

Matt Magee: prima materia

Matt Magee has an eye for found objects, be they from an urban street, a beach, or an arid Southwestern plain. Pocketed, they find their way to shelves in the artist's studio, where they await possible formation into works such as the thirty-six seen here.

These "mobile objects" invite handling and close inspection. Palm-sized, their modest scale belies their gentle intrigue. Many have a primarily frontal or pictorial address to the viewer, often characteristic of the painter-sculptors who have periodically rejuvenated modern sculpture. Gluing or nailing are Magee's modes, producing combination and juxtaposition. Unlike parts may clash with a Surrealist-type spark generated by difference, as in *Radiolaria*, while at other times, as in *Milkwater*, formal concerns such as texture or composition will unexpectedly fuse the parts into an organic whole.

The materials are not traditional sculpture's clay or marble. Those found have associations of place; those given carry associations of the giver. A colorful spiral form may be culled from a collection of shells passed on by a friend (*Music of the Spheres*); an ovoid rock presented years ago by Matt's geologist father may find its socle (*Rock Egg*). The resulting objects overlay these narratives into sculptures which balance these threads with formal control. A poetics of narrative meets the poetics of artistic decision.

Andre Breton admitted natural objects as one category of Surrealist object, in both "interpreted" and "incorporated" forms. Magee does both. Breton's words at the height of engagement with the Surrealist object still seem relevant: "the object's conventional value becomes entirely subordinate, in the eyes of the observer, to its dramatic value, leading them to see it more in terms of its picturesque aspect and its evocative power."¹ While the Surrealists preferred to trawl the flea markets, Magee's sources are often closer to nature. He works with some unusual ones: coyote vertebrae, sea urchins, tortoise bone. The last of these was combined with a smudge stick in his first sculpture, *Smudge jar* (1987). He walked this piece, in a kind of ritualistic ceremony, around the perimeter of his new studio space when he first moved to New York.

Natural objects are often combined with man-made elements-- an iron rest, an aluminum box, pieces of manufactured metal, a brick. Some, like sardine cans, suggest both nature and the man-made. A few works allude to the history of sculpture: Caro, Johns, Rauschenberg. One of Rauschenberg's poignant titles, *The Man with Two Souls* (1950) is repurposed here; two wires ascend from small shot bottles, cross when threaded through the holes of a button, then begin to diverge again. Doubling and uniting also characterize the support, a sardine can on a slate block. Such bases, as in Brancusi's sculptures, have a dual function, and partially merge into the sculptural mass.

¹ Andre Breton, "Crisis of the object," (1936), in his *Surrealism and Painting*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Publishers, 2002, p. 279.

As *Man with Two Souls* suggests, titles can add an important layer of meaning, as in *Winged Victory* with its top bone making classical allusions, like a helmet of Mercury. The intriguing *Mnemosyne*, the personification of memory, gave birth to the nine muses in Greek mythology. The object is a tablet of pebbles arranged in lines, like an abstract text, and also a pictorial relief. The delightful Joycean title of the related *Slatetext* (2009) introduces both the material and its letter-like forms. And language itself becomes part of the object in two works (*No Man is an Island, Penetration*).

In *prima materia* these sculptures are arrayed over three large wooden boards raised on sawhorses. The pieces have been created over nearly three decades, from the late 1980s to the present, across periods of great stylistic diversity in the artworld. Despite the chronological span, they have a consistency of approach. They form an extended family, dialoguing with each other. Their general uprightness endows each with a sentient personality, and spectators tend to find their one favorite. In pointed contrast to the high production values (and cost) of much recent sculpture, Magee's totems are unobtrusively and wittily do-it-yourself.

- Lewis Kachur