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The Object of Painting

A Conversation with

Bill Thompson

BY CHRISTOPHER HART CHAMBERS

Bill Thompson's aquiline sculptures are meticulously executed: simple abstract shapes carved in rigid polyurethane foam coated and recoated with resin, sanded until pristine, then painted monochromatically in various shiny colors. This painstaking craftsmanship also carries over into elements never seen by viewers, including the belabored hanging mechanisms mounting the pieces to the wall and the custom transport/storage boxes made for each individual work. All of these elements — seen and unseen — reflect Thompson's obsessive manner and cobbler-like approach to making things by hand, and making them well. To this commitment, he adds a visionary sensibility. His old-school respect for materials and the pleasure that he takes in patient handicraft might seem at odds with his futuristic vision, yet his work represents a seamless coupling of inspiration and perspiration, to the benefit of viewers.

Opposite: *Slider*, 2012. Urethane on polyurethane block, 90 x 38 x 17 cm.
Above: Installation view with (left to right) *68*, *Saddle*, *Emulator*, and *Skiff*, 2013.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Christopher Hart Chambers: *Could you talk about your evolution as an artist and how you came to this body of work?*

Bill Thompson: I started as a painter when I was very young, making nature-based work. Since 1998, I've been carving the substrates of my paintings, though, at first, I still considered them to be paintings. But years ago, I shifted my mindset and figured the work had to be sculpture when the form became as important to me as the color. I went through many, many phases, gradually making the landscapes simpler.

CHC: *I see similarities between your efforts and the architectural designs of Zaha Hadid. I think she uses CAD programs and rapid prototyping. Could you talk about your working methods and techniques?*

BT: I do everything by hand rather than with a computer or a CAD program. I sort of backed into sculpture because of my desire to paint objects. Not having a sculpture background was a plus and a minus for me, because I started out with an idea and had to figure out a way to make it happen. I was interested in using my hands to create an object, and the computer in no way figured into that. But when I started making pieces that were more sculptural, more three-dimensional, people would say, "You should be designing this on a computer." I considered it, but not for long. I realized very quickly that I could carve the substrate faster than a machine could—which I get a kick out of. But I was more concerned that, if I gave things over to the computer, I wouldn't be able to shift gears within the design process and feel my way through the shape, which I want to do. In that sense, I'm a very traditional sculptor. In some cases, I work with symmetry, which I can achieve almost perfectly—you can't perceive that there is any differentiation from side to side.

Castus, 2012. Urethane on polyurethane block, 56 x 46 x 38 cm.

I have a bit of an obstinate streak, an old-world, I-want-to-do-it-myself attitude.

The way that I approach carving is very old fashioned, but I'm using relatively new materials and the final result does not look like it was done by hand. The pieces don't have any evidence of my crafting, which includes covering the surface with 15 to 20 coats of automotive paint. There's no evidence of my hand in that. I like the transformation that turns a rough block that I carve and sand by hand into a pristine final product that looks like it *could* be manufactured. If you look at it closely, however, you sense that a person made this object and that it would not be possible for a machine to do it the same way.

CHC: *Where did your desire to make objects come from? Not that paintings aren't objects.*

BT: There are painters who consider their paintings objects and there are painters who consider them representations of something else. I was on the object side. In some cases, I did trompe l'oeil paintings



that I wanted to look three-dimensional. But I always regarded the substrate and the paint as object-like. To me, that was more credible. I wanted to make something that existed and functioned, and naturally this led to sculpture. That's how I approach the wall pieces that I'm doing now—as functioning objects.

CHC: *How do they function?*

BT: Ideally, when a piece of mine is installed in a room, it affects viewers. When you walk into the room, you are struck by this piece, and it alters the chemistry of the room and gives something. Each time you walk by the piece, I want it to elicit some kind of response. In that sense, I see them as functioning. Obviously they don't function like a machine or something utilitarian, but the attitude that I carry through the carving and the whole production process—that this thing should function and contribute—is important, at least symbolically, in how I approach the work.

CHC: *The forms appear quite deliberate. Could you explain the improvisational moments that you mentioned?*

BT: When I start to work on a piece, I begin with large blocks of dense polyurethane and figure out what proportions I want them to be and cut them down. The first step after I've considered the proportions is to start drawing directly on the block.

CHC: *So, you don't have sketches or notes beforehand?*

BT: No. Sometimes I have thumbnail sketches and work out ideas that way, but most of the time, I do multiple drawings on the block itself. Work out a drawing, sand it off, work out another one—I'll do this for two, three hours on a single block until I'm happy with the design, though I wouldn't say that the design, the form, is fixed at that point. This is something I learned when I was a very young watercolor painter—if you don't have a good drawing, a good structure to start painting with, you will be screwed as you get farther in.

CHC: *You don't have a preconceived notion?*

BT: Sometimes I do. The drawings that I put in my sketchbook usually don't have a designated size to them, they're just form ideas and conceptual ideas, things I want to pursue.

CHC: *So why the size?*



Sliver, 2013. Urethane on polyurethane block, 132 x 25 x 14 cm.

BT: The form that I want dictates the dimensions of the piece. My physical capabilities are also a factor. I work alone most of the time, and I can only work so large. The largest pieces are maybe a meter square—that's about all I can move in and out of the spray booth. I don't feel like this is a restriction though, because another angle, another approach I have to the work is that it's human scale. If I'm working on something that's roughly equal mass with my body, I feel like this will work out—it's a poignant, effective scale, a scale that's relatable.

CHC: *Is it your desire to achieve a form of "pure" abstraction? And if so, does that require the product to be entirely non-referential? For example, one piece looks a lot like one of those egg pods you find on the beach.*

BT: A skate egg pod—you nailed it. I grew up north of Boston, close to the ocean, and we used to find them. That form made a big impression on me, as did many forms that I saw in nature. This case is unusual because I allowed that form to directly inspire the



Above left: *Incubus*, 2012. Urethane on polyurethane block, 97 x 61 x 18 cm.
 Above: *Satori*, 2013. Urethane on polyurethane block, 100 x 61 x 20 cm. Left:
Nut, 2012. Urethane on polyurethane block, 61 x 56 x 22 cm.

shape of the work. For the first one in that series, I was definitely thinking of a skate egg case. Take a square block of the substrate, hold on to the four points, and carve away, back. You can imagine the original rectangular form. The deepest points are where the corners are. It's important to me that there is a reference to the original block, that I wasn't carving the block completely away, that there is a connection to the original form.

CHC: *Why is that important?*

BT: When I was strictly a monochrome painter, I was always addressing the four corners of the substrate panel that I was painting. So this is something left over, carried over into my new work, though it's unusual for me to have a direct natural reference in the work. Because of my upbringing and because I spent a lot of time in natural settings, all of that has inspired and informed my shapes. I am in no way trying to replicate natural forms, but my reverence for nature continues to strongly inform my work.

CHC: *Other than nature, what has influenced you?*

BT: All of my life, I've figured out what I wanted to do on my own. I've always been a very private artist, obsessed with being original. I stumbled through various styles as a developing painter and plowed my way through different stages—a little bit blind to what was going on outside my studio. Oftentimes during my develop-



Above: *Skiff*, 2013. Urethane on polyurethane block, 61 x 150 x 17.5 cm. Right: *Copse*, 2013. Urethane on polyurethane block, 104 x 69 x 14 cm.

mental years, I'd go through a phase and then I'd find some artist who was doing a similar type of work unbeknownst to me. I wouldn't say that I work in a vacuum, but the direction of my work is informed by the last piece I made and where that leads me. I'm not linked to any group of artists or any particular style happening today. Still, it's rewarding to feel like there are other people doing similar things. I see that more in architecture than in the work of fellow sculptors. People look at my work and because it's glossy and minimal, they think of Anish Kapoor. But we're working in completely different fields, certainly at different scales. He's thinking in terms of public art, I'm thinking in terms of very intimate art. **CHC:** *Do you feel that your work is inherently New World, with a strong European foundation? The notions involved seem to me very post-1960s — surf boards, hot rods, and science fiction, which are, I think, American constructs.*

BT: I have a formalist or traditional side that is recognized and appreciated by a European audience, and at the same time, there is something very American about my work, not just in terms of materials, but also in the aggressiveness and other-worldliness of the shapes and colors that I choose. So, when I'm showing in the States, it feels more like Europe than New York; and when I'm in Europe or Asia, it's seen as having a more American influence. It's a nice place to be — stably in between cultures and not flitting back and forth. In the same way, I feel like I rest in a really nice place between painting and sculpture. A lot of times that's a difficult place to be, because you're either one or the other and not really good at both. I feel like I am able to carry on my passion for color and reverence for the history of painting and also embrace form with equal gusto. There's so much more I can do, and that's what keeps me fired up.

Christopher Hart Chambers is an artist and writer living in New York.

