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Sculptor Justin Matherly on Turning Hospital Gear Into Art at Paula Cooper



Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Justin Matherly

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It helps for a contemporary artist to have a niche, and it just so happens that Justin Matherly's niche, as of late, has been of the cast-concrete-and-hospital-equipment variety. His lumpy sculptures, such as *New Beaches*, a 2012 commission for the Public Art Fund in New York's City Hall Park, are majestically sad. The work fuses simple industrial material (concrete, which Matherly uses in its premixed form) with readymades (walkers, crutches, and assorted hospital seats), always with an eye to art history. Matherly makes his solo debut at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York on March 23, joining Tauba Auerbach as another young talent snapped up by the venerable institution.

The artist has long been enamored of construction-based materials. Early pieces incorporated Oriented Strand Board (OSB) and medium-density fiberboard (MDF), out of which he carved a faux record player and a facsimile of the film camera from Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). A piece made with OSB mimicked the appearance of a writing desk circa 1913; Matherly had come across a short description of a similar piece of furniture in Franz Kafka's *Amerika*. He eventually grew tired of wood because of its inflexibility. "There was no room for accidents, for things to happen during the process," he says.

Matherly came to concrete as a medium after reading an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "The Aesthetics of Security," which discusses the material's increased usage post-9/11. And the hospital walkers were partially suggested by a '90s Japanese horror film — Matherly forgets the name — in which "every character is broken in some sense, mentally or physically. But it wasn't inflicted on them — it was almost matter of fact, these bodies just existed that way." At first the artist was propping chunks of concrete, cast in molds made of corrugated metal siding, on "crutches" made of OSB or plywood. Too many of those pieces broke while in transit or on display. Matherly eventually overcame an aversion to incorporating finished objects and began exploiting readymade hospital equipment as the structural base for the works. He found a simple way to create bulbous concrete shapes by filling Treegators, the plastic sacks used to water foliage, with premixed concrete. (The artist says that he thinks of the Treegators themselves as "prosthetics" for the trees they help to grow.) The result was sculptures like *Death; death? It's certain death, but with what speed and with what dash!*, 2009: a round concrete blob-shape supported by metal legs, with one armlike crutch appendage reaching out to touch the wall. Matherly was able to construct more complex sculptures by cutting and recombining several Treegators. While there were parameters, there was an element of unpredictability new to his process. "I could allow the material, to a degree, to dictate the form," he says.

Since the first sculptures were solid, and therefore incredibly heavy, Matherly began adding foam filler to the mix. Later he made entire foam molds around which the Treegator assemblages were wrapped, with the concrete hardening in the gap. These often resulted in an uneven thickness, as well as actual holes in the concrete surface. The molds referred to a number of important forms and famous works, including the ancient sculpture *Laocoön and His Sons*, and the Belvedere Torso, an ancient Greek sculpture lacking a head, arms, or lower legs. (An avid reader of philosophy and fiction, Matherly's interest in the latter statue was sparked by Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*.) Other sculptures had a similar mix of abstract figuration. "It has a lot to do with the body," Matherly says of his work, "about humans and sickness, things breaking down and not being able to function on their own." A good example is the 2011 sculpture *To know death one must fuck life in the gall bladder, called salute the future*, 2011, a mostly limbless humanoid block with a single arm defiantly raised. (The figure's chest cavity is pierced by an oversize keyhole shape that happens to resemble the outline of a cock and balls.) *Laocoön and His Sons* directly inspired *Every body moves, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly (dedicate to everyone)*, 2012, in which the damaged form of the original assumes a more subtly pathetic demeanor, accentuated by its support on the decidedly un-monumental hospital walkers.

Matherly concurrently makes a great number of two-dimensional works, mainly monoprints of varying sizes, achieved by printing wet ink on 13-by-19-inch transparency sheets that he then applies to the paper by hand, creating pieces — occasionally as large as 8 feet by 8 feet — in gridded segments. "In a way, I

become the machine that transcribes the image,” he says. A number of recent prints use a photograph of Bob Marley with Jamaican Prime Ministers Michael Manley and Edward Seaga, partially covered by squares or rectangles taken from the work of Kazimir Malevich. “What drew me to that image was the visual relationship between the three clasped hands and arms and the three versions of Laocoön’s missing arm,” he says, referring to the various erroneous reconstructions and replicas of that statue that have been made over the years.

From there, the associations run even wilder. Matherly initially came to Jamaican and African culture via an affection for dance hall music. And the hands of Manley/Seaga/Marley assumed another significance when he began researching the damaged sculptural works at Nemrut Dagi (Mount Nemrut), a Turkish historical site and the elaborate tomb of Antiochus I, a Hellenic king from 70–38 B.C. The statues there “depict Antiochus clasping hands with deities he wanted to align himself with,” Matherly says, “thereby creating a historical lineage or framework within which his accomplishments are to be understood.” The archaeologically significant site will likely influence, if obliquely, a number of the sculptures and prints in his March show at Paula Cooper. “The significance of the work’s source can ebb and flow,” Matherly says. There was no eureka moment that brought him to research Nemrut Dagi — he admits it was little more than coming across an archival image in a book — but that’s typical of his practice. “A lot of times it’s about making a decision: ‘Okay, this is interesting enough for me,’ ” he says. “Even if it isn’t interesting enough, I’ve made the decision it will be, and the work grows out of that.”

To see images, click on the slideshow.

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