

This interview was conducted via e-mail during the run of *Jim Howieson's One Man Show*; a solo presentation by Jim Howieson at Supercollider Contemporary Art Projects, Blackpool between 17 May - 15 June 2013.

Jim Howieson is an artist based in Sheffield, UK. He was recently selected to take part in the Testing Ground: Masterclass project organised by Doug Fishbone and Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2013). He currently has a solo exhibition at Eastside Projects, Birmingham until 03 August 2013.

Tom Ireland is the Director/Curator of Supercollider Contemporary Art Projects.

TI/ As part of the initial discussions surrounding the possibilities for your show in Blackpool you mentioned an interest in the People's Playground; the re-development of Blackpool's seafront. What interested you about this project?

JH/ Before considering a show in Blackpool I had been doing quite a bit of research into utopian playscape designs from the 60's, from people like Richard Dattner and Isamu Noguchi. I was drawn in this direction through previous interests in sculpture and some increasing frustrations with the medium. Specifically I had been thinking a lot around ideas of function, interaction and play. So, I was excited when I initially read the title of 'The People's Playground' project as it connected with these concerns and sounded so unashamedly optimistic, inclusive and forward thinking at a public level. I am drawn to this desire for escapism and a perpetual sense of leisure.

TI/ The idea of 'playscape' is interesting. It can certainly be said that the re-development of the promenade at Blackpool, of which the People's Playground was a core component was trying to align landscaping with play – *playscaping* as it were. I'm interested in the utopian notions that surround both those designs of Dattner and Noguchi from the 60s and the People's Playground project and their meeting with reality. The People's Playground project made concessions to reality in the face of a difficult climate, financially in this case. The work in *One Man Show* seems also to make concessions to reality, in that it represents a compromised vision of what the show may have been - a monument to the failure to align both your practice and work situation and also aims and realisation. This similarity is interesting and endows OMS with a heightened site-specificity – is this something you were conscious of as you moved forward with the project and thinking about what you may show?

JH/ Yes, I am very sceptical about the over conceptualisation of producing a finished object or environment (this happens a lot in cabinet making too). I am more interested in a process that is facilitated by conceptual limits, but allows me to remain responsive to shifting ideas and contextual concerns from start to finish. I had quite a long time to finalise the show (around 6 months) so I went through many ideas that felt unsatisfactory for various reasons. It was important to set some restraints to the making process, so only using the transformation of my studio furniture was implemented. I suppose this was largely a process-led project. It's important for the process to be playful as well as the outcome.

TI/ The sculpture at the centre (literally) of the exhibition is a very austere object, aesthetically speaking, but closer inspection belies its 'thrown together' look; it is actually a really refined object, exactly the kind of attention and craft that you would anticipate with a cabinet maker's workshop. With this in mind the object offers up a nice dialogue with the audience about comparative levels of value and worth – aesthetically, culturally and functionally. Is this issue of value an important motivator in the work?

JH/ The idea of value comes up a fair bit. Usually just through an applied resourcefulness or simply using and altering the things available to me. Most artists do this though I think. In this particular case I had a lot of timber and decorative surfaces available from studio furniture I had made in the workshop. Also, I was originally interested in working in a cabinet maker's workshop as a very direct way of observing and unpicking the seductive surfaces of what is often considered 'high end' furniture. I am concerned with how much of the visible world is surface. I think calculated value becomes difficult in this respect.

TI/ I think that in the UK there is a real issue with labour-value which seems to override a public acceptance of things particularly when dealing with an artwork. The object in OMS seems very direct in that it engages with labour-value across the 'maker spectrum' and derives a real power from it. Is this a factor you took into account or where particularly conscious of when making the work?

JH/ I think this is the product of the making process again. Some areas of the making worked first time and are probably considered 'nicely finished' where as others demanded more working and come across quite 'slap-dash' or 'botched'. That seems to confuse an initial reading of labour-value in the object. Also, any attempt to clearly state how long it took me to make would be a difficult task. Elements have been made as furniture and have been re-made sometimes more than once over the last year. So, it's potentially one year's worth of work in total. I am not sure whether this knowledge adds to or subtracts from its value though?

TI/ The work's aesthetic austerity offers a huge slice of ambiguity to the object in terms of its position within a narrative arc – where did it come from, how did it come to be, what is it, what does it represent and where is it going

etc. How conscious of the audience were you in putting together the work for the show?

JH/ I think about the audience a lot. I am interested in the subtleties of suggestion and think art has a responsibility to challenge expectations, but a little imagination can go a long way...

TI/ In the doorway at Supercollider you have installed a piece of translucent orange window vinyl to the central glass panel. In the mornings particularly the work is bathed in a really 'attractive' orange/golden light. Can you explain the motivation for this subtle intervention in the space?

JH/ I think I mentioned during install that the first workshop I worked in after leaving university was very diy and low-fi. We didn't have safety goggles, but one day I think my boss must have felt guilty and brought in some orange tinted ski goggles from home. I got hooked on them and pretty much wore them in the workshop for the whole of winter. It altered my mood significantly and taking them off was just as thrilling as the world seemed to have changed from before you put them on. This momentary intoxication seemed like an interesting tool to use to mark the threshold of the space and potentially initiate the viewer's perception upon entering. An orange filter typically increases our sense of contrast and creates a heightened sensitivity to movement and depth of field. Outdoor enthusiasts often use orange lenses on overcast days for this reason.

TI/ In the press release for the show, you described the object as a 'monument'. Monuments exist for all manner of reasons but are primarily a point of focus for remembrance or celebration, or both. Can you elaborate on this idea of monument in relation to the work – what are you celebrating or remembering?

JH/ I have grappled quite a lot with what my studio practice could be and have had various studio spaces and none of them have ever worked for me. Having a studio has only ever really made me feel lazy and dissatisfied (not to mention out of pocket). This is to do with the way I work and respond to spaces. When I'm faced with places or spaces that I feel have a lot of symbolic weight or inherent ideologies, I want to break and test the rules. In an art studio I usually feel a pressure to make art and so it can feel like schoolwork. The obvious way of breaking the rules in this space is to not make art. This has been counter-productive. So, in a sense the object can be read as a monument to the burying of my own naivety towards studio-based art making. It can also be celebrating a shift in my work out towards public spaces and a new sense of freedom. I am much happier viewing the studio as a psychological space that can be projected onto any place or situation.

TI/ You mentioned during the installation of OMS that you had recently left your studio and you were currently without a defined studio space. This situation seems to be in direct dialogue with the work and also with other works such as the ongoing Sports Hall Sessions – they exist because of and in response to your relationship to the studio. I wondered whether you aimed to return to a studio environment or this more conversational, working relationship with the dynamics of making was a developmental avenue for you?

JH/ Yes, following on from the last question, I enjoy the freedom that art can offer so I have been finding places where I can forget about any expectation of work. Practicing in the Sports Halls is perhaps quite a literal demonstration of this drive and also deals with ways of mediating my activity. Yes, I will continue looking for new places to work (and play).

TI/ One interesting reading I had from the public was that the work may be some sort of abstracted self portrait. Given that the work is presented as a singular object and the show is titled *One Man Show* is this idea of autobiography something which was conscious and if so/not how do you feel about that reading?

JH/ That's really interesting for me. I have been looking for a while about each work containing biographical developments in some way. I like the filtering in of my life events as a way of giving access to the thinking and discussions in and around the work. I can't separate the work from what's happening in my personal life and I am developing both simultaneously. The work usually stems from a direct response to everyday situations and encounters. I often think of an imaginary protagonist central to the work, but really it is always me. For Supercollider I wanted to make a singular object that could both represent me (and my studio practice) and could stand in for me while I wasn't there. I thought positioning a lonely object centre stage might bring out the inner bully in the viewer to start pushing it around and demanding answers.

TI/ In material terms, the object is made up of the 'superfluous studio furniture' which sat in your studio space. In a sense, functionality is at the heart of its journey; it begins life as furniture with a wholly functional purpose, unused it is disassembled and repurposed and then presented as an artwork. Here its function changes to one with a more abstract purpose; its function being to act as a repository for ideas and a facilitator for a discussion about wealth, value, worth and functionality (amongst other things). Beyond the show and its material second life what is in store for the object?

JH/ I have no plans for it as yet. It is more than likely it will be disassembled and repurposed again - possibly as furniture – possibly as fire wood.