

Falling
Short
of
Knowing

Brett Littman for PS1 Radio

On November 30th, 2007 I sat down with Norman Mooney and Ran Ortner in New York to discuss their upcoming New York, Wiesbaden, and Moscow exhibitions. I was intrigued about the genesis of this show because the artists are close friends and do regular studio visits with each other. Both artists also share an almost primordial undercurrent of energy and immediacy in their work. However, in the end it is apparent when you see the work side by side their individual pieces stand in stark contrast to each other in terms of content and their visual impact. In this interview I wanted to parse out the similarities and dissimilarities between these two artists in terms of their personal backgrounds and their artistic practices to better understand the choices that they make and ultimately what makes their work unique.

LITTMAN: Norman, can you talk about how you got involved in art-making.

MOONEY: I graduated from the National College of Art and Design in Dublin in 1990 with a focus in sculpture. I have continued to make sculptures but recently I have been working two-dimensionally.

LITTMAN: Scale has always been quite important in your work. Early on when I met you in 1993, you were working very large scale.

MOONEY: Scale has been important and the work has always been very physical. A sense of the relationship between yourself and the object is really a central issue in my work.

LITTMAN: When you were in art school, were you exploring different media, or were you working mostly in metal?

MOONEY: Initially I worked mostly in metal and stone. Later I worked with glass.

LITTMAN: Ran, can you talk a little bit about how you began making art.

ORTNER: My original background, my real drive as a boy was a bicycle, then as a teenager it was motorcycles. In my late teens I became a professional motorcycle racer. I loved the physicality and energy of racing and how the thrill of this flight totally engaged my body and mind. So in some ways I feel that my interest in art came out of motorcycle racing which can be viewed as a kind of performance or dance.

At 21 a knee injury ended my racing. So I moved on to surfing and painting. My mother painted. Mom and her friends would read art instruction booklets and then they would come and paint at our cabin. I saw a kind of freedom in painting, and thought it would be very nice to have something that had this kind of portability, that could be done anywhere. It's something that didn't require the same kind of vigorous physical power that athletics did. When I started painting I had very naive ideas about what good art should look like. I thought the more luminous and the more detailed something was, the more I felt one could enter into it, then the better it was.

LITTMAN: The relationship between physical activity and art, and I think in your case specifically sports, is a pretty important aspect of your own life. In terms of your current work can you talk about relationship of your body to the paintings? There is a perceptible sense of energy that's placed right into the image.

ORTNER: Absolutely. I am also working with large scale. The reference point for my work is my body. The arc of movement, the range of movement, up and off the ladder, back, that moving in and out while I am painting feels like dance. It is a different kind of intimacy than I have, say with a book, or something that is scaled to be held. With something small you can get a quality of tenderness, but with something large you are forced to deal with the immediate visceral aspects of it. I think that quality can be particularly enlivening because you're both exhausted and you're touched by the magnitude of the process.

MOONEY: I think that's where Ran and I really connect in our work. Even though our processes are so different it is that intimacy when you physically engage in what you're doing. That relationship expands your experience and new ideas come out of that.

LITTMAN: Norman you've gone through quite a few progressions in terms of your own working method. You've been making drawings now with a blowtorch and using smoke and carbon as the medium. How did you start working with this process?

MOONEY: I had been focusing on form and density for a long time in my sculptural work. Using the blowtorch and carbon as my base materials allowed me to deal with a more subliminal idea of form. The drawings started with the smoke being this ethereal medium that produced density. I think for me I

needed to find a new material process with a sense of solidity and form without using metal and stone. The drawings also happen very fast. I set everything up and the setup is a big deal and we get all the big panels hung in the air and then when I'm actually doing the work it literally is over in about five minutes.

ORTNER: Which is fascinating. That is a dramatic difference in our approach because I spend very long days as a painter. My head is always well ahead of my body. I'm always trying to get myself to catch up so I'm moving as fast as I can, but I put in very long days.

MOONEY: Ran is always pissed off when he comes over to my studio and I am finished with about 10 pieces and he is still working on one painting.

ORTNER: It really is disgusting!

LITTMAN: That is a huge difference between your working methods because Norman you're one shot. It works or it does not work.

MOONEY: It is true that I have to throw away many pieces because they just are not quite there.

ORTNER: I find that I am chastened by the process, the physical exhaustion by painting long hard days. I am on and off the ladder and up and down all the time. I work with large portions of the painting and I am moving as fast as I can. I see so much possibility and I become enamored with this possibility and then I become careful and the piece starts to fail. At that point I need to be irreverent and come at the work again from another vantage point. Through this back and forth I feel my surface gains experience. I find that art can be amazing in that it is like a battery that holds this energy, and I feel that the more I put into the surface the more I get back this amazing devotional quality of pathos that becomes married to the surface.

LITTMAN: Ran or Norman, do you think the places you grew up and their distinct landscapes play conscious or unconscious roles in your work.

MOONEY: I grew up in Dublin, Ireland but also spent a lot of time outside of Cork which is on the south coast of

the country. The connection to and the feelings that I have about art are very much influenced by those surroundings. The sense of awe when you're standing on the edge of a cliff by the Irish sea and feel a sort of continuum with the landscape and power of the ocean is what I am always trying to achieve in my work.

ORTNER: I had a fairly unusual upbringing. My father was a missionary and a bush pilot. From age five to eighteen we lived in Alaska and spent time in South America. One constant in my childhood was the magnificence of the landscape. The power of these landscapes gathered in me over the years as we spent so much of our time flying our small plane around Alaska and South America.

LITTMAN: Ran, in terms of the subject matter of your current paintings you mentioned surfing and your relationship to the ocean. I imagine this is a pretty important reference for you. Maybe you can expand on this a bit?

ORTNER: As a surfer I have very specific relationship to the ocean. I see it as a kind of intimacy that marine painters of the past may not have had. Even great sailors and people who have really known the ocean do not really know waves, how they break, how they form, where they're feathering and crumbling or holding up and hesitating, exactly how they move.

20

Since surfing is a relatively recent activity I think it is a new point from which to understanding the ocean. On my board I feel this energy that comes, these series, the pulse of waves that is very much like music. It is this non-material energy moving through the water that is so powerful.

Again this may be another reason that I like Norman's work. In my mind his work is not really about carbon or about smoke but about energy and movement.

LITTMAN: You also both tend to work with a pretty monochromatic palette. Norman in terms of your own process you're working with whites, grays, and the thousand shades of black. Ran, your paintings don't really have any color either.

ORTNER: I work with tri-tones, really a complexity that registers as muted grays and ivories, silvery blacks.

LITTMAN: Do you think that there is a kind of strategy behind that or is it simply that it gives you the ability to rework that surface and get that depth and that feeling of movement.

ORTNER: No I think it very much is a strategy. Obviously as artists you're looking at things all the time, you're looking for a balance between what you are seeing/felling and what the best way to engage it. This is a conversation Norman and I have - we talk about restraint, how holding something back can allow mystery and enigma to come leaking out around the edges. This can be much more profound than rainbow colors in a painting.

MOONEY: I just don't see color in my work. It is as simple as that. For me there are tonal shifts, which bring out the ideas and emotions that I want in the drawings. Color would just diffuse the experience for me. The tones and shades of the carbon should just be enough to hold the point of contact between myself, the viewer and the form.

LITTMAN: One observation that I had about a major difference in your approaches is that Norman is likes to center his image and Ran you like to move the eye around your painting.

21

Norman's image is right in front of you and that sort of forces you to go into the work. Ran, in your paintings I feel like you are always painting right up to the edge. It's almost a full bleed and you don't ever find the center in your work because your eye is always moving to take in the totality of the image and follow the pulse of the energy of the wave forms.

This leads me to ask why you are interested in showing together. What is interesting to you both as artists about placing your work side by side or in the same context?

MOONEY: We didn't really conceive of putting our work together. Curators, collectors and critics who have done studio visits seem to feel that there is some elemental connection between us.

ORTNER: It has really come about because we have always supported each other as friends and artists. This whole thing has come about from people that have come to see the work and then identify this very deep thread that Norman and I both share about art making and our practice.