



# EMPIRE

MARCUS KLEINFELD

## NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION

For this exhibition Marcus Kleinfeld has devised eight large-scale sculptures. The subject of these works is the artist's view of reality, his perception of the world and how people live and behave in it. The sculptures acknowledge in formal and psychological terms some of the key characteristics of our world - power, hierarchy, wealth, greed, oppression, domination and conquest. At the same time they communicate human experience - what we desire, strive for, fear, fight against and consume - our weaknesses and our suffering.

For Marcus Kleinfeld objects have their own authority, yet presented as sculpture they can be charged with new meaning and power. The artist lifts readymade objects from the worlds of factory farming and prisons to reveal machines and apparatuses as traded commodities in production and use. In other works he fabricates anew to allow abstractions from the original object, again taken from the realms of agriculture and detention. He also creates mutant sculptures - somewhere between the state of readymade and fabrication these objects retain their original association but take on a new, emphatic meaning by their treatment or installation. All of these recastings, rebrandings and resignifications concentrate political potency.

The word Empire alone evokes strong images – colonialism, oligarchy, corporate imperialism and ideological hegemony. It is also the title of Negri & Hardt's book Empire. Published in 2000 it proved, according to the London Review of Books, 'the most successful work of political theory to come from the Left for a generation. It addressed directly a central political issue of the 21st Century: the perceived distance between ordinary people trying to live in the way they want and the systems of power that defeat them'. Both the notion and the book provide two useful inroads into the sculpture of Marcus Kleinfeld.

WORKS EXHIBITED





Dereliction  
Five pigmented plaster casts  
Each: 90 × 45 × 60 (d) cm (35 1/2 17 3/4 × 23 1/2 ins)



Nets  
Hay nets and shredded paper  
Dimensions variable



Empire  
Steel trough, marble and rubble  
169 × 365 × 305 cm (66 × 143 × 120 ins)





Totem  
Steel, paraffin, black mulch  
250 × 100 × 100 cm (98 1/2 × 39 × 39 ins)





Method  
Steel crowd barriers  
240 × 218 × 90 cm (94 1/2 × 85 3/4 × 35 1/2 ins)



Urge  
Salt lick bricks  
Dimensions variable





Dialectics  
Hand painted hessian sacks and black ribbon  
Dimensions variable

## SOURCES















IP I know you as a painter. Yet in Empire you present a primarily sculptural show, do you make a distinction?

MK It is true that the first works of mine you saw were paintings and prints. This makes sense, ultimately I trained as a painter - and making paintings will always remain part of my practice. Yet, nowadays a practice should be more than simply sticking to your tools no matter what. There are things I wanted to work on that needed of another mode of expression, a different physicality. In short I am not someone totally committed to painting come what may. In the beginning I was interested enough in the challenge of the material, the format, the history that comes with the medium, and to an extent I obviously still am. But with time and by looking at a lot of art I saw the potential for what one could say or show. I came to realize the inherent freedom that one has to make a statement as an artist.

There is a limitation to painting as a medium. You are generally constrained to making marks on a wall-mounted surface and though there is an honesty to this limitation I knew I had come to a certain culmination. From there I had to either continue an exploration into a very personal relationship with the material of paint, developing a practice that would become political in its self-referentiality, or else accept where the limits of painting were, making a decision to work within them at times and outside them in other media whenever it seemed necessary.

Outside a 'traditional' structure of painting there are more possibilities to make a statement. There are certain subjects that you can try and modulate, working them into a framework that is concerned with painting, to try to 'translate' them into the medium, but sculpture is a more effective way to negotiate them, i.e. if I want to make a piece about the conditions of 'storing' or containing people I can better use a structure that was made to do something similar. I could paint a crowded prison, but I think transformation for the viewer happens when they see something familiar and make a connection with it that is somehow revelatory. Experiences like that stick more than purely descriptive renderings. All possible methods should therefore be explored to speak the truth, and all forces united, one method may not always suffice.

IP Does painting still have merit?

MK The things that are powerful about painting are just these shortcomings. It can be very direct because of its limitations. It has something placative that an artist can use, and it refers not just to its own history but also to advertising or propaganda - any poster or banner you have ever seen could potentially be a painting. I respect anyone who believes that making marks on canvas for the rest of his life is an activity worth pursuing. I lost my belief in the validity of such an exclusivity some time ago, and I guess that for most of the past 5 years my painting has always also been a conceptual exercise.



In the past years and decades fixed, solid systems of authoritative weight and meaning have become increasingly obsolete. The world has diversified and become more and more complex, it has in many ways become more heterogeneous (whilst, paradoxically, also becoming more homogenous). The definitive rights and wrongs in teaching or practice have disappeared, everything can be quoted, combined, refigured and so on. We know this since the advent of so-called ‘postmodernism’ and probably before that. Now we live in this world of limitless opportunity and endless visibility through an even greater anonymity and banality. You can see millions of individuals speaking to webcams on youtube or dancing or cooking, yet although they are intrinsically individual, in their mass they become collectively uniform. I think that strategies to make things visible, or to lift them out of this stream of inane perpetual recurrence require strong substance and measure, which painting can offer.

IP I’m interested in how you see this divide. Do painting and sculpture (or painting and print-making etc) offer vastly different opportunities - different methods of indoctrination and communication? They have different empires?

MK I believe that there are very different, and perhaps wider, opportunities within sculpture when compared with painting. The things that surround us are mostly made for specific purposes. The possibility of using real existing objects and products and displaying them in an altered context to either heighten or change their inherent presence is nothing new, in the same way that putting paint on cloth isn’t. Yet I believe there is an immediacy of encounter with presences that have bodies (in opposition to being 2D) that holds an incredible potential. This world surrounding us is constructed; it is mostly man-made, and we are moving within its structure. Navigating it involves making decisions, meeting other people and becoming part of the structure and its products. I feel that we can see the overarching system, the design,

within the pre-existing objects and structures. The great quality of the readymade object in comparison to the self-made painting is that it was designed with some sense of purpose or functionality. Sometimes it just takes one little more action to point out this purpose, and it becomes transformed before our eyes and within us.

IP I imagine you would be somewhat uncomfortable with particularly political questions – as is appropriate, you are more focused on macro-symbolic-matters. Nonetheless, do you have an ambition for social critique through your art?

MK I know many people believe it is naive to think that art could really critique something and be heard, because its reach is incredibly limited when you compare it to mass media. It doesn’t change my prerogative that my ambitions may prove futile in practical terms. It is a privilege as an (exhibiting) artist to be able to put something out there and take a stand - most people will never be able to have a platform or voice.

I don’t think art needs to have a social function and I understand everyone who is not interested in this potential or doesn’t believe in it. Yet to me, the greatest art tells us something about ourselves and the world we live in, it confronts us, and that is generous in itself. There is also mystic art about existence which can be transformative in a universal way outside of whatever social construct surrounds us at any given time, Eliasson for example. I would be happy to make such art too, without needing to refer to harsh realities of human psychologies, and I may at some point - for ultimately, my outlook is positive, I still believe in the possibility for change.

If you look at my works from the ‘crowds without qualities’ period, many elements are somewhat disguised or unclear - words need to be deciphered and put into relation and so on. They’re not as ‘immediate’ as the sculpture is. For me this is no judgment of their quality, but with the sculpture show I wanted to do something physical and immediate in a way that

... I cannot with my paintings. I don’t think they’re necessarily ‘social critique’ as such. As they are, they just depict ‘problems’ or discourses and you do the math. They are not direct enough to say: ‘the government shouldn’t shorten welfare payments’ or something. They also don’t say generally ‘the world is a bad place’. I think they just aim at something within the human mind and history that is within us all, which we all feel and that is quite difficult to put a finger on. It’s like a shadow from a kind of inherited sin, a stain or something. It’s perhaps social in a sense and critique in the other, and of course it also refers to institutions and politics, but overall I think it’s about systems that we feel and experience, a psychological state.

Marcus Kleinfeld speaking with Inigo Philbrick.  
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