

in conversation

This outoftheCUBE transcribed interview was held with Neill Wright by Mandy Conidaris and Kevin Sneider (OOTC) 13 June 2013. We were discussing his solo exhibition work at Circa, Everard Read Gallery. Part of this exhibition is exhibited on outoftheCUBE.

NOTE - The sculptures discussed in this interviewed may be seen on Neill's website www.neillwright.com

OOTC - Shall we start by talking about the Dr Cleva paper works?

NW - Let's rather start in this room because these [sculptures] are what lead to Dr Cleva, because my concepts were broader here in terms of covering a variety of spectra. This is about products of society and how situations lead to certain things arising like, because of the history of our country and the now-massive differentiation in wealth between people, poor crime-ridden areas have sprung up, with gangsters and drugs and all of that. But then further, due to the lack of resources, there is vigilante justice, which isn't right, but you can't blame people for taking the law into their own hands when situations are desperate. [Shows us two works side by side, *Scrapmense, Fire and Bridgestone*]. So these two are antagonists I guess, and that's why I want to show them together, one is the exact opposite of the other. You can't help but feel sorry for both of them, they are just products of a sad environment, a cycle that perpetuates itself. Then [shows another sculpture, *Another Place, Another Time*] that little girl, due to that situation as well, can fall pregnant or become the victim of assault or rape, this exists especially in the third world where you've got this huge gap, it's only a 10-minute drive from complete affluence to this [poverty].

My work is quite politically motivated, although I don't want to push the politics, as we are bombarded by it. I bring politics in although tone it down and look at the social dynamics which are a direct result of our politics, a result of this predatory culture which has developed in South Africa. Lip service is paid yet nothing is done and people are getting angry which in turn spills over into all facets of society. Unfortunately, we live in a very angry country.

And this is quite a desperate dude [shows another sculpture, *The House will always win*]. I live close to Gold Reef City & I went to a show there & you just see booths there with guys like this, smoking, just trying to turn a little bit of cash, you can't blame him, we are just so privileged. Privileged to have been given great educations, and I guess a head start in life.

OOTC - You mean the way Casinos are often developed in blue-collar areas?

NW - It's like the Lotto, you see people who've only got 5 bucks getting into the queue, not educated to the reality of the odds. I mean I can understand a guy liking blackjack or poker, but one-armed bandits!

Then that led me to a whole system of people who misinform other people, which led me to this guy with the flier (*Unlock your life*). I used him as the embodiment for everything around exploitation, and the different facets of society where this exploitation occurs, not just in casinos and fliers, but into the religious realm as well, with these prophets we see advertised everywhere.

OOTC - The way religion can become the ultimate means to exploit people?

NW - Exactly. My uncle, in the 1970s, spent 10 years with a band of /Gwikwe Bushmen, living with them, learning from them and documenting their lives through photographs and written accounts. There is a sense of unity and equality in the way they dealt with spirituality, and a stark contrast to how certain facets of the western religions often just prey on the vulnerable with this idea of pardon and wealth. *Prophet Pander and the supernatural chicken*, has taken the idea of exploitation further. It's about the product of propaganda, and it's a clever product, so with time a whole load of new characters will be coming along too.

OOTC - Who is Prophet Pander?

NW - Prophet Pander is about the charade, you are in the performance and get blown away by the whole energy around it, you don't actually get to see the reality. It's something I feel strongly about, but want to show it lightly, without it becoming too serious. I want to keep that element in my new sculptures [shows us sketches for new sculptures]. I feel that by carving big tears & gluing them onto the sculpture, and adding the little money bag at the back, it's like this joy, this double-edged sword, they cry because they want to make you believe the spirit is pouring through them but on the other hand, it's 100 000 people at R100 per head.

What I like about Prophet Pander, when you view it like this, it's in the context of a show, he talks on his own, and that is important to me. My favourite sculpture at the moment is Brett Murray's *At the trough*, where there are two little pigs humping, but if you take it out of the context of *Hail the Thief* it's just two pigs humping, unless you are aware of Brett Murray's work. I want to try to make the work readable on its own.

OOTC - Work does need to live in isolation away from even the intention of the artist, because ultimately it will move away from that context anyway.

NW - That's why I need for this guy to be able to live without context. I was initially going to play on that idea of a prayer for Africa, the National Anthem, God bless Africa, guide her leaders and all that, but that just becomes step one, it won't stand alone. So at the moment I'm dealing with the theme of exploitation.

OOTC - Are you going to be making your sculptures in wood from now on?

NW - I think wood and bronze. My sculptural work is more serious than my printed and painted work, which is more humorous.

OOTC - It is, and it's easier to engage with the prints and paintings at a more direct level, we are familiar with the *Mageu* carton and these kinds of pamphlets – well, in South Africa we are - but these [sculptures] require information from the artist.

NW - And they require more thought on the part of the viewer.

OOTC - Yes, whereas these [*Dr Cleva* series of prints] are - I'm not saying they're a quick fix, because for me they're not, they are clever & sophisticated - but instantly you can engage with them at one level and take something away with you, and then if you want to take the time, you can engage with them at a deeper level.

NW - Yes, the point is there for you to read easily.

OOTC - Also it references the pamphlets that you pick up in the street, as soon as you pick it up you know what the guy's going to offer you. For me, the *Mageu* container is really clever because the kind of text & imagery, it's really aimed at people who are often desperate, even the 'keep chilled' – it's quite an ironic statement, which I assume is on the carton - has that other layer of meaning.

NW - Some of them have layered meanings, for example, in terms of government tenders, & literally soft & tender. I've often been asked, aren't I just laughing at people, but I'm not laughing AT people, just trying to create awareness through humour, of how desperate people are to fall for this sort of thing.

OOTC - You haven't had any copyright issues?

NW - No, I did check the boundaries with a lawyer, and believe it's not an issue, what I'm doing is not an insult to another brand, it's actually using the power of their brand to comment about a facet of society. I've altered logos, added in my own elements, like the dice referring to chance or luck. And changed the colours.

OOTC - Your choice of colours?

NW - I just wanted to use bright colours, but the one I feel more for about colour was the purple one [*Put bad spell on all your enemies*], for me purple has associations with the occult, a supernatural vibe, to do with spells.

I've shown these prints quite a few times, so with the bottle caps I want it to start creating more of an international flavour, or rather a[n African] continent flavour, whereas the prints are more specific to here. Now I want to start working with objects without always wanting to be figurative, bottle caps, fliers, that is how the message is spread.

OOTC - Will you speak about the posters next [*Your life is my life's work*]?

NW - The layout was just about driving through Joburg, through town, and you see these false prophets. It's not just one poster, they bang you with about 15, pasted one on top of the other I wanted to have that feel, and the title, *Your life is my life's work*, I think there's no emptier phrase than that, no one can say that, not even doctors, real doctors. Is he really saying, this guy, that he is dedicating his entire being to making you, whoever you may be, better? And the wording 'run for help now' felt like 'run away' but it was more 'run to me, as fast as possible, if you want'.

OOTC - And this work [sculpture] *Prophet Pander*?

NW - I've had such a good reaction to this show in part because of this work. I've never worked with wood before, and I really enjoy the fact that it's finished as soon as you've carved it, so I want to keep this natural wood thing going. I want to use Jacaranda & play around with staining with different colours & patterns, for example on the shoes. I'll minimise the amount of paint that goes on, I want to show off the wood.

OOTC - I think it's a nice shift from the bronzes

NW - I do still like the weight & time associated with the bronze.

OOTC - Do you make them first in clay?

NW - No I make them in Superwood first, carve them.

OOTC - Do they burn away in the mould?

NW - No they make a silicon mound, then cast the wax, then from the wax make a ceramic or plaster mould, and from that they cast the bronze.

OOTC - So these are originally wood carvings? So wood's not that new to you as a medium?

NW - Natural wood is new to me, working with the grain etc. So I start with little sketches and tweak the colours and play around with that. Then from there I play around with Superwood, and I treat them so they come out looking like plastic & from that they are cast. They get damaged in the process, so they can't be used afterwards as work. I tried with clay and it's not as forgiving as wood in terms of holding its shape, it dries out, it sags.

OOTC - Clay's really a more organic finish than you want?

NW - Yes. The caster said, whatever you give us in wood, you'll get that back in bronze. So I thought for me, the Superwood is the easiest way to get it from this shape to bronze.

OOTC - And the bottle caps series are paintings.

NW - Yes, hand-painted, acrylic and silver enamel to get that metallic rim.

With the bottle caps, I wanted to push the idea of the ridiculous. I chose my spelling errors, like in *Never Fale Ale*, and the supernatural colours. It's also about Dr Cleva and exploitation, *Lotto Cola* and gambling, *Cosmic love portion*, my favourite is *Miracle money* and the fact that no one has caught him out is ridiculous.

OOTC - How much do you think superstition plays a role in this?

NW - I think a big role because they're crossing the boundaries between the power of western religions and the supernatural, and people take these two things very very seriously, and like you say, the desperation behind it pushes that even further. Like this one [*Hoodwink*] is tongue-in-cheek, he's telling you how he's manipulating you with your desire to manipulate other people.

OOTC - In a way it is reminiscent of issues raised in Cameron Platter's work?

NW - Cameron Platter, I love his work. I don't want to be too influenced by him but we are working with similar themes.

OOTC - Well they are real.

NW - What I like now though is that I'm moving away from the flier to an actual product [bottle cap], which is taking it a step further into the dynamics that co-exist in this situation.

OOTC - Have you ever had any comments about why you, as a white man, are dealing with this kind of issue? And how would you respond to that?

NW - Yes I have. My work is not really about race, I'm not commenting on a race, it's more that I want to comment on certain elements in society. My intention is not to offend people, but to create awareness about these characters.

OOTC - Like Anton Kannemeyer's work?

NW - I love his work, but he pushes boundaries that I really wouldn't want to. He's talking about what's lurking in the subconscious of all the different races & how they view each other.

OOTC - It is, of course, one thing seeing it everywhere in the streets, & another taking it & putting it in this context, because here a statement is being made, its being translated from a pamphlet into an artwork, framing it and putting it on the wall of a gallery totally decontextualizes it from its original function.

NW - I'd love to get these works supernaturally empowered by a healer because that would add to the story, like this one, the guy guaranteed me that it would save my future, and then there's also that element of, can that honestly be? - so many people believe in that, can there be some tiny element of truth that you don't understand but that you're trying to tap into.

I try to make my work function without relying too much on heavy titles. I want to avoid making angry blatant work; because you get angry about certain issues and can easily transfer that anger into the work. I prefer to change it into a subtle joke, I think it will resonate for longer through laughter than through shock value.

OOTC - I want to go back and relook at these works because one needs actual time to read them.

NW - That's why I like text in work as well as having imagery.

Thanks Neill, this has been really helpful.