

Stay bewildered : CROSSING Interview with Jason Lee Starin

What comes in mind hearing the expression Crossing the Threshold?

Can I give you a background of two major influences in my life that where I am a kind of getting answers for all your questions? As a way of introduction. I am working with clay and ceramics for thirty years. So the material as clay, the qualities of clay and ceramic, which are two different materials, they changed my mind. They changed the way I think. So clay is wet and soft and amorphous and mushy and it changes a lot and then you let go of it. You put it into the kiln, a force outside of my control and it changes into a hard and brutal, it changes into a rock. So there is this whole metamorphic process that after going through this process from a creative perspective for thirty years it changes the way I think about the world and life and people and relationship and everything. The other major influence is this notion of virtual life online and that's been going on for 27 years now, half my life. There was a big shift in consciousness when I was around 20 and now I am 42. This idea of a physical life and the virtual life... just this large qualities of consciousness.

What do you think of the phenomenon of fear?

I personally have a lot of anxiety, because I have no tenable base. I have no material orientation to the world as much. I know a thing when I touch it. I know the table is there, if I stamp my toe into it in the middle of the night. It is how we locate ourselves in space. But I have a certain anxiety because in virtual space there is nothing hard to hit your toe on. You do not know where you are anymore. You can not center yourself with the virtual consciousness. I do not think this is negative, it is just very different.

I can cause anxiety but it is also an issue and an interest to figure out as an artist.

When I have a fear it is a sign that I have to change. It is a sign for me that there is something I need to face my fear. It is a change that I would be a better person. If I face my fear and I go towards it is a challenge. If I face my fear I have a deeper connection to myself, of which I have more majority, more wisdom. And if I choose this I can pass this on to someone else, who might be facing those fears in their own life. Speaking as an educator I think this is an important thing to do.

Could you describe your artistic practice?

Clay is constantly in need of interpretation, because it has nothing hard. It is not like wood, you cut it with a saw and it makes a straight line. Clay adopts to the impression of the hand, it is completely amorphous. I am always a kind of in-between this position of interpretation and intention. So I have an image of a sculpture in my mind, but my hands they do what they want. That is to me a moment of mystery and experimentation, trying new things. If I position my hand this way or that way with the clay changes the form. I am not a formalist. I just like sculptures. I like to entertain fantasy and mystery and show this a little. When I am making art it really goes through all of psychological mysteries that are in my mind, but the final outcome is basically just a very formal object, surface, form, color, space. Those are the foundation of my artistic language or rhetoric, that I still believe in.

Is there any experience in your life which opens you to your very own artistic process?

It is the process learning the material. Every ceramicist has this moment when they put their heart and soul into a sculpture, and they pull it in the kiln and it blows up into a million little shards. This is typical for ceramics. So you learn to let go. You learn that art is no pressures. You learn it gonna go to changes that you can not predict. Even with the out most experience, with thirty years of experience I still do not exactly know what is gonna come out of the kiln. For me that is more human. It is human to make mistakes and to stay bewildered and try for moments of curiosity. This is essential for making new things. I do not like answers, I like questions.

What do you think about the connection between the inner human world and the so-called "Virtual Reality"?

Each one of us exists simultaneously in the same time now because of this new technology. And I do not think a lot of people still quite know how it is effecting our lives and our consciousness. As I exist now talking to you I exist on social media. And if I create with this software as an artist I am thinking with both materials. And I worked with Google Sketchup. You start thinking how the material behaves. The medium is the message (Marshall McLuhan). So it changes your consciousness. To put it lately, I am stuck between a rock and a no-place, like between clay, the beginning of a lot of human civilization, a very old medium and this very new medium, the post-human medium, the virtual medium. So you have this very old notion, this connection of humanity over the centuries and then you have this very strange connection through the world wide web. Very different ways to connect through objects but also through virtual social media contexts. All this computer stuff is actually very odd. It's a fact and a big duality. So, crossing the threshold for me is psychologically between material knowledge, knowing yourself through the material, through hands on, and knowing yourself through the immaterial, through virtual conversation and virtual connection.

We are at a time this notion of post internet, where the internet is normal now, and we just have learned to live a hybrid life to be on and offline in the same time. But the social interactions are very odd now. I know more people before I see them. I think it is important to stay messy, make mistakes. I think those are human qualities that are important. That a lot of people are afraid to admit and show but automatically there is a vulnerability there. Vulnerability for me is a strength. If I can be honest to myself and share my mistakes with somebody. It is ok to make mistakes. It is ok to be human almost.

Is there any precondition or preparation for arriving at your artistic process, rituals or something like this?

Certainty is boring. Having the answers is boring. It is the end of the conversation. It is the end of curiosity. It is the end of investigation. It is the end of creative thinking, to be certain. Is it more anxious? Yes. But if you get constable with ambiguity my creative practice become more open, there are a lot of more possibilities to explore this kind of things. To strengthen that, I never settle for one possibility. And again, clay is like that, so it developed my mind this creative approach to my artistic practice. Even if I do not work in clay, it is always: How can I make this more honest. Clay is the only thing in life I constantly return to.

In ceramics, we talk about the interior of a pot or a sculpture, because at the pottery wheel you have the hand in the middle of a jug and you push out, these changes the exterior. All ceramic sculptures have to be humble. But a lot of ceramic sculptures give the illusion that they are solid and you see any wholes. To me it is ridiculous. So I started accepting the necessities of the material by allowing those wholes, those voids, the external to be exposed. And in cooperating it into the sculpture itself. It that is the truth through the material than you should go for it. That

is my belief. In that parallels this point in my life where I'm trying to have more emotional maturity and more psychological wisdom by again, being more vulnerable with my mistakes and really trying to open up a little more. As I shape the design of the sculpture, I am controlling how much the viewer can see of the inside, but at least I am opening up a little, for the benefit of the viewer or maybe my students or myself.

What did you mean with the disillusion between the internal and the external?

We all have the roles we play, the persona that we put out in the public and I want my persona to match what I really feel and what I'm thinking on the inside and I think, that I am expressing that in my sculptures as well by opening up and cutting the holes into it. What I attempted to do is, the viewer as they walk around the sculpture, becomes confused as to what is the internal and what is the external making them the same, that is a part of my development.

So this is actually a process of crossing the threshold. If you are switching so quickly, that you don't know on which side you are, then you are on both?

Yes, it's definitely both and you can see, it is quite personal to me, but it comes from a macro - perspective of the physical and the virtual.

And maybe this is a real artistic act, if you have this possibility, but it's not only for you.

It is interesting, because my graduation in university was not in fine art, it was in applied craft and design, so we talked about design a lot and one of the major things we talked about was that the personal is universal and it's a design consideration. So as I get more in touch with being able to express my personal need, everybody has the same needs ; food, love and whatever.

Now I'm coming to the statement of Joseph Beuys. What is your own experience with sculpture according to Beuys' statement "Sculpture is thinking". He transfers his concept of sculpture to all levels of our life, from our form of thinking and language to our social form of living. He said that this all is a form of sculpture. So what do you think of this approach to art and sculpture?

So as I said, my graduate was craft and design and craft has a completely different approach and thinking, than in Fine Arts. I think that it is vitally important that humans make and there is hand -knowledge and brain-knowledge and Good-knowledge. If we talk about sculpture, making is an activity. It's an act, an event and it is between the person with the intention, the artist, and the medium. It becomes social, when the artist is done with the sculpture and puts it out in the public. Then this object becomes part of the world existing and all the objects in the world. So your sculpture speaks to the building and the viewer locates them self between the two objects and automatically starts to make psychological comparisons or contrasts based on the similarity with the building and similar looking sculptures, so it's all interpretation. It's the artists' responsibility to make sculptures that challenge the viewers perception of a given reality.

Do you think, that you have a kind of duty or mission, that we can apply methods of art in life?

I think the duty or mission is to be a cultural ambassador to develop culture further and to kind of like push the boundaries of consciousness to expand abstract thoughts to learn to communicate on different, possibly higher levels. I think it's the responsibility of the artist to challenge the viewers' perception of things and how people connect. Art is supposed to shake things up, it doesn't always have to be political, but if I walk into a gallery and I'm still confused a few days after and still be thinking about the art — the artist is doing something right!

How can an artist avoid becoming irresponsible or distinctive with in human life by focusing on his work does he have to do?

This was a good question because I always thought the opposite. I always thought of making art was a selfish thing, a distinctive act to relationships and everything, but as I am becoming more mature I am learning the language to be more positive about it, so I don't know quite yet. The closest thing I have, is to be the cultural investiture, to help others in the ways that we've been talking about. That's a new concept in me, to be positive about making art.

Well you know it was always me in my bedroom or me in the studio by myself just playing and being a child, which is very important to me but nobody else gives a damn. I think a certain amount of confidence has to be gained in the artist and for the artist to become a more mature artist. The mature artist is a different kind of artist than the mature adult. I think it's a much slower journey, it takes a while and more consideration.

I think that it is the artists' responsibility to make questions and to say "hey, life is worth investigating stuff".