

Sebastian Black/Ernst Fischer/Ben Hall

SB: So we came and saw the show a couple of days ago, right? One of the most basic things we talked about with the sculpture is this illusionistic quality. The magic trick thing they have going on, or you said parlor tricks... Can you explain the difference between magic trick and parlor trick?

BH: The magic trick is held and there's no reveal. It's supposed to be magic. The parlor trick is something colloquial that you share. That's the thing you do Sunday after dinner with your family or the people that are visiting. It still holds the same moment of excitement but then you share how it works rather than insist on some tepid proprietary quality.

SB: Things are balanced in such a way that it seems impossible. It seems like it's about to fall over at any moment but you're also totally aware that it won't, that it's not going to.

BH: We hope so, Insha'Allah.

SB: That's where the magic trick thing occurs. You know the person's not going to get sawn in half but you still gasp when they're still smiling.

EF: Facing them as sculptures, as not American, the cultural signifiers aren't that apparent to me. I'm not sure what a pack of Newports means culturally. I presume it has a specific connotation. They're supporting more weight than they can so there must be a trick in their rehearsed precarity. They're not, those little boxes aren't they're to support the work. It's illusion so I presume they're more solid than they might appear to be.

SB: Is that a thing? It just makes me wanna know what's in that can that holds that thing up. All the connotations, all the sets of signifiers aside-

BH: The Mountain Dew can, specifically? Those are just Mountain Dew cans.

SB: Right, because you can stand on a can

Aud: Sometimes a Mountain Dew can is just a Mountain Dew can.

BH: When Steve and I started talking about this show, when he came over—he's an engineer—we started talking about stasis. So when you talk about that rehearsal thing, if it's a rehearsal of the performance of the thing, to be balancing then that's that moment of stasis when it achieves stillness, where it's just right before it falls. The pause button, the pause button rather than some life thing so that's the parlor trick part—it's not real.

SB: You know it's not.

EF: It's that aspect of circus where it has to be rehearsed to the point to where it's; A. Effortless, B. The importance of making it look more difficult in the moment that it actually is.

SB: And you had used the word precarity...

BH: That was Ernst actually I wanted to avoid that sort of terminology for myself though it's accurate.

SB: It's not at issue anyway because it's not actually precarious. There's a difference between something fragile and between something balanced.

BH: I think wanting something to be imbued with fragility, that intention.

EF: So this trick, this friend of my father's used to work in a circus, used to perform, where he's on top of a stepladder doing a handstand. He's quite high up and his assistant throws up bricks and he catches it raises up, and the assistant throws another brick and he's got these two stacks and he get's higher and higher. It's actually a really easy trick to do acrobatically.

SB: So, Ernst, can you do that?

EF: But the trick, to make it a good show, is he has to drop a brick every now and then to make it look... And the audience roars and by the time he's got ten bricks under each hand it seems like a huge accident.

SB: I guess there's a question somewhere in there which is, what is the relationship between that and this performative, acrobatic ability to make these things that have this tension? On what level do the referents play and on what level is it structural decision making? You know what I'm saying? A little bit?

BH: The instability is exactly that thing, the work I was making a couple years ago was one trick pony. It was more like watching the guy after he's on top of the bricks, "That's amazing." Clap, clap. But I think they both share this feeling of the limb and I see the limb as a perceptual system. That's the sculpture rather than just a photo of a dude up on some bricks, the after effect. It's an attempt to present it in real time. Jason and I we're talking about this a lot because for a while he was doing these paintings—all the dollar stores along the strip had all these different images of Scarface—right? But it was just a moment, there's no Scarface images on Joseph Campau anymore. It used to be that every dollar store had Scarface as display. It was so predominant as image—

SB: It was like every episode of cribs also.

BH: I only watched the one with Lil' Jon. But I started to pay attention to this culture, this is local culture and one of the things I here most from recent arrivals is, "There's no culture here." The first thing I think of is car culture—because that's a culture I grew up in both here and California. I think to say there's no culture here, to deny that it exists, is a super colonial thing to say. But it's also uniquely inspiring for people.

SB: Nothing's here.

BH: Yeah, nothing. One of the working titles for the show was from this Billy Preston song, Nothing from Nothing is Nothing. I ask my economist friend how do I write that as a clever equation as a distancing move. He's like, "N minus N equals N."

SB: But what about the clever part?

BH: Exactly. And not to mention that I'm reticent to use homage to legitimate new work but somehow I still ended up with a song title as a title or organizing principle. So I reminded him that it should be clever or illustrative or I

think I said I was looking for something, at least, elegant, and he says, "Nothing's more elegant than the minus sign." And I was like, "Oooh. Oh." And it's weighted in such a way in terms of regional or local commentary that I shied away. So then it becomes this issue of thinking about moments, that if you don't see them they don't produce memory. There's a truth value in physical trace rather than testimony. But also trying to not replicate wastefulness because though it might be an area sans culture it's still prey to geopolitical resource allocation, and that's real. Anyway waste just becomes a small moment in time, small time, rather than big time.

SB: In the way that some of these things are put together some of their meaning can be accounted for in the fact that in the parlance of contemporary art a pack of Newport or a can of soda has a particular meaning, as much as it's subject to change it has a stable set of connotations.

BH: I would argue more than one depending on it's framing. They have identity out, outside of commerce, but while it has fixed meaning I don't think it's individualized or static. It's bit of a witch, which, they're, their, there, bad, sick. You have one slippage that's usage and another that's colloquial unmeaning that's been mainstreamed and then there's a certain amount of slang. Like what is a Baughman table slang for?

SB: If each element is a sign with a couple of meanings then they're almost constructed like sentences. And at first I thought that's really interesting but that's not really reflected in the press release or maybe that's just the way contemporary sculpture is composed more generally but then there's that paragraph at the end of the press release which is essentially a stand in for one of the sculptures, it could be one of the sculptures. The one you were saying was almost shifted to the first paragraph.

EF: Which in a way is a material list. What are you actually doing? What is it you're doing working with objects that are compound of properties? Is it a performance of non-performance? You talk a lot about trap doors and about circumscribing the work somehow because the work can't be qualified in the end. But this idea that the objects themselves that you're making, if they are objects, compounds of compounds, so what you've done apart from a kind of illusionist trick, you've refused to perform

anything. You haven't changed what they're made of it's a sort of holographic repeat of the material you're working with. In a way you're putting it all to unintended use. And when you we're just talking about Detroit now I think that's one of the things that surprised me because this is my first time here but it's all this stuff that's lost it's intended use. That's what's striking. That's what gives it a romantic sense of colonial potential for someone who's new here, right? You can see there used to be a use for all this stuff that's still here and means something and of course it's different when it's more than a memory.

BH: So if we go down this syntactical road one part is grammar and construction and another is use. Well there's a lot of questions here. So first back to the slang part and maybe I can answer Ernst about traps. If I say trap it can mean a lot of things but by presenting a trap, the trap door it's sort of an inverse semiotics the refers to a particular type of drug dealing but also escapism, trap door as escape hatch, trap set, as in drums, short for contraption or a compound system. And that's not a binary that's just a couple. That flexibility is what I'm after to a certain degree. We use words because the non-verbal is automatically subordinated. But there's a stone refusal to be pinned into one meaning so maybe I'd be trying to develop a certain facility with a set of materials that seem at once fixed but when you press on them they mutate and move, not a malleability but language as a set of registers that aren't dialectic, right. In Jamaica, the fancy people speak English and the Nyabinghi speak English. It's not dialect it's English both ways but the slang and relative meaning infused at what can be seen as the edges of that speech and here it's getting dicey because I'm defining speech as different than language and I'm no linguist but I asked a linguist guy I know about this very thing and he sort of confirmed the whole Jamaica concept. To go back to the idea of the holographic I like that idea that it bends with viewing not in a memory way but in a physical way.

Then I also want to say that there's specificity to the importance, the significance, of refusal within the tradition of people with African heritage in the Americas and that refusal of performance has a specific history related to African heritage and white audience and minstrelsy. That's not a driver per se but it's there both as someone of African heritage, and as an interlocutor,

interloper and thief with European heritage. So in some ways it's a reperformance or aping of refusal. Again it's not a binary it's just barrel of snakes. But it's a refusal to be a subject. The spine board isn't stranding in for anything except. It's a reversal. A tree was made into board, which was then made into a spine board and then used as a piece of wood. I could draw a lot of metaphors here but it's like Jennifer Egan says, "All we have are metaphors and they're never exactly right."

So in this room there's a Fanon bullhorn. It's not a metaphor but it has proven instability and drive as an object.

SB: Why is it a Fanon bullhorn?

BH: It's just the brand. You know when I work with voice I look at bullhorns and then of all the names it's Fanon. This is like after 5 years of looking. So it's immediately a compound subject. Like the Buddha quote in the press release.

AUD: Which piece are you talking about right now?

SB: I realize I'm pointing at it's invisible,

BH: Parlor tricks.

AUD: It would help if you pointed out which piece you're referring to.

BH: So Fanon and Glissant, the way they refer to subjecthood, if it's a static thing, as a person how do you refuse it, being a subject. What does that refusal do.

AUD: Inanimate subjects can refuse to be subjects.

BH: I think so. They're not fixed when they're meaning shifts they move.

When I was painting it was hard to think about the paintings as objects, in the world. I couldn't project that relationship out and vision it. Like you, you used to be a smoker, so you might really want a cigarette so that Newport box turns you on in a way I don't recognize.

EF: I'm not quite making that jump, the colonial subject refusing to be a subject.

BH: You mentioned earlier the basketball having a set set of meanings. So take the hoops and make them, legs, and then body becomes plinth. The ball is a lung and doesn't exist in the room and the hoop is the negative space and stais the ball ultimately wants to occupy.

SB: So is it like an allegorical thing?

BH: I can't say.