

A CONVERSATION SEPTEMBER 1996

Juan Muñoz/James Lingwood

In our previous conversations, we've talked about the importance of absence in your work, about the feeling that a figure that departed from the piece or the room. How did you arrive at placing a number of figures together in a room?

It came out of being in the studio. I was working on different single figures and then I saw that they had the possibility of living together as opposed to standing on their own. The fact that these figures might have a relation to one another, or that they might be indifferent to one another gradually came into view as they stood around the studio. I became aware of the tensions of the space in-between them.

So it wasn't necessary to situate them on a patterned floor anymore?

This distance between them was accentuated by the indifference of one figure to another. The floor was no longer necessary as a way to secure the ownership of the space.

The relationship with the spectator is different. You are one amongst a group rather than just being with a single solitary figure. The Conversation Piece do not issue a challenge in the way that a single dwarf does.

Probably that's true, but the fact that they are indifferent to the presence of the person who's in the room is very important to me.

At the same time, you moved from casting figures to modeling them. Was this something which you'd felt necessary to repress a little earlier?

The first probable reason was that I didn't have other solutions as exact as the image of the dwarf or the ventriloquist's dummy, and I didn't want to be constantly inventing unnecessary variations on a theme. I needed to have a problem that I could work on every day at the studio, that I could carry on from day to day and that didn't always have to be resolved conceptually before it was resolved physically. To construct an apparently very classical, figurative work made me very anxious but is also allowed me to work continuously every day in the studio.

You were concerned about appearing too classical?

I felt I had to do it. It was not a territory that I could forbid myself from exploring. But I also felt that maybe I was walking into a territory where I would get lost mannerist decisions, mannerist in the negative sense of endlessly reworking a gesture, or retouching a nose or an eye. If I had moved more closely into the area of caricature, as I had done with some drawings, it might have been more comfortable. But sculpture and caricature don't seem to work so well for me. I wanted the figures to be very concentrated as if their strength came from the inside. In the beginning I was very, very unsure of what I was really doing and whether I was taking completely the wrong direction.

Did you find any reassurance amongst other sculptors?

If I say Giacometti, it would help me to explain one point that we were discussing before, the point of being able to go back to the studio every day and having something to do. I had a need to do this work myself, to allow the work to be in an unfinished condition, rather than moving from concept to production without this phase in-between. I wanted to be able to go to the studio every morning knowing something would be left from yesterday which I could work on today, and again tomorrow.

Giacometti normally worked both from life and from a model during the day, then he worked a lot from memory at night. But you only really work from memory – a memory of what gesture could be.

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I did take on the problem of the construction of a solitary figure, like Giacometti had done. But I did not want to take on what I understand to be his failure, or his interest in failure, which I think run parallel, because his interest in failure, which I think run parallel, because his interest in failure was also perhaps his failure. When you look back as of today I have used a repertoire of only about six faces. I was more interested in the totality of the figure, the general composition, the overall presence of the figure in relation to the others. I'm not into this digging, forever rescratching, forever erasing or redrawing.

There's a dialectic of presence and distance. You see your work from a long way and you want to approach the group, be within the conversation. But the closer you approach, perhaps the more distant the figures become.

It's always been said that statues are blind. You cannot represent the gaze convincingly in a three dimensional way. Even in France in the 18th century when they made the most elaborate cutting of the iris in the stone, the statues still seemed blind. When you look at these classical pieces from a certain distance, you might think for a second that the statue is looking, but it never does. The acceptance of this condition of blindness is important to the piece. They are looking inwards, and that looking inwards automatically excludes the receiver, the person in front. The most successful statues give the impression that they are humming inside even though you can't hear them.

In you work you're always inside, the landscape is an interior one. Even with the street you have just had built at DIA in New York, you still feel within an interior landscape.

I don't even know that I have certain obsessions inside of me until one day they are strong enough to live a life of their own. They take time to shape or reshape themselves. I was interested in the space of the pelota court because I could see a relation with some of my work like the balconies and the staircases. I read extensively about it, I collected books on games, I even wrote about it. It took a long time for this obsession with the street to find any kind of physical form, and it was important not to push it. Then finally I made this street which might be the arena of a game. I realize now that I spend an endless amount of time looking at walls, looking at their construction, and how they help make the street. So eventually all that seeding and watering of the image will take its own particular form.

You also made the street quite clearly as if it was a stage set or even a film set by revealing its manner of construction at certain points.

I wanted people to realize from the very beginning that what I was showing them was a kind of deception. Before the spectators become aware of the street itself, I wanted them to be aware that they were looking at a device. So I was explaining the trick at the same time that I was performing it. Because I think that the explanation of some of the best card tricks or disappearance games is of equal beauty to the trick itself. They are as elaborate, rich and wonderful as the trick itself.

The greyish tone gives an other-worldly feel to the street, almost dream-like.

I had to compress all the decisions, to standardize the street because I don't think the image allowed room for any excesses. It was more about a form of containment...

Containing what?

Containment in the sense of holding, being very precise in using the least amount of devices to achieve an image of the street. I could have used a second colour around 90 centimeters from the floor, I could have painted different sections in different tonalities, but that information and detail would not make the street more convincing. I was looking for the maximum visual recognition with the minimum elaboration.

That could be said of some of the figures too. The figures are made within a narrow tonal range, there's never any naturalistic colour, there's not really any immediate contemporary detail in terms of clothing or hairstyle.

I sometimes feel unable to escape some quite general conditions of the history of sculpture. The act of making a figurative sculpture means working within a very limited language, but one which has an incredible range within those limits. I know that I will not increase the aloofness or the presence of the figure by using a wider palette of colours or lots of different materials. Going back to Giacometti you can see those minute cigarette-size figures that are white on white and they seem to me to remain terribly haunting. I look back in time and I see that in some of the works that have impressed me the most, it seems that the artist decided that the problem he or she was handling was of such complexity that it was necessary to renounce voluntarily a certain amount of the repertoire, not to fall into endless formalism. To make the *Conversation Pieces* or the street, it was necessary to limit the range of possibilities, to keep the problem tighter. I always remember Picasso saying that the exploration of cubism was so very difficult, that they decided, he and Braque, consciously to narrow the spectrum of colours to the ochres. All the discoveries of analytical cubism were possible only with a very restricted palette. I can not have too many things on the table to make a drawing. It's better that I have a pencil, rubber and ink

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and maybe a brush. But I cannot have pastels, acrylic, waxes, charcoal, because I might get lost amongst all the different temptations.

For a few hundred years, figurative sculpture has been largely without colour.

In a historical sense that comes from the Renaissance, the perception of classical sculpture because the polychrome had literally been washed away. But if you look at the closest reproductions that have been done today to the early Greek statues, which were originally coloured, they seem so jumpy, I can't trust them. I can't trust them any more than I can trust a mannequin in a shop window. The more realistic they are meant to be, the less interior life they have.

So the detail deadens them?

In wax museums they use glass eyes and perfect fake eyebrows to look even more present. But for me the best sculptures seem to linger in time. Their future is forever postponed and they have a certain indifference to time. While shop mannequins don't even know what time is, they're not afraid of it, they don't live in defiance of it. Some of the best figurative sculptures seem to be aware of the impossibility of looking alive and aware of the boundaries of the territory they can occupy. The most successful ones are the ones that state those limits, the space between being just a sculpture and the man walking on the street. Not for a split second can you confuse one with the other.

Giacometti's walking figure is going nowhere...

He will be forever wanting to walk and never be able to make the next step forward.

There's a lack of belief?

When they saw the classical Greek statues, the Italians understood they would never again make people believe that this woman is the Virgin Mary. Only in a religious context you still have some people looking at a statue and thinking that they really are looking at the Virgin Mary. I think you have to go back to polytheism to understand the unique power of sculpture. All the historical discussions about iconoclasm, they were never to do with painting, they were always to do with sculpture. If you look at a Richard Serra piece, it's about weight, oppression, lack of security, but what you're looking at is always a sculpture. You just have one material world to explain another material world and the gap in between is the territory of meaning that you have.

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[Link to exhibition](#)

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