



John Summers interviewed  
by Ellen Mara De Wachter on  
26 April 2012

**Ellen Mara De Wachter:** Your sculptures often develop over time, going from one form to another quite different one. These transformations are the result of your adding materials, taking them away, and also a very physical kind of interaction with the works which sees you jump on them, remould materials by punching them, throwing things at them, etc. Can you talk about this physical relationship you develop with the works? Why is it important to you to interact with them in such a physical way?

**John Summers:** Dependent on the material I use and how it operates, how I can play with it, crush it, fold it, or do whatever it allows me to do, and how the piece can be placed with something else, or leaned against a prop, it will begin to develop and suggest ideas about what and how it can become. Once I've got the piece and it seems strong and I'm gripped in with it, it gets to a point where I think: just leave it there, it's great, it's fine. So I might leave it for a couple days, or I might think: forget it, it's too obvious why it's interesting or nice. So I try to push it even further, to go beyond the familiar aspects of why it's interesting, but also to push the material beyond its means and what we recognise it for. I might slowly start to push it or mould it or fold it, and I can get so wrapped up working with it that the next minute I'm jumping on it and beating it with a steel pole, or throwing it in the corner or whatever. But I am aware and conscious during this kind of intense, extreme physical beating, which spirals up as a kind of tornado of energy which gets put into the piece. Eventually I stop and see how the piece is changing before my eyes. There's also an inner drive of knowing that a piece needs a certain kind of attention. Until I feel satisfied with it, I keep working on it. Some pieces, I will work into the ground until they fall apart and disappear. But others stand the test of time. They get a good workover with whatever means I use and then I leave them alone. I might go back to

them later, or something will just happen all of a sudden and, there you go!

**EMDW:** It sounds like a real relationship, where you are testing out the work and asking it to stand up to you, and if it doesn't, it disappears. I really like the idea that you are making something that is an equal for you, that survives your assaults on it and then that you also survive the demands for attention it makes on you.

**JS:** It's a bit like a fight, in a way.

**EMDW:** Yes, or like a mutual becoming. You and the work are reciprocally affecting each other: you're listening out for what the materials are asking of you and then you act on them in a kind of cycle.

**JS:** Yes, and there are so many variables in how the works come about. It's not all just hands on. There are points when I stand back and look at colour, height, width or whether a certain part is or isn't working. All these things are broken down and digested and then left alone. It's a real clash in ways of operating: just grabbing something and chucking it around is really spontaneous, whereas standing back makes me feel very different. It sometimes makes me feel hesitant and distant, wondering whether I'm just decorating or approaching the work like an interior designer.

**EMDW:** The visual associations or referents for your works are often classical in nature. Can you say a bit about how you choose these sources: what are you looking for in them, and how do you transform them from existing sources into the works you make?

**JS:** I go to museums and I love ancient art and I'm very influenced by those sorts of things, but not in a deliberate sense. I don't think about them when I'm in the studio making work. The closest I get to anything like classical sculpture might be that some of the works start as a figure,

in a very basic way, almost like a stick man or a scarecrow. They are starting points which slowly and inexplicably evolve. People might see ancient ruins in the work, but they would be made out of tin foil or covered in some sort of furry fleece. Maybe subconsciously, there's a certain language in the work, which is a combination of historical and modern meeting somewhere in the middle to work together. But none of it is pre-thought.

**EMDW:** Your work and classical sculpture both seem to have undergone a degradation of the figure in which the figure's integrity is broken down by time, the elements, devotional touching or at your own hand. There's a starting shape which is intact and then there's the form where it ends up, which retains the memory of where it started.

**JS:** I guess what I do to these figures is to acknowledge a process that is also nature's own process.

**EMDW:** You often work with found or everyday materials, rather than art materials as such. You've used toilet paper, kitchen foil, carpet underlay, second-hand clothing. In re-purposing them, you somehow corrupt them, but by doing so, you also bring them to life. What guides this transformation of an everyday thing into a part of your work?

**JS:** A lot of it boils down to discovery. At the moment, I am using a lot of tin foil, fuzzy neon fake fur and toilet paper. I use what's at hand or what I have in my studio. In 2010 I made a piece with a pink hoodie on it, which marked the beginning of a new line of work using old garments I had in bin bags in my studio. I started to pick up a way of using certain things, realising how they work. It's a really slow process to teach oneself how to use some materials. I might go down to Camden High Street or Berwick Street market and see a great material or object, which looks amazing. And I might try to use it but realise I can't because

it's got so much presence that it's too much of a dictation: I can't bend it, I can't squash it, I can't break it, it's invincible and beyond my means. I can't make it into anything that it wasn't already when I brought it into the studio, and that is problematic. So I end up discarding it. Things like tin foil, toilet paper and clothes can be twisted, crushed, draped. They are very malleable and can be moulded to all types of structures. I need to be able to push things so that they can be turned into something else while still remaining themselves, so they have a dual meaning.

**EMDW:** There is a stylistic aspect to your work, which I would describe as grotesque and humorous. Your sculptures are figure forms, but they are often distorted, distended or deformed. Yet they are also reminiscent of monumental sculptures like the Easter Island statues, or prehistoric effigies such as the Venus of Willendorf. You made a sculpture last year which was a cross between the Venus of Willendorf and Mr Snuffleupagus from The Muppets. When the sculpture was finished, you placed it on a Twister mat, which you mentioned had "freed it up and made it more upright". Can you talk about the place of humour and the grotesque in your work?

**JS:** *Snuffleupawillendorf* is a 6ft tall hunky, chunky body covered in furry brown fleece. The form on its own wasn't quite isolated enough, and it was so freaky and weird that it needed to be pushed back a bit so you could really see it. It needed to be highlighted and given a kind of glow. Placing it on top of the Twister mat pulled it away from any references to ancient artefacts. It was suddenly placed on a disco floor or something. And the furry aspect of the Willendorf came alive and was framed within the mat. The mat isolated and contained it and put it in its own place. I started to realise this was a strategy that I could carry through with other pieces, which would involve some sort of lumpy, chunky

form and incorporate straight lines to frame or contain the form and bring it into a kind of order. Another work has a big lumpy piece of foil, which had been a figure I crushed down and attached to a door on which I stuck a Piet Mondrian poster. The poster added a kind of grid and an order to this big battered lump of foil on the other side of the door. They brought each other alive and became something other than what they were before.

Someone might look at the sculptures and think: 'Ugh, that's not slick or neat'. I have a fascination with how you can walk around a city like London and see a combination of different kinds of architecture all knit together. So you'll have a historical building, a super-modern one, a corporate building, ruins, a busted-down wall, a new one with scaffolding on it, and a crater full of mud. All these things come together and constantly change – and this is what I see in my work. A particular material might end up looking like a ruin, or an old bit of discarded gum, or something someone has trod in. All that visual energy is subconsciously going into my work. I'm also not very good at making things neat, so my sculptures will come out chunky and lumpy and not straight, as opposed to a lot of work which is slick and looks like it has come off a conveyor belt, and is so shiny, but also hollow and sealed up, that if it gets one nick on it, it doesn't work anymore. My work reacts in a different way. It's very hands-on, twisted, looks like it might fall over, is visually ugly, maybe looks like it smells, and I'm more interested in having that come across.

**Artist's presentation**  
John Summers  
Sunday 27 May, 3pm

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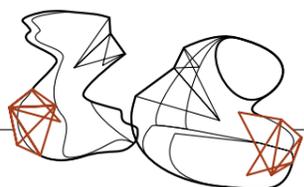
Reverse:  
John Summers in his studio  
Photo: Tim Bowditch

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