

joseph havel in conversation

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with executive director peter doroshenko

What was the concept for the recently postponed exhibition at the Asia Society in Houston?

The Asia Society Exhibit was my contemporary response to an exhibition of Chinese ritual bronzes from the Shang to the Han Dynasties; about 1600 BCE to 220 CE currently on view there. These were ceremonial bronzes used in ritual ancestor worship that are incredibly beautiful and exquisitely crafted. I decided to direct cast bronzes from contemporary paper and cardboard items called Joss bought in a store "The Exquisite Buddha" in Chinatown San Francisco near where I have a condo. Joss items are cardboard versions of ordinary objects intended to be burnt to send the material goods to deceased relatives. It too is a way to connect ritually with ancestors. In making them I tried to present as much the action of the process and the burning of the originals in the final works.

Sculpture - how has that label evolved over the years?

I honestly don't think about sculpture that much. I never really considered myself a sculptor but a few years ago accepted the label for convenience. I originally took to making things in order to slow myself down putting some degree of craft between me and the final manifestation of the idea. I suppose more broadly sculpture has become messier and more inclusive as it embrace all aspects of time since it requires time to be fully legible.

How has your art changed over the last thirty years and why?

My practice has changed in incidentals and appearance but in some fundamental ways remains grounded in the same attitude. The grounding point asks at what moment does the ordinary become extraordinary and the common refer to a larger cosmos. I mostly have taken things out of my surroundings and used them to ask questions about the foundation of our beliefs and behavior, history, politics or other ethical positions. Usually there is both some sense of elegance balanced with irony. There is both a belief and a doubt in the possibility of art to transcend its circumstances and refer to more than just me or itself. After that the investigations come in about shirts, domestic fabric, labels; currently I am collaborating with my African Gray Parrot Hannah who is carving wood and cardboard as I assemble it sometimes casting in bronze. We are trying to see what it might mean to try and communicate across species with empathy. I'm also making drawings and collages that asks how we determine at any given moment where we are in time and space. There are still traces of other thought systems too such as the series of six label works I'm finishing during our stay at home moment. I think a lot less linearly then I used to as I now think in questions and these things bounce around in how they need to be manifested.

Does literature and music influence your thinking?

Music is pretty primary for me. I have written and recorded many songs since 1999 or so and have played off and on since I was eleven. I play in a band that performs some of the songs. Literature is important to me and was particularly earlier as I worked through some meaningful texts, John Berryman, Samuel Beckett, Sylvia Plath, Haruki Murakami, George Perec to name a few. At the moment literature is playing less of a role as I am trying to hit something visually that is almost preverbal. Maybe that's why the music is currently more important as although I write lyrics they would not be literature outside of songs. Of course books may become important again...it's just not so much of a touchstone now.













about joseph havel

Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1954, Houston-based artist Joseph Havel is a sculptor who has worked with bronze, resin, and fiber materials over the last thirty years. His work has been exhibited widely in the United States and Europe, and is in the collections of many museums, including the Pompidou Center, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. In late 2020, Havel has been invited to exhibit at the Asia Society Texas, Houston. In 1987, he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Artist Fellowship and in 1995 he received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Artist's Fellowship. Havel has served as Director of the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston since 1991.