

December 2011 : **Jamie George** met with **Siôn Parkinson** at his studio/apartment whilst Siôn was undertaking a 3-month artist residency, *Going Dutch*, in Amsterdam run by Artquest in partnership with M4gastaterlier.

BEING AWAY

(an exorcism through facial hair)

Jamie George I wanted to start really simply and ask you for a description of what you have been doing in this room, here in Amsterdam.

Siôn Parkinson I think that I wanted to start knowing, to some extent, what work I was going to produce – almost like an action plan; a list of things I would achieve; a methodology. I wanted to type it up, print it out and stick it up on my wall on the first day. It would include things like drawing hands that were mumming some kind of deformity or writing a radio play based around a short extract of a story ... I found that even having written the plan, I didn't want to do most of it. And the process of even getting this residency was by writing a proposal and saying how you are going to achieve that. So knowing doubly that I was going to jettison most aspects of my original proposal – which was to do with coming here with the idea of Scott Walker's 'Amsterdam' in my head, which is a cover of a [Jaques] Brel song that he wrote 1500 kilometres away in the Aples-Maritime – an idea of being at a 'remove' and a romantic idea of singing in Amsterdam and an idea of water and buoyancy.

So quite quickly I got rid of those ideas and started drawing my beard, which seemed funny. Anecdotaly funny! I would say to people that this is what I was doing and that I agreed it was ridiculous. But that opened up everything in a way. And, almost by drawing something that is physically close to me and working on something that seemed completely irrelevant to the work I'd proposed led me on to the path of what I am doing now.

The work I am now making does share an idea of buoyancy but in a very different way; in a punning way, in being lighter and warmer, wetter than work I've made previously.



Siôn Parkinson is a Mighty Engine (2011)
screen print on paper 1682 x 1189mm

‘There is a benefit to going to new places to reinvent ourselves.’

JG That leads well on to returning to what we discussed on the ferry this afternoon. I wanted to know more about the processes between making objects in the studio, works that have your hand in – they are ‘made’ – and sitting in the other room writing something. As the poetry establishes fictional spaces that are miles away from here – yet with references to where you grew up. I’m really intrigued by those seemingly irreconcilable spaces.

SP They are part of the same thing. It can be dangerous to start talking about writing poetry and making sculpture within those particular disciplinary constraints, finding metaphors between them because, of course, they abound. In terms of process there is something about being sat in a room and picking the background on your screen to which you want to write, picking the font and the space in between letters and words.

It’s to do with providing a space which is conducive to working, which we all do. It’s similar to having to have a certain amount of images up on the studio wall. But those images, too, can become stale and stifling.

I’ve been writing in one room, in a warm room, here in Amsterdam, and coming through to this studio to make very quick, fast, ‘godawful’ sculptures as I’ve called them; waste mould plaster casts of fairly indiscriminate shapes that are usually through the drawings that precede them, something graphic and sometimes with text. But really free, I think, for me.

There is a benefit to going to new places to reinvent ourselves – we do it when we go to a new college. I think what happens quite quickly is that you end up going back to the kind of person you were before you arrive. I don’t think we stray too far from our core values or core interests. I think coming here, at least till the half-way mark, I felt very buoyant with my work because I felt ignorant of any audience. The writing less so, because I’m always conscious of who’s going to read it and what is understandable.

JG We’ve spoken about how much unpacking there is in the process of arriving somewhere, which I empathise with. When I did a residency in China, apart from the major differences and adjustments in day-to-day living, it was almost like not ‘being away’ at all. I was expected and considered to be ‘in’; to be ‘in’ the ‘practice,’ to not be away from the ‘practice’.

SP I am definitely very grateful to people who supply these kind of opportunities and you definitely do need to jump through certain hoops. That’s made quite clear. Sometimes they are quite small hoops, which are more difficult to jump through. Sometimes they are really wide, well lubricated hoops. But, sometimes you can perform too much as an artist.



Untitled (2011)
plaster, ink and spray paint
210 x 230 x 15mm



Left and above: *MIGHTY ENGINE* (2011)
plaster, ink and wax 530 x 270 x 25mm

‘It is between things
but still is a thing.
The feeling of ambiva-
lence can be named.’

JG I was thinking about recurrent themes within your work. One could be to do with the orifice ... a physical manifestation of a kind of gateway; an inner journey to an outer journey or visa versa. When you sent the early image from this residency, that accompanied the poem, *Eating the Beard*, with your mouth open, it seemed that you might be interested in orifices?

SP I don't think I'm interested in orifices. There is definitely something less to do with swallowing or consuming or even defecating or shitting, but more,

something to do with being secreted from outside something else, or at least growing inside; something that is not see-able but feel-able. And that's the frightening thing, I find. The frightening infra-thin distance between a tumour and the skin, for example. I find specifically feelings of ambivalence, as when you are ambivalent about a poem, or a line, or a image, or something physical or material very – I find that very enduring. I am using the word 'ambivalent' in a really positive way here; to be ambivalent is to be in two minds, to not know your mind about it. It's very different to being 'unsure' although the worlds are quite close, synonymously. In the poster of me with my mouth open and one eye closed, I remember thinking: I don't want to look like I'm screaming. I don't want to look like I'm surprised. I don't want to look like I going to eat something. I don't even want to look like I'm singing. I just want to look slack-jawed and open-mouthed, but as open-mouthed as it could be without it being any of those things. In the image, it's the lazy



All the songs for my mother (2011) water-colour and ink on board 230 x 290 x 20mm

open eye plus the lazy closed eye that makes the mouth appear more open. It's a strangely crude image. I got my mum to do exactly the same pose, which I know she now hates, but the images are absolute alternates, not just because our actions are the same – because it is mother and son – but because the emotion that is conveyed in them both is exactly the same.

JG This seems really key, how are you deploying the word ambivalent in reference to making work. Can I ask you for a description of the word?

SP My understanding of the word comes from when I was a kid falling asleep and that moment feeling like there was a knife behind a really thick blanket. Knowing that there is something sharp, cold and pointy poking through something that is heavily felt. It is not going to penetrate it but it is there. I have had the feeling subsequently, almost like *déjà vu*, and it is usually from having seen things within sculpture. This may seem fanciful but it is that kind of feeling.

‘I wanted to begin with something that feels completely personal: my beard!’

This is where my interests lie: the potency of things, materials and stuff like guts or the smell of particles in the air, or flaking skin, and right down to things like my daughter's insulin and the smell of her moisturiser or a partner's bad breath. All of these things conjure up ideas of longing and sentimental attachment, of deeply entrenched moments of memory. Actions that happen upon you and, again, a string of synapses being formed ... Ambivalence, ambivalence! ambivalence!

JG I have recently been thinking about a similar thing but have described it in a much more blunt way using the term ‘antinomy.’ For me this presents itself in wanting to address collective issues of politics and forms – yet I encounter the personal: experience, reaction, memory, forgetting ... Whether antinomy or ambivalence, it seems so central to processes of making right now.

SP And yet there are so many false synonyms of ambivalence that I think they can distract one from its true meaning. Sometimes we confuse it with indecision. It's not! It is absolutely what it is: it is between things but still it is a thing. The feeling of ambivalence can be named.

I noticed in the back of my diary, I wrote as part of my resolutions for the 2011, that I wanted to become an authority on something, even if it were my own practice. And although that sounds contradictory, it's about feeling that you can confidently speak and know about one thing. When I wrote it I think I thought it was to do with a process, even a theme. Writing more and more personally and trying to communicate to people broader than the people who know me became a real challenge and really important. This writing was about personal experience but knowing how to fictionalise it, having experienced things first hand and having felt very deeply about them. I think this is ultimately closer to what I mean about being an authority on something. I want it,

BEARD, SWAN, CLOGGS, MUZZLES OF BEES ... they have been pretty strong images for me, here.

positive or negative, to evoke feelings of empathy over sympathy.

JG Lets return to the original statement I came to this discussion with; being away.

SP There has been two things that have killed that for me. One is Skype, the other is paid work, which I have been doing whilst I've been here. Skype, the idea of somebody in a different city but conveyed in real-time through image for me has been quite incredible. It has satisfied me enough to not feel lonely or not to miss my family too much. But what it did do was heighten a lot of physical feelings of loss – of missing somebody ... I found that my senses were heightened by the things I have missed!

JG Looking at the work you've made here I suddenly, now, see you as an image-maker, through the 'graphic' sculptures and through the images that jump out of the texts: a man masturbating into a sink, eating – no – *chewing* a beard; obtuse wooden clogs; the neck of a swan being throttled – resonant images.

SP BEARD, SWAN, CLOGGS, MUZZLES OF BEES ... they have been pretty strong images for me, here. I had a contretemps with a resident here [in the Tetterode building] about how the image of the swan is ultimately un-mineable because it is so laden with symbolism and mythology. This was with the backdrop of Jan Asselyn's *Threatened Swan* image printed out three times in the living room – an image that obviously means quite a lot to a Dutchman. So he started speaking about Republicanism and allegory and I was there just speaking about a man killing a bird and trying to find a way through that. I've wanted it to be another bird and I wrote about it briefly; how it could not be. How can you free yourself from the knowledge of myths that surround objects, myths that spill over one another so that even the idea of, for example, a swan breaking a man's arm becomes part of our parlance? These are the kind of myths that have half-truths to them and I think about the structures

around them that created that image. For me, it is not about the swan, per say. It is not even about a man with his hands round the neck of a swan. It is about that moment of death in an animal that is equal to the size of a man (equal if you were to draw an oval around them both). And that man killing a bird and feeling nothing, like an Albert Camus character, or feeling that there was nothing in the death, feeling a real sense of anger and loss because there is nothing in the death of this bird. There is no swan song because there is no swan song. There is no breaking arms or even hissing save for a slight gurgle when he chokes it, dispelling the idea of it being a mute swan as it is capable of making sound even if that is in its death throws. But freeing it from its mythology. Again, finding out that it is not a white bird truly, but more of a pissy-yellow bird. All of these things are about seeing it *well*.

Also, thinking about coming here with a big ginger beard and being told nearly everyday [pointing to his chin] that I looked like Vincent van Gogh, because it's a big ginger beard and I am a big bald man with a big ginger beard – that feeling of weight and the spongy 'give' that it has. Seeing in the mirror almost every day my father and knowing "this is not the best look I've ever had!" It is about the beard as an object. As my wife said, "it feels like it has nothing to do with how you look anymore; it is just something you are mining for your art." When she said that, she nailed it on my face for a couple more months. I want to see it (the beard) without its baggage of repulsion, of hobo-ism, of somebody who doesn't care. Or on the flip side its associations with being some sort of thinker. Instead I wanted to begin with something that feels completely personal: my beard!

JG When I grew a beard I could only see my father in my face, so I had to get rid of it. Then the most recent time I thought "this is ridiculous I need to make it my own." But it doesn't work.



‘I can take a lot of pleasure in the knowledge that people can be repulsed by the feeling of my face.’

Untitled (2011)
plaster, ink and graphite 270 x 210 x 25mm

I'm becoming the man that I remember!

SP An exorcism through facial hair! I feel exactly the same. The only image I have of my father in my possession is him clean-shaven and wearing a wig. This is completely the opposite of the way I ever saw him in my lifetime. For me, at the moment he is as much a character as anything. He is a character as he died anyway. This is to do with trying to relinquish some of that as well. These stories or emotions have nothing to do with him, or the image of him, or the image of his death or even the experience I had of seeing him dying, nor of my grief. I see more and more the wonderful image of my mother and the image of my daughter, and, now, the image of me.

JG That takes me back to the term ambivalence, wanting to dispel something and also wanting to

indulge it at the same time – it has to be both!

SP I also want to get away from the image of the beard. When the fog is up, as it has been here which is amazing as it rises – it doesn't come in; it rises – droplets of water cling to my face, then kissing somebody and they are absolutely repulsed. I can take a lot of pleasure in that; in the knowledge that people can be repulsed by the feeling of my face.

END