

The following interview between Paul Cullen and I occurred by email during August 2007. In it we discussed the relationship between his sculptural practice and modelling. Topics covered include the historic relationship between the model and sculpture, the conceptual nature of models and modelling, and the playful ways Cullen disrupts existing patterns or models of organisation, thought and behaviour. We also discuss how *engaging* the viewer in the process of contemplation is a fundamental outcome of his practice.

Mark Kirby

M.K. I have on the wall of my office a drawing that was reproduced in the Falsework catalogue from your recent exhibition in Melbourne. This image contains some furniture, a ladder, planks of wood, and a number of globes; all of which seem to be floating about as if in outer space. When I hung it I couldn't decide which way it should hang, which side was up and which was down. This is of course perfectly congruent with outer space, because out there, there is no gravity, no up or down. I am aware that gravity is of interest to you, or rather, something that you use as a beginning point in a wider interrogation of systems or structure.

P.C. Gravity has always preoccupied sculptors and I'm interested in it because in a conventional sense it is a defining attribute of the discipline of sculpture. The drawing you refer to proposes a situation in which gravity is suspended and objects are freed from their normal earth-bound condition. In my drawing, a system of support is hinted at with lines and props but as you point out the exact way to orient the drawing isn't clear because I provide no unambiguous indication of up or down. Parallel with this in some of my recent sculptures I've propped objects off the floor and against the ceiling in defiance of gravity. But actually gravity isn't the only subject matter and for me a significant concern is the idea that my sculptures may be considered models.

M.K. I assume this interest in models comes from your background in science. I note that your first degree was in chemistry, which is a discipline concerned with understanding models of the smallest and most complicated kind. But models also exist in far less erudite and everyday environments; my son's bedroom is littered with them, and they are fundamental to how he plays and learns. In light of this can you explain for me what, from your point of view, constitutes a model and the act of modelling? At first glance the definitions seem quite clear cut, but your work suggests otherwise.

P.C. It might come partly from my background in science but I think it comes also from the enjoyment I had when I was young from buying and making models, particularly the assembling of the parts and the diagrams that showed you how those parts fitted together. Back then a model was something quite specific for me but I eventually came to realise that there were also models which weren't toys. So to answer your question, a model, I think, is a representation and makes sense to us by referring on to something outside itself. A model can make visible the very small (the DNA molecule for example) or it can be at a reduced scale like a world globe. There are of course abstract mathematical models, but I'm primarily interested in models which have a tangible physical form. Models can be a way of visualising things that don't yet, and may never, exist. Models play an important role in sculpture too and so this also makes them even more interesting. In sculpture models or 'maquettes' generally can be regarded as an intermediate state, one which allows the artist to trial an object to be made at a larger scale, usually in some other material.

M.K. To me all art models something, be that an idea, a view, an object, an emotion, or some other thing. Both art and modelling seem to be processes that implicitly involve representation, which as you say could be of something that exists or something that is hypothetical. The subject 'modelled' can also be material or abstract, it can have material or immaterial form. Your work has made me interested in the notion of the 'immaterial model', which could include theories and philosophies, values and beliefs, ideologies, behaviours, et cetera.

P.C. Yes it may be true that all art models something but I'm primarily concerned with various types of physical models – and particularly models which have some kind of demonstrative

function. Most of the works in this exhibition are model-like in the sense that they appear to represent something - the rotation of a plastic orange in "The Orange Theory" is an example and with this work I've used the title as a means to further enhance that possibility. The plastic orange of course was already a model (of an orange) before I incorporated it in the sculpture. I think what happens through this incorporation is that the possibility that it might in fact now be representing something other than an orange. All of these sculptures have been made using existing objects with use value, like pencils, furniture and books. This is important because in being made into these sculptures they lose their practical use-value and so can only model this intended function.

M.K. What you seem to be saying is that your objects are more than they seem, that they carry metaphorical or other references to other models. I suspect most of these are in the 'immaterial' category. Can you outline further what these references might be?

P.C. Well one of the things that happens in these sculptures is that objects which are already models, like world globes or the orange, are placed into a relationship with other objects. The chairs and tables in these sculptures, or the books penetrated with pencils, have their usefulness interrupted and so can be regarded as no longer "useful" in a practical sense. They can only model this usefulness since they are no longer able to perform it. So the objects which began as models become incorporated into new models but there is no way of determining what they might be models of.

M.K. This suggests, as do your comments about gravity, that you are very much interested in disrupting how people think about those models that occur within our lives; you are in a sense playing with them. I like this approach, primarily because it opens up the world, by disrupting what is already there, and then offering alternatives that have no particular conceptual form. It turns viewing artwork into something akin to a game, which I think fits nicely with your references to your interest in models as a child.

P.C. In one of your earlier comments you mentioned the "act of modelling", which is something conventionally associated with sculpture. It's an additive process that involves working with a raw material, clay usually, which is shaped by hand and formed into a sculpture. I would regard what I'm doing as an act of modelling but not one which involves modelling in this conventional sense. For me making sculptures is a constructional process and my raw materials are existing objects. I use existing objects because they have use-value and carry associations deriving from their usefulness. I select objects for incorporation in my sculptures on the basis of formal attributes, which make them suitable in a practical sense, but equally because of the associations they bring. Rulers, for example, which I have used quite extensively in the past, propose reason, science and objectivity.

M.K. Further to the above ideas, you seem to treat the individual objects that comprise each specific sculpture like words or phrases that when combined, within the 'syntax' of your compositions, form narratives or stories. This is in the nature of most art, which communicates ideas through signs and symbols; and where meaning is able to be more or less shared if the language is common to the artist and audience. However, the strangeness of your objects denies a specific 'reading' for anyone; rather, you allow playfulness to take over at the point of viewing, and enable each viewer to bring their own 'dialect' to each work. As such, I suspect that for you, the point is not so much what each object 'means' but the process of contemplating itself. In this way, I would suggest, your work presents a 'purposeful gibberish', facts or in some cases science reinterpreted into 'nonsense'.

P.C. What you call 'purposeful gibberish' arises out of a deliberate juxtaposition of the apparently rational and the absurd. By making sculptures that link to science, objectivity and reason are suggested but in the context of the sculptures this is contradicted. Some of my sculptures suggest purposeful activity; "The Orange Theory" or "Fox Circle" for example. In the latter, the rotation of an arm made from a ruler could be interpreted as a demonstration of some sort. The arm has green plastic things sticking through it which look a bit like gherkins and these rotate continuously. "Models, methods and assumptions" on the other hand employ seemingly irrational and purposeless activity: drilling holes through the books and then poking yellow pencils, or segments of yellow pencils, through the holes in the books.

This activity is read in the context of the books and their titles; "Maps", "One hundred harmless chemical experiments for boys", "Avian anatomy", "Curtains" and so on. So as you say, the act of contemplating these is the point, rather than any possible meanings, which aren't necessary.