



## A Critical Distance.

After a flurry of emails and a couple of phone calls Nick and I meet for a relatively informal chat about his sculptural practice and in particular his latest bid to work in the public realm. Nick's mind is focused on a large scale public art proposal which is a collaboration with interventionist, colourist, painter, Sinta Tantra. A couple of emails had me slightly concerned about the creative control of this article. Nick wants to lay some ground rules, he obviously likes some control. Seconds into the interview and I realize my suppositions couldn't be further from the truth, Nick is refreshingly open, welcoming, articulate and passionate about a wide spectrum of creative output.

The public art proposal is part of a recommendation by the Royal Borough's Public Art Panel to commission work for the Kensington Academy. Nick is up against the likes of Nigel Hall RA and Julian Opie to name but two.

Interview with Nick Hornby by Daniel Lingham – Friday 6th June 2014.

Q. You've recently been shortlisted for a public art project in Kensington, can you give us any details about that project?

*I can actually give you details down to the nuts and bolts, the foundations, the interior structure, the colour, the surface, the materials, the fabrication. In a project like this you have to present an vast amount of detail even for the initial pitch in terms of feasibility and timeline of the project. Even at a concept level the project has to be viable, so yes I can give you details.*

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Nick Hornby and Sinta Tantra. Photograph by Sinta Tantra

Q. The initial brief, was that quite open, did it allow you to have an open field in the sense of what you wanted to do?

*Yes, it's funny really, I can hardly remember the initial brief, it was quite open...I feel like I have internalized the notion of a brief for a public sculpture anyway. I know that the panel will be made up of arts professionals and people who have vested interest in the site, the value of the site, the use of the site, all sorts of different types of legacies. I'm aware that there is multiple pluralist audience. And then I am aware that the commissioners are looking for a historical narrative. The piece needs to be relevant to site and to be quite timeless. So the project brief can feel like it's riddled with complications. Me and Sinta, we're a collaborative pair so what's kind of wonderful is we will go to the site together and chat for quite a long time – we'll do almost 'sit-ins', breathe it in and try and have quite abstract creative association.*

Q. I was wondering if your collaboration with Sinta is as a direct response to the brief or was it that you decided to work together again and saw this opportunity?

*Sinta and I have been working on and off for a few years now. The first project we did publicly was in Canary Wharf. That was the first time we presented work together. She curated a project I did about 10 years ago and even if we're not working together on collaborative works we talk a lot.*

Q. I wasn't sure how the relationship worked because reading what had been written before it felt like you knew Sinta at Slade and then ten years later you're working with her and there's a big gap in between. It sounds like that's not the case?

*No, kind of, we weren't actually buddies at college. I was making videos; she was in the painting department. We reconnected later because we were both interested in the public realm and a similar type of art practice. In the main in England you have, with artists who work in the public realm, either blue chip artists who are just super-imposing their studio practice 'blown up', some of that works and some of it doesn't. Then you get artists who don't really have a studio gallery practice and they are proficient at making public monuments. And then there is a very small niche of artists who try and have a more prosaic practice that includes low budget risky studio sketches plus potentially very high budget large production public monuments. That was one reason why we hooked up because we both had this shared interest.*

Q. Do you feel it works well?

*You've come from diverse areas, you're almost at opposite ends of a spectrum and you've come together... We have nothing in common in terms of our sensibilities. She likes pink I like white. She has no sense of 3D and I have no sense of colour. My relationship to designing works is normally a sort of logocentric. I tend to create a methodology and act it out and her relationship is more intuitive, she's internalized a lot of the questions that have built up over time. Her vocabulary, her work, is as much to do with a creative understanding of the vocabulary as it is to do with trying to resolve a particular concept and a particular scenario.*

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The Broken Man in Cornforth, Hague Blue, Arsenic, Lush Pink, Incarnadine and Down-pipe, 2013

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Q. You've worked with Sinta before, so there's obviously something good going on between the two of you, but I imagine you have had to let go of something, let go of parts of the process. Have you had to work at that?

*You have to be open. When we first whacked a rather dark blue diagonal line across one of my sculptures, that was a little bit of a shock, but an amazing and fantastic one. Very unpredictable. Am I letting go? No, I don't let go for a second, we thrash things out.*

Q. You don't do one part and Sinta receives it and does another part, Like a Lennon and McCartney song?

*It's a weird thing, our collaboration, because there are lots of collaborative artists out there, you know, Jane and Louise Wilson or Gilbert and George, Noble and Webster, who don't see to have separate practices. Ours is unusual because we primarily have our separate practices but then collaborate on top of one another. We're interested in how the viewer deconstructs the artwork, how they understand its process, how they create meaning. If we're setting up a premise where you can already see potentially two voices not blurred in to one but kind of on a knife edge between being cooked as a singularity and remaining in the constituent parts then hopefully that implicitly raises that question about authorship, pluralism and multiplicity. Your question is 'do we pass the baton?'... The short answer to your question is no, It's a constant dialogue between both of our voices and we've been happy with our product. In the past we've used my sculptures to paint on because they were kicking about and they were a good starting point.*

Q. Do you find your practice isolating? I imagine not as much as I did, because you are doing these collaborations. Do you have to make that effort to reconnect?

*You know it's a funny question and it depends on if it's nice weather or not and what mood you catch me in, sometimes it can be lonely. I'm not sure necessarily that the loneliness comes from the isolation of the studio, I think it can be a lonely practice if you don't feel like you have kindred spirits and if you're not being connected to your peer group. Most of the time I do feel connected to my peer group, but it's quite a small group. A lot of the artists I admire conceptually are not trying to deal with the same practical problem as me. I'm currently casting some huge bronzes for a commission and the logistics around those types of things... I can't really share those. I feel a little bit isolated because I haven't got any friends who are trying to tread the same path as me. But in terms of the social life, I'm in London, there's between three and ten openings every night.*

Q. Do you go out and look at other artwork for inspiration? I

*go through waves, sometimes I'm quite good at going to openings and not talking to anyone, just doing what I need to do and disappearing. People always say you can't view art properly at openings; but I mean, they're crazy, of course you can, you just go in.*

Q. Do you try to avoid looking at other sculptors work, especially your contemporaries?

*No, I have an insatiable appetite. My references are often very historical and that is because quite often I have a distrust of the present, or I have a distrust of my ability to distance myself from the present. I am very aware that I am part of a trending culture, part of a body of 'us' and I'm just moving someone else's project forward a little bit. I don't really buy into this idea of authorship. For that reason I look back at historic artworks a lot because we have enough time to have a critical distance. I like to spend time in other arenas: industry, ergonomics, design, consumer culture, online culture, other art forms, dance, literature, music and theater. I think that because there's a lot of translation that happens from words and conversation like this, to drawings to objects – those sorts of transitions are good stuff, yeah I love it. As much art as possible*



All of Leighton in Hague Blue, Lush Pink and Cornforth, 2013, Nick Hornby & Sinta Tantra

*Q. You are not worried about being perhaps subconsciously influenced by something that's predominant at the moment?*

*Not at all, in fact the bulk of my work is like a Boolean operation. If you can imagine a Venn diagram, the bulk of the carvings are the intersected section of multiple quotations combined. For example, I could take the outline of a Henry Moore, a Rodin, a Brancusi merge that and carve away then that's the object. This idea of influence is completely pertinent to what I do. That said, I am contradicting myself because I am heavily authoring everything and that's inescapable as well. It's impossible to be an author and impossible to avoid being an author. With all things being equal...it doesn't matter how much quotation I do, they end up looking like a Nick Hornby.*

*Q. You've said in other interviews that you have tried to remove yourself from the artwork, perhaps trying to depersonalize or deconstruct your work by providing a dialogue of signs and references but in doing so you are creating a language; an identity in your work that is very personal. Do you think that perception is because you are not loosely expressive but quite controlled?*

*That's a really interesting question, and complicated. My approach to it would be, when I talk about objectivity and subjectivity there are two audiences for those questions, one is 'you' the audience and the other is me. What is subjective and objective to me is very different to the audience member, so one of the reasons I want to employ moments of objectivity, although I kind of reckon they are almost impossible, is to have critical distance, in the same way that time gives us that critical distance when we look at Michaelangelo, ancient Greek sculpture, or whatever is might be. It's a real buzz for me in my practice if I have something digitally cut then when it comes into the studio full size I want to orchestrate it so that's the first time I ever see this object. Now that's really amazing, it means I am fully author of the methodology, the approach, all of the components, all the semiotic, linguistic meanings in making this thing, but my phenomenological experience is for a brief moment before I become familiar, for a snap second I can judge it like 'you' the audience and I find that really amazing. I wish I could stretch out that period but tragically we absorb stuff so quickly that it then becomes familiar and I am no longer able to be critical.*

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Q. That's quite an exciting position to be in because you often want to be able to distance yourself and view it as though you haven't lived it – as though it's a totally new experience.

*I've always been amused by the anecdotes about historical ways that artists have done that distancing. For example, one of them is you hold your picture up in front of a mirror and by seeing in reverse you are distanced enough to see all the mistakes. Then there's the narrative of the artist stepping back from the canvas to see it clearer and I love that metaphor. It's a bit like the difference between cinema and television, in cinema you are this disembodied eye, you're floating, you have no sense of self and therefore you are entirely in the picture, whereas when you are reading a book or watching television you can see your Victorian china coffee cup, your plastic Japanese television, you're conscious of your slightly misfitting trousers, so all those senses of reflective are subconsciously blending into the narrative you are reading.*

Q. Going back the Kensington project, what can you tell me about your proposal at this stage of the process?

Kensington is a crazy place, it has the Palace, the V&A, it has Notting Hill Carnival, it has Trellick tower, it has Portobello and it has some of the most high net worth individuals in the world and it also has a little bit of social housing. The road I live on is weird-beyond. At one end we have five different examples of social housing (I'm talking about architecture now), neoclassical, neo-Egyptian, 70's modern. Adjacent to that is the oldest Sikh temple in the UK, on the other side is Elton John and round the corner is Bridget Riley. Just round the corner from where the site is Madonna did all her recording. When you make a sculpture for Kensington, it's difficult right, because of how to draw that all in, what narrative do you want to put out. We wanted to have a superstructure, some sort of conceit, some rationale to bring together a multiplicity of ideas. In the end we chose the idea of an arch because we thought an arch was a horrific idea in the main, in so far as it's such a signifier of colonial empowerment and top down authority. You have to think about these things, the point of a sculpture is to pose questions. Just adjacent to the school is the Gothic tapered arch that holds the railway that goes from west to east, east to west, and what was quite nice about it was that it was an oblique, it crossed the road at about 60 degrees. This one little shape created by the extrusion of a double Gothic arch and this brick Victorian bridge. So that's some of the context. One of the issues with education is that it's supposed to be this line of pedagogic beliefs. You start with Greeks and maths, Aristotle and Plato. It's like knowledge is built upon knowledge: if that is right, then this will be right too; if you learn these things then what you are saying is going to be right. You've got to learn the basics before you can break the rules. That's absolute crap. You don't need to learn the basics before you break rules. In fact the only thing you should really learn at school is to try and be introspective, listen to yourself and try and be creative. So trying to make a symbol for education, on the one hand the weight of history, on the other hand wanting to create rupture, we chose an arch, but we wanted to make an arch which was a composite of three things, and that was a bit off-kilter. It was about to teeter over. We have this very precarious, enormous eight meter concrete block sitting on top of a polished sphere and this tree trunk. The tree trunk is a digital blow up of the stone support that Michelangelo David has propping up the leg. This is really cool: stone can be very strong, you can do a lot, but it's also very brittle, so in the main free standing figures always have this prosthetic lump in order to support the narrow tapered ankle. Those things are really weird: you have stones, trees, animals; sometimes a chicken or a goat. I've seen piles of platted hair...really weird figurative conceit in order create this figurative support. So I love that idea of figurative camouflage, of an excuse: a figurative excuse in order to have this practical end. It's the relationship between the imperative, for an artist, and the idea. A sculpture has to stand up. It doesn't matter what the concept is, it is bound by gravity. For me that's the whole point of this object: we're throwing up semiotic signified meanings in to the air, but it is all bound by gravity. The tree stump in its own right is hopefully already invoking that question of a relationship between the logistics of the material and it's invocation. The sphere is a funny thing: on the one hand it's supposed to be this mathematical, perfect geometric thing and at the same time it's akin to a piece of municipal art. You can't go to a new build without seeing a bunch of polished balls, so it's kind of a critique of that municipal product, but also, it looks like an Anish Kapoor. We wanted to make a sculpture that had Michelangelo, Anish Kapoor and Corbusier.

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