

# A CONVERSATION SEPTEMBER 1996

Juan Munoz/James Lingwood

**JL How does it feel to be dealing in this book and in the exhibition at the Palacio de Velázquez with works that you made quite a long time ago?**

JM I don't think it comes as a pleasure. I have a sense of being partially defeated, even of anger. I become more aware of the things that might have been done differently, and the things that one would like to change, to amend. It's very difficult to remember the reasons why the things appear as they are. Why, for example, is there a drum at the far end of *The Prompter*? In fact, I made two drums to be shown separately at Konrad Fischer's and at that time I felt that *The Prompter* needed something across the floor. There's an element of improvisation involved in the original decisions, and I can't reach back to these pieces in the same way now. If a piece taken from the past allows for some transformations, if it can come out of a crate to live a new life, then that's more interesting.

**Actually, you have to remake pieces sometimes. Take *The Wasteland*, which was made, destroyed, and will be remade again.**

It's a wonderful conceptual problem. I'm going to make it again, but the piece cannot exist, because it's a new piece, not the original piece. On the other hand, it's not a new piece because it's a variation of the old one. So at the end it will be destroyed again.

**It has its origins in the old piece?**

Should it be a representation of that piece or a variation? It's an impossible conundrum.

**Looking at these first pieces, I have two impressions. The first is that your work develops through a process of building things up then taking some of the things away. And the second it's that there are some things that you can't leave behind, which you keep coming back to. Some images recur. There's a crowd of figures compressed into a balcony form 1984, and then there are crowds of figures dispersed into vast spaces, like the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, or the Palacio de Velázquez...**

If one looks back at the beginning, the very first show, there are works there that could develop later on. The most successful pieces are generators of a language that I can continue to converse in. I'm surprised now looking at the staircases going up to the ceiling which I have just made for the DIA show. They relate in a way with the first little staircase.

**How did that first staircase originate?**

When I made the little staircase, it was the first time that I could see something I had made as an independent object. It was the first piece I remember having a sense of its own identity, and because it was independent, I could also think of it as being mine.

**So it was when you managed to have the figures disappear that you felt the work was more independent.**

Yes, but the figurative image arises very clearly only in *If Only She Knew*, with the contrast of the women carved very carefully in stone, and then the rougher, more male images in wood. And then the figure disappeared in a way.

**The little staircase has a very reduced dimension.**

It's the height of a sheet of paper. It made me very aware of the possibility of working on a reduced scale. And I'm continually interested in how something small can animate a large amount of space. With the floor pieces, starting with *The Wasteland*, you might have the impression that they are very large

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works, but in reality always saw the largeness being the backdrop for the small dimension of the ventriloquist. Part of that came from having made the little staircase and learning from it.

**It concentrates the vision of the viewer?**

It sucks the space in because of its scale. It can live very well in a gigantic room, it has no need for any structural devices, any vanishing point. It owns its own vanishing point.

**You could say the same about the *Minarette for Otto Kurz*?**

It's important to me for another reason. It opens the door for the floor pieces later...

**It seems to combine the optical and the spatial. Is the carpet a barrier across which you shouldn't go - you're not used to walking on carpets in museums. Or is it something that invites you to go closer? And the floor pieces have a similar function. You tread uneasily on them to begin with and then when you're treading on them you suddenly realize you're inside...**

You're in the piece. The minarette for me also had another dimension; the carpet was like a map of a city. The first time I placed the piece in my studio, I always had this feeling that this tower was overlooking the city.

**Why is it a *Minarette for Otto Kurz*?**

Long time ago I was reading a book by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz about the image of the artist where Gombrich, in the introduction, said that Kurz had been in search of the forbidden image. So I went to the Warburg Institute to look for Kurz's book and his files. I don't think there was a direct relationship between the title and the work...

**There's no voice form the minarette...**

In this minarette there's no voice, it's looking for something that doesn't exist in a way. Kurz never found the forbidden image because there is no such thing. There are prohibitions in certain cultures as to what can be represented.

**In Islamic culture, it's the human figure. Was the carpet Islamic?**

Yes, and the image of the minarette is also Islamic.

**Are you saying to yourself then, there's a prohibition about the figure here as well?**

No, I wasn't really saying that to myself. I think in a way it is a very private title because not many people would know that Kurz was a librarian of the Warburg Institute. I was just looking for something, and I didn't know if I could find it. It's true that it's become a very ironic work through the years. Again it's one of those pieces that I look at not as a finished object, but as source material for other things to grow from.

**You have a reservoir to draw on...**

They become inhabited by other voices and other lives and, in time, other things grow form them. I think without the carpet I would not have made the floors.

**Did the balconies precede the figures or was the balcony a device to somehow present the figures?**

No. The balcony came before the figure.

**And is that the same with the banisters?**

The first banisters have no figures. The very first banister was with a knife. It only became clear to me later that there was a very strong relationship between the banister and the floor – they're both to do with walking and insecurity.

**It's as if they exist in a somatic. You activate them not only by looking, but by thinking of touching them.**

In a certain way, the banister with a knife is a *Noli me Tangere* – don't touch me. Stay away – look at me, but don't make me part of you.

**The balconies and the minarette are places to look down form. Your work is often viewed form above or below. You're taking that to an extreme at the Palacio de Velázquez, where one**

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of the viewing points will be above the offices, looking down on to an interior plaza.

It is a balcony but more so a viewing point. In the Velázquez we are using the whole of the space as a backdrop.

Basically when you're on the ground level of the Palacio de Velázquez, you're going to be looking up a lot, looking up at the balconies, looking up at the shoebox piece or whatever. Then for the courtyard piece you're going to be looking down. Either way you're trying to disrupt the normal angle of vision.

Only in the last few months I've come to realize how much I admire some of the photography of the 1920s and 1930s, like Rodchenko or some of the classical Americans. They really did re-position the viewing point, and it was possible because of modern architecture and the skyscraper.

**With Rodchenko the condition of viewing is made much more dynamic, as if to displace the human subject from a comfortable, normal way of looking. Are you trying to do something similar?**

In the Palacio de Velázquez, not allowing the spectator to walk through the pieces is renouncing one great capacity of the *Conversation Pieces*, in the sense that you are travelling between them – you become one amongst them. But controlling the viewpoint of the spectator, you sacrifice that and you gain something else.

It's a different mode of participation, it actually takes away the physical relationship of the viewer to the sculpture. It turns it into a much more optical relationship – perhaps more like a three-dimensional tableau. In your *Raincoat Drawings*, the viewer's eye is directed by the apertures, the passage-ways which are closed down or opened up. The eye goes down a corridor and it stops at a closed door.

It's interesting to me now that some of the pieces don't want you to get close to them.

So there is this issue of a threshold, something which the carpet in *Minarette for Otto Kurz* first raised, and which the floor pieces and the *Raincoat Drawings* continued. Your work has this ability to make you stop at the door. So you stand by the door and look through into the piece and there's a moment's hesitation before you cross the threshold. And perhaps that moment of hesitation is quite important, it heightens the experience, both visual and physical.

The work stays there separated from you as another world on its own. I think maybe in the most successful works of art, the pieces exist without you. I always have this feeling that a piece should be able to work even when there is nobody there. You think of great pieces in great museums – whether there's anyone there or not, they keep emanating an incredible energy, visual energy. I would like to make a humming sound in one of the pieces, only to be switched on at night when everybody's gone. Have it working only at night, then the moment you open the door, the piece stops humming.

Perhaps what you're trying to do is to combine on the one hand the control of vision which the classical "tableau" embodies, a fixed relationship between the viewer and the viewed; and on the other hand a more contemporary condition of looking which is considered less stable.

This duality is the one that I don't seem to be able to escape, this sense of dislocation while crossing through the forest of my time, the late 20th century. But I feel that however much I try or try not to choreograph the way a work of mine is seen, to attempt a sense of normality in this crossing, it will, I suspect, prove self-defeating.

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[Link to exhibition](#)

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