning?

No, at the very beginning it was more about its absence. The empty balconies.

You felt that somebody had been there and then gone. The balconies are not empty in the same way that an empty container is.

The image was implicit in the empty balcony, so it was unnecessary to put the figures there.

Quite a lot of your work seems to exist in a state where once it had been complete, and then something departed. The drum is separated from the drummer so there's no sound anymore. You don't hear the laughing of the laughing figure.

That's a beautiful image, that something has departed. If you remove meaning, you are left with a fragment of a totality that never existed. The drum as a sculpture is an object which has left its reason behind.

Something has to depart so that space is created for it to communicate in a different way.

If you remove the furniture from a room, the room is loaded with that emptiness. It's not an empty room, it is a room which is no longer occupied with what used to be there before. That's a quality you cannot build from zero. You have first to build the house, then furnish the room, then take the things away.

You can't imagine there being a person pictured in one of the rooms in your *Raincoat Drawings*?

If the drawings succeed in conveying an emotion, it's because they might give the sense that something has happened or is going to happen. Either you're too early or too late. It's always the wrong moment. A normal room is very interesting. You can build stories from a very normal situation. Any normal situation is ready for something to happen. I think Surrealist painting is boring because the story is always forced on you.

So if you take all of the sleeping figures out of Delvaux...

If you took all of the figures, and all of the beds, and everything out of Delvaux, you might end up with something.

I'll tell you something that might help to explain the *Raincoat Drawings*: when I was a kid living at home, I used to come back to the house every day. Occasionally – I don't know why – my mother changed the furniture around between the rooms. So you came in and opened the door to your room and found that your room was no longer your room – it was your brother's. And a different room somewhere up the hall was now your room with all of your stuff in it, you posters on the wall. Then you grew used to it – until the rooms were changed again. So I grew up with this experience of dislocation. You feel uncomfortable yet it's extremely normal and the discomfiting is part of the territory of the work.

Most artists prefer to use the word "space", but you always talk about the "room." Why is that?

The subject for so many years has been the room, this place where you are on your own. It's probably the condition of every artist, that you spend most of your time alone in a room. And that's where the action takes place, in the many hours where nothing happens. So if there ever was a subject, it's exactly that experience.

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So your rooms are like the studio?

The studio can be an ordinary room with tables, or a hotel room, which is like a temporary studio. The city might change, and the view from the window, but the experience is the same from one to another. It's about the absurdity of it, and the impossibility of getting away from it.

So if the room is your room, is the figure in some way a reflection of your condition?

I must say I really feel uncomfortable about this conversation. I think I should ask the question. Why do you think my work is about silence?

I could return to the stillness of Seurat that you mentioned. Silence is more than an absence of noise. I think your works condense the absence of noise so as to render the silence palpable. They seem to slow things down, so that you become intensely aware of the condition of the sculpture and the condition of yourself looking at it. And that condition is being alone. That's why I see your work in existential terms. It's about the figure alone...But the only lone standing figure that you have done so far is the dwarf. That's really the only time that you have dealt with this essential question of stability, of the foot on the ground. Then you made the figures with the rounded bases, who were very aware of their inability to move. They were stilled in their position in the tableau, going nowhere. And then you had figures against the wall. Or a figure sitting on a plinth, laughing. And now you have figures with someone on their back, like an incubus. You're circling around this ultimate problem of how the human being stands in space alone.

What if your obsession that all of these characters are going nowhere?

They seem to be fairly mired in their condition. Or waiting for something. The ballerinas can't dance anymore. They would like to believe in the possibility of movement, of transformation, but they're not sure they do. And that is an expression of our time, which is a fairly sceptical one.

Is that why you walk about Beckett in relation to my work?

As Beckett said, "I can't go on, I'll go on!" Beckett's landscape is one in which there are so many spaces, silences, stops and starts, attempts at communication. It's absurd and it's human, this effort to find some common ground, to bridge the separateness of people. Your sculpture attract, take you in, and then don't let you get too close. They can make you feel very tentative about trespassing on their space, not because they are confronting you but because they are so very distant. It makes you feel like a hesitant actor, very worried about your lines.

They don't take that frontal position that demands a response. Maybe we are all tired of having to answer back all the time to things that are displayed in front of us. It's getting more and more difficult to get anything back, to have a return for our emotions.

And sometimes the figures aren't there at all because you take them away. Like the last room in the exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art: you took the figures out of the room, leaving the viewer in there alone. Just a big patterned floor and some meat-hooks on the wall. That was very hard. You made the viewer into the standing figure.

It was important for me to have a non-figurative conclusion. To have one gigantic illusion so that there was nothing to look at but the illusion itself.

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[Link to exhibition](#)

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