

# MATT JOHNSON AND FRANK BENSON

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**FRANK:** So, Matt, I think your work is very generous. You make sculptures that are sophisticated, yet anyone can appreciate them. Do you think it's important for your work, or for anybody's work, to be accessible at a lot of different levels?

**MATT:** Well, not necessarily. That's not necessarily important in order to make good work, but it's nice when that happens. Accessibility is probably the wrong word. When I think of accessibility, I think, like, handicap-accessible bathrooms [laughs] and things like that. I would say it's important for work to be rooted in the world that people live in and in the relationships that they're dealing with. People dealing with what's physical and things like that. I think it's important to deal with themes that aren't alien.

**FRANK:** And with subjects that are familiar to the viewer? Or materials?

**MATT:** Yeah, but people have made great work by using barely anything. I think it's important to make work that people can relate to, and that I guess could be defined as accessible work.

**FRANK:** Do you think there is any particular quality that you put into your work that people can relate to specifically?

**MATT:** Well, I think my stuff is really rooted in the natural world. Maybe one reason why you would say it's accessible is that there is a familiarity to the work. You don't necessarily need a lot of prior information to "get" my work, but I consider that a quality, not something that's imperative.

**FRANK:** In relation to that, I feel like a lot of recent sculpture sort of falls into two camps: formal abstraction and works that are found objects or works that are based in surrealism. But I've never really seen you make a work that I would consider completely abstract. Why do you think that these two modes of working—formal abstraction and the found object—are appealing? And why have you chosen to work in one mode and not the other?

**MATT:** I think they're appealing because what else are you going to do? That pretty much covers everything. I'm sort of interested in things that are geared on the one side; it gives me greater control over what I'm doing. It gives me reasons for doing what I do. The works take on clear-cut paths, so it sort of gives me direction.

**FRANK:** So the object that you start with gives you the direction? Is that what you're saying?

**MATT:** The form and its relationship to what it's recognized as. Because if something is sort of formless, its reason for being is under question and it can get confusing for me. Why would I do one thing and not the other? Whereas in the other camp, I feel my directives are clear.

**FRANK:** I feel that some artists who work more abstractly might choose to use an object in their work for the very reason that you might not, because of its formlessness or unfamiliarity, and because the decision to choose each object is based solely on its formal qualities and how they can be used, rather on its connotation as a recognizable object. We kind of discussed this before, when we were talking about Macrae [Semans]'s and Jed [Caesar]'s works and about how they sort of operate without a tether to representation. I was just wondering if you ever felt like any of your pieces reach that or what you've done that has come closest to that?

**MATT:** The one thing I've done that probably comes closest was that tarp thing, which is reminiscent of a crumpled piece of paper. It was stiffened a little bit but still was malleable and sort of took on whatever form it did. But that—surprisingly, I didn't feel liberated by it. I kept trying to make it into something, like the way certain cliffs start to resemble old men's faces. The cliff's not enough for me; I need to see the face. I was always trying to turn it into something. I'm always trying to find things within things, whether it's physical or mental. I think in a sense those camps aren't actually so dissimilar; it just looks like a different door, but it's still a door.

**FRANK:** It seems like you were unsatisfied with that original piece because you kind of return to it in one of your most recent sculptures, with the piano player, and you made that piece you were talking about where you used the tarp but made it look like something else in a really elaborate way. I guess you'd say that's pretty key to the work being satisfying for you?

**MATT:** I try to build layers up in the work, and any way I can do that is appealing to me. If I felt I could figure that

out in another way, I would. With that piece, it just seemed that's what it was, that's all it was, and I wanted somehow to make it more than that.

**FRANK:** Sometimes when I'm working on things there will be a point where it's not the sculpture I planned it to be but there's something really appealing about it. Like if I'm working on something and I put a layer of Bondo on it and it pops out and looks really good, but it's not what I planned it to be at all, I usually keep on going. Sometimes it affects the way the sculpture is finished, but I usually keep on going to finish the idea that I started with, although I feel like some other people might just stop there—like they're open to that formal beauty that might emerge unexpectedly. Does that ever happen with your work?

**MATT:** Yeah, but not necessarily in form or in practice but more like in my head—if I'm thinking about something and something unexpected happens and I'm drawn to something else, or something like that. Usually when it comes to working out the piece physically, sometimes there's this, "Oh, this finish looks good," but rarely does the piece change completely and take a new direction. I usually try and map all that out in thinking. But of course I wouldn't rule any of that out.

**FRANK:** We both went to school at Maryland Institute. We both went to UCLA. Our work has been compared to each other and everything, but it also has been compared to Charley Ray's work and the work of other people at school. At what point do you think you stopped being a student? Do you feel like it was the moment that you graduated, or sometime before, or sometime after?

**MATT:** When you're in school, you're in dialogue with your peers and with your professors. There's a certain level of approval that you're looking for and that you get among your peers and the faculty. It sort of builds you up and breaks you down and develops your confidence in what you're doing and what you want to do. But there's a certain point where you stop looking for that approval. It stops being important. You start just really executing what you want to do. You stop caring so much about what people think. I think that's what the schools are designed to do, to develop you as a thinker. I don't know at exactly what point it happened for me, but I would say that it was shortly after school, probably when I was working on my first show right after school. I stopped working for others and was just focusing on my work and I think it was right around then.

**FRANK:** Do you feel that it took you a while to really solidify your identity? I'm kind of interested in how at first, when any artist's work comes out, people say, "Oh, that reminds me of this," or they compare it to the work of others who came before. Then later there's a magical point where people say, "That's like a Matt Johnson." You become the person that they refer to. That even happened—did you read the Whitney Biennial catalogue?

**MATT:** Oh yeah, with Hannah Greeley.

**FRANK:** Yeah, we missed out on when we were supposed to be in there or something.

**MATT:** Yeah, we're already references. It's funny, there was an article that Pascal [Spengemann] passed on to me—I forget the guy's name, unfortunately, who it was about—but Roberta Smith wrote it and it was about this guy who was making miniature works of other people's art.

**FRANK:** Yeah, I'm not sure what his name is either, but he works in New York and he sells his pieces on the street there.

**MATT:** She dropped my name as one of those references. But I'm still not sure if she was talking about me or someone else, because a lot of people have my name. [Laughs.]

**FRANK:** I'm pretty sure she was talking about you.

**MATT:** You think so? Because that was really strange for that to happen, because that was sort of the first time that had ever happened.

**FRANK:** Yeah, it's really strange to see your name in print in that context.

**MATT:** Yeah, it's kind of cool.

**FRANK:** It's like, oh, people know me. I remember that Andy Warhol once said he wouldn't think he was a major artist until Picasso knew who he was. I thought that was pretty good. I'm sure Picasso found out who he was by the time he died.

Since I lived in LA and you are still there, I want to ask you about that context—with Hollywood, and everything that gets produced physically for the movie industry, props and scenic backdrops, animations. There's just so much creative output, and even though a lot of it is not necessarily interesting, peripherally the companies that

make everything and all of the resources that are there in LA can be really useful for making a sculpture. And all the natural resources that are there—for instance, you mentioned that you can get stone easily. You can work outside. I wanted to see if you could give me a few examples of how you use the city in your work?

**MATT:** Yeah, mostly the landscape, I think. Like you said, I dug up a piece of sandstone from a friend's property.

**FRANK:** What were you using that for?

**MATT:** I'm doing a sandstone piece. I'm making a ventifact. A ventifact is any stone that's been shaped by windblown sand. They occur mostly where there isn't a lot of water, like Death Valley or something. Once water is introduced, it changes it a little bit. It's funny; I'm making this ventifact that resembles a Picasso sculpture, actually. You know the death's head, the weird skull?

**FRANK:** Yeah, that's a great one.

**MATT:** So, I'm making this object that's a ventifact. It's a piece of sandstone that I'm sandblasting, so I'm carving it with wind and sand. I'm taking this natural process and replicating it as a form of making a sculpture, but the end result will resemble a famous work of art.

**FRANK:** Right.

**MATT:** That's why I needed a piece of sandstone.

**FRANK:** The landscape in LA is what you find inspiring?

**MATT:** Yeah, the landscape... It's got the mountains, the city, the beach, the desert, and the forest. And they're all pretty close together—within two hours you can get to any of those things. I don't really mess with Hollywood or special-effects stuff. I'll buy some silicone at the store, but I don't really draw too much from that industry.

**FRANK:** You have been increasingly interested in really traditional materials like bronze and stone, as you just mentioned, and things like that. That doesn't really have any use at all in the film industry.

**MATT:** Yeah, they pretty much use Styrofoam and fiberglass, which I'll use for specific applications.

**FRANK:** Speaking of Hollywood, do you think that a sculpture can ever have the mass appeal of a film or a

good pop song—not something bad, but something by the Beatles? Can you think of any sculptures that have achieved that? I have some in mind.

**MATT:** I don't know. A good pop song, a mass-appealing film, or whatever—they're experiential and sort of temporal, whereas sculptures are these objects and they just sit there. So the viewer sort of brings to them his or her relationship to the object, to the sculpture, whereas the pop song or the film brings everything to the viewer or to whoever is listening. Viewers will interpret as they will but it's kind of a different beast altogether.

**FRANK:** Sometimes I think sculpture just becomes famous over time, but I feel like something that did that was Jeff Koons's flower puppy.

**MATT:** Oh, the flower puppy. I thought you were going to say the Michael Jackson one.

**FRANK:** Yeah, that would be an obvious illustration of it, but I actually think that the flower puppy had that capability of just stopping everybody in their tracks, both people who weren't really knowledgeable about art and people who were really well-educated about art. All kinds of different people were stopped by that piece.

**MATT:** Do you think if it didn't have the flowers in it, if it was just a topiary bush, would it be the same?

**FRANK:** A lot of things that are kind of specific to Koons as an artist and his ability as a sculptor really contributed to that. I don't think that just a topiary bush that is part of traditional landscaping would have had the same power, because I don't think anyone had ever seen flowers used that way, and just the sheer scale of it, and then the subject, the puppy itself—it's one of those sculptures or an image that can appeal to a child for one reason and an adult for another, perhaps more perverse reason. I guess it's something that he tries to do with a lot of his pieces that have an appeal at different levels.

**MATT:** Multifaceted. [Laughs.]

**FRANK:** Multifaceted, yeah.

**MATT:** That makes sense.

**FRANK:** I don't know if you think that's important or if it's just something that happens. I always think he thought about it as an important thing to do. From reading things

about Jeff Koons, I think he wants to draw more people into the art world and to draw more people in to appreciate his work. I think that it is partially why he made that sculpture of Michael Jackson, because he's the King of Pop. I think Jeff Koons, in some ways, admires Michael Jackson, maybe more so at the time when he made that sculpture. But Koons was also using him—Michael Jackson himself is a fascinating subject. I feel like Koons was attracted to him as a subject partially for Michael Jackson's ability to reach so many people.

**MATT:** Yeah.

**FRANK:** I don't know if that's important to you. I'm just trying to figure it out.

**MATT:** It's not my goal to reach a lot of people or draw people in the same way Jeff Koons does. His scale is so grandiose. I'm definitely interested in a small approach, but making something that people appreciate outside of the art world as well as inside does interest me. I'm sort of in tune with that, as far as he's concerned, but right now my scale is just a completely different thing and I think that has a lot to do with it too. There may be similarities between something that sits on a table and something that sits in the town square, but in the end one is public where the other's private.

**FRANK:** I want to come back to that later with another question, but I would like to ask you something about the wordplay in your work. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word "dumb" means "unable to speak or mute." The second definition is "silenced by surprise or shyness," and the third is "stupid or ignorant." The dictionary defines "pun" as "the humorous use of a word to suggest different meanings." Many of your sculptures involve visual puns, but the physical manifestation of those puns can become something really surprising. I'm thinking about *The Crow* and *New Mask*, the masking-tape piece, and even *Wicked Curse Reversed*. *The Crow* is a crow fashioned out of five bent and twisted crowbars, and *New Mask* is a mask made of masking tape, but both are subsequently cast in bronze. Some of my favorite artists, like Duchamp and Bruce Nauman and Richard Prince, have all used dumb puns in their work to expose the futility of words. I was wondering what the role of wordplay is in your work? Is it just that the title comes afterwards, or is the pun part of the initial idea?

**MATT:** Most of that stuff gets worked out in advance. It's a way to layer and encode things, but also to bring about

and expose the relationships with form and language, what things are... What was the end of that question again?

**FRANK:** I just wanted to ask you what the role of wordplay is in your work and how it reflects your relationship to language in general.

**MATT:** Sometimes a certain piece just called for it, like with the crow. It allows me to relieve some of the weight from the work but also add layers that are seemingly complex—but the pun actually reduces the work, makes it a little simpler. There are relationships with words and their forms, and it's a way to add another element. It can become like a riddle, or something that can be figured out, or a problem. I think it's just a way to add something to the form, what it is and what it represents or what it's made of, and then the relationship to the work that describes those things. I think it's funny sometimes.

**FRANK:** Do you think your titles have the possibility of stopping people's interest short because they find too easily what they think might be the reason for making the work? With the masking tape piece, for instance, at first it's really creepy-looking, but then when you realize it's masking tape, it does lighten the work a bit. Do you think that kind of stops the work?

**MATT:** No, I don't think so. People are going to think what they think. That piece is more about self-portraiture than anything, about the tradition of self-portraiture, and the removal of the artist from the self-portrait. It just happens to be a mask made out of masking tape, but that's definitely not where that piece ends. That may be what some people thought, but I'm not necessarily concerned with that.

**FRANK:** Where did the *Wicked Curse Reversed* poster come from?

**MATT:** That was actually made as like a commemorative object for the Red Sox winning the World Series in 2004. People have said that they were cursed for eighty-six years, since they traded Babe Ruth.

**FRANK:** And that was important to you because you're from Boston.

**MATT:** Well, yeah, I grew up in Boston and I grew up watching the Red Sox and they would never win. They would always come close but something would always happen. Superstition sets in, and people think the team is

cursed because they haven't won since they traded Babe Ruth. When they won—even before they had won, when they were trying to win—people were saying, "Reverse the wicked curse!" and blah, blah, blah. So it became this mantra, and when they won, it was just a statement.

**FRANK:** Was it appealing to you because there was this air of superstition around it?

**MATT:** Yeah. It stems from that, and then it becomes about so many other things. I was interested in it because of what it meant and what it came from. A lot of people come to the work not really knowing that, and it's still interesting to them, so it has that collaboration with superstition—not collaboration but relationship with superstition. I sent one to somebody and they said, I can already feel my life getting better. Whatever that means. *[Laughs.]*

**FRANK:** When I first met you, you were making a lot of work that was outdoors and in the public space and ephemeral, but a certain body of your recent work, which you did during and after school, was on a small scale and made of archival materials and usually displayed indoors. What do you think the two bodies of work have in common, and what do you think caused your shift from the ephemeral, outdoor works to the more recent works that you've been making?

**MATT:** I think that they're really similar. The stuff that I was doing before and the stuff that I'm doing now is pretty much the same exact thing, but just in a different place. They're both these subtle interventions. One is into objects and the other was into the environment, into the landscape. I think that was because of the place where I was working. The place had a big effect. Baltimore is a small city, so I was doing these big things outside that were really under the radar, and LA is this huge city so I sort of did the opposite, and investigated what's really small and seemingly unimportant. I would say that the place really dictated those shifts.

**FRANK:** Do you feel that there is a parallel between how these two bodies of work operate within their contexts? I'm thinking of things like *Two Orange Peels*, (which is an older piece within the new body of work that is two orange peels that resemble an elephant cast in bronze and painted tromp l'oeil). In terms of the way that it sits on the floor and is kind of inconspicuous, it seems to operate with respect to the gallery similarly to how the older, outdoor pieces operate within the outside world or the whole city of Baltimore.

**MATT:** Yeah, totally.

**FRANK:** *Two Orange Peels* was sort of inconspicuous, but other works are confined, in a way, to a pedestal or to a certain way of viewing them. How do you feel one jives with the other?

**MATT:** In the same way, really. When a piece is confined to the sidewalk or a billboard or a tree, it's not very different from being confined to a pedestal. It's just a different scale or a different setting, but it's pretty much still confined. Even though it has an air of not being confined, it still kind of is.

**FRANK:** How independent do you think a work of sculpture should be from its surroundings?

**MATT:** I think it's important to figure that out—unless a work is inherently good, whatever that means. If something is inherently good, then it's dependent on nothing other than itself. Whether the thing sits on the sidewalk or in a museum, it shouldn't change.

**FRANK:** I think that one of the hardest things to achieve is a work that has inherent qualities, that is a really good piece of sculpture no matter what's surrounding it, but is also not too entirely self-contained. It sort of expands. It inhabits the whole space that it's in. I feel like that can happen regardless of the size. I'm going back to the orange peel sculpture, because even though it's a very small-scale work, it's on a real scale, and the way that it's placed on the floor, it attaches to the space and makes it all a part of the sculpture. It can really exist. It functions really well on just the tabletop or in the whole room. Even a piece like the *Endless Ice Sculpture*—I've seen that on a coffee table and on a pedestal, in different places, and it sort of has the same effect wherever it is. I guess it's because the elements of the sculpture—ice cubes stacked in a glass—are a part of the real world, so they sort of inhabit the real world in that way.

**MATT:** I think that the expansion of something started to make me think about how there's something in a room or whatever, and how it can expand after you leave the room, like it continues to expand temporarily in your mind or something. That's a sign of success right there. If someone makes something and you leave the place and you're still thinking about it and then you start to think about it in relationship to other things that you see—like, say you see something on the street that resembles this other thing—then it's expanding how you interpret things. That's a goal,

I think, to make something that continues to expand, not only physically but also mentally for the people who are confronted with it.

**FRANK:** In thinking about your work, I realize you've made work made on various subjects and in various materials, but if I were to name one quality that sort of unites all of it, I think it would be the miraculous. I just wanted to know why you keep returning to that? Why is there always something kind of miraculous about each piece? Can you talk about that?

**MATT:** Oh, that's pretty cool, thanks. [Laughs.] That's a pretty heavy word.

**FRANK:** I feel like the word itself could either be something very spiritual or something that is magical, which is a very physical understanding of a miracle.

**MATT:** The only way that I can respond to that, as far as approaching sculpture—I don't know if this is true or not—is that I'm sort of under the impression that anything is possible. As far as probability theories go, there's a highly probable chance that anything you can dream up could exist somewhere. Chances are there's someone else in another universe, talking on the phone, who looks just like...

**FRANK:** Even if the chances are a million to one or a billion to one, there is still that one that has to happen.

**MATT:** When you do the math, it's like a 99.9 percent repeating chance of the probable. Maybe I have that in the back of my head and I'm just interested in these really far-out possibilities.

**FRANK:** That's something that's universal for people—you can appreciate that miracle, even if it's on a very small scale, in the same way that most people could. It's like something that's balanced. Taking the example of \$1.08 (a small pile of change that was shrunken using electricity), or any of these things that seem like the impossible made possible—I feel like that is such a universal quality to tap into because we're all dealing with the same things and we all know the limitations of our world. I think everyone can kind of appreciate it that way. I remember we were hanging out at school one time and you were reading about a machine that could make anything you think of. Do you remember that?

**MATT:** Kind of.

**FRANK:** Do you still wish you had that machine? Or do you feel like there is something about the making of it?

**MATT:** I feel like it still wouldn't work. It's kind of like the difference between the synthesized drugs and the drugs that grow out of the ground or something—it's still different. There's something about it.

**FRANK:** Yeah, there's something that happens that wouldn't happen in the dream machine.

**MATT:** On *The Jetsons*, when they make food, they just type in to the computer what they want and it comes out. I always kind of wanted one of those machines, but if you think about it, the food probably all tastes the same. If you think about it, everything is made up of the same shit. There are these little things that change things that we can sense.

**FRANK:** Yeah, some of them are by accident and...

**MATT:** Yeah, like how the tomatoes in Italy taste better than they do here. It's the same thing, but there are subtleties. I don't know if machines can gauge subtleties the way humans can, or at least they can't yet. Let's hope they never can, because then it will be like fuckin' *Terminator 2* or something.

**FRANK:** So we were talking again about dumbness and we were trying to clarify that.

**MATT:** You were just saying that you were trying to find a way to put it in, to talk about it, but in a way that wasn't... I was just saying that we all appreciate what's dumb. I mentioned *Beavis and Butthead*, how really stupid it is, but also how it can be really funny. We all understand dumb. Ignorance is bliss.

**FRANK:** If you know too much, there's too much pain.

**MATT:** The more you know, the more pain you endure. That's funny. ■■



