

**JEFFREY MONGRAIN:
SECRETS AND REVELATIONS**

David Revere McFadden

“We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.”

Robert Frost, *The Secret Sits* (1942)

Jeffrey Mongrain is a purveyor of secrets. In his sculpture, secrets are exposed (but never fully revealed); these works do not announce, but rather insinuate their presence in the tangible world we inhabit and in the spaces through which we move. They are alluring in their purity and apparent simplicity, and seductive in their complexity and ambiguity. His works are exquisitely crafted in concept and execution, seemingly flawless. However, as the artist has said, “perfection is not an end in itself.”¹ Embedded in each of his works are tantalizing clues as to the nature of the secret conversation between object and context, between site and purpose, and between form and meaning. The duality of form and intention in Mongrain’s work

has been described succinctly by Glen R. Brown, who recognized that the sculptures “like faded photographs...interpose an obvious distance between sensation and the object they represent... that they *are* symbols rather than self-referential objects is an inevitable inference from their severely reductive yet still representational form.”² It is through a magical visual choreography that takes the viewer from the perceived and tangible perfection of form and surface into a much more nebulous world of sensation, memory, emotion, and intellect.

Mongrain acknowledges the influence of Gothic iconography and early Renaissance symbolism in

his work, specifically the ways in which quotidian objects are transformed into potent symbols, and more specifically notes his deep engagement with the works of the thirteenth-century Florentine painter Cimabue. In Cimabue's paintings, the deceptively stiff figures are carefully staged to evoke, on one hand, the specificity of a moment in time, but also the deep spiritual significance of the narrative, event, or gesture.³

Mongrain seeks a similar destination in works that he often describes as more "site referential," than "site specific," suggesting that the physical form of the work responds to the physical context in which it is conceived and executed, but more importantly its meaning is informed by the location in which it is displayed. The site of a work performs a dual function in such examples as his 2002 *Cathedra*, created for the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York City following a disastrous fire at the Cathedral in December 2001. Mongrain chose the elaborately carved antique bishop's chair (in Greek, "cathedra") as his site. One of Mongrain's familiar and distinctive gothic-inspired pillow forms⁴ was invisibly suspended above the

seat. Taking the work beyond the site referential was Mongrain's addition of a blown glass bubble resting in the indentation of the pillow, a reliquary-like container for ashes taken from the site of the 2001 fire. In this memorable work, the worlds of alchemy and mythology are imperceptibly merged in a simple object containing many illusions of authority, destruction, reverence, and memory.

By painstakingly grinding and polishing the surfaces of his clay forms, Mongrain creates surfaces that long to be touched and caressed. The artist says "I like attempted precision; I like the feeling of purity of touch in relationship to a form that evokes memories of tactile interaction." The artist has frequently commented on the relationship between touch and vision in his works, and probably nowhere is this more eloquently expressed than in *Balustrade*, a work from 2000 in the form of a segment of handrail built of pure white clay. While installed at the familiar height of a standard handrail—generally used to bridge between two destinations—*Balustrade* floats above the viewer's foreground in suspension, emerging mysteriously from the wall in apparent denial of the laws of gravity. The humble

and commonplace object draws the viewer to it through its tactility and its apparent function, but its surrealist vulnerability in space suggests a more otherworldly reality.

One year after *Balustrade*, Mongrain created another railing as part of a multi-work installation at Glasgow Cathedral in Scotland. *Litany Rail* (2001) comprised a single white handrail suspended in an arch leading to the crypt of the church. The viewer (or supplicant) at this railing was teased again by an intervention between function and meaning: in this work the artist embellished the rail with thousand of pearl-like beads, strung on long strands that stretch from the railing, fall over the architectural elements, and ultimately spill onto the floor. The luxurious abundance of jewel-like beads stands in stunning contrast to the austerity of the architecture, and the function of a hand or prayer rail is negated by its placement in a window arch. The evocative power of the work is immediate and suggestive: are these the beads of hundreds of abandoned rosaries or do the pearls represent individual prayers of worship, an allegoric veil, requests for forgiveness, or a frozen fluid gesture?

The potent image of the handrail appeared in an even more provocative context in Mongrain's *Listener Rail with Shotgun Blast* (2002), in which the mysteriously suspended rail floated against a plaster wall spattered with small holes created by an anonymous blast from an actual shotgun. Absolution? Retribution? Or a modern variation on a confessional's screen? The purposeful obscurity is there, taunting the viewer at every level.

Sight is referenced in two distinctive works by Mongrain that deal with the realities and distortions of vision. Mongrain takes us deep into the eye of one Dr. John Daugman, inventor of the technology that permits the iris of the human eye to be scanned as a means of identification as unique as a fingerprint or DNA sequence. The work is a large cream-colored articulated circular form, based on the oculus window so common to ecclesiastical structures and government buildings. The form, of course, refers to the all-seeing eye of god or government, or some combination of both. The center of the eye is filled with an enormous close-up of Dr. Daugman's own eye, a photograph directed by the artist. Issues of privacy and the invasion of

privacy, of security in a time of international insecurity, and the frightening nature of the scale of the iris, all contribute to a lingering sense of angst and mystery.

The eye is called into service again as a metaphor for philosophical vision in *The Philosopher's Halo* (2005) sited in the St. Thomas Aquinas Chapel of Christus Church in Baltimore, Maryland. Mongrain's continuing relationship with ecclesiastical sites as a setting for works that may or may not have specific religious connotations has been thoughtfully analyzed by art historians, most notably Glen R. Brown.⁵ The work was originally installed directly in front of the face of a sculpted figure of the Saint. Enclosed in its articulated frame was an optical lens that distorted the image of the Saint and, according to the artist "distorted his view of us," both a telling commentary on the controversial theology espoused by Aquinas.

The circle, the ring, and the disc reappear in many works by Mongrain. The circle is a shape that is immediately understandable and complete; at the

same time it isolates and separates itself from the viewer through its perfection. An untold secret may lie at the center unseen and unrevealed to the viewer. *Hollow Drop* (2000) is a black graphite and powdered iron coated 45-inch diameter clay disc that floats a few inches off the floor. The surface of the disc is modulated with concentric raised rings that suggest the ever-expanding pattern of a body of water created by a stone (or possibly another more personal object) tossed into its depths. The mysterious image is further removed from everyday experience by the insertion of a hole in the center of the disc and another hole cut directly into the gallery floor creating a momentary sensation of vertigo for the observer. The artist has commented, "I have sculpted water many times. My first sculptures, made at about the age of 10, were constructed and hidden underwater. Water has countless implications—purity, danger, sensuality, mystery. I think all of the objects I choose have the potential for multiple interpretations."

A similar format of circular discs featuring molded concentric rings is used in another series of works by Mongrain that explore another realm of sensual

perception—that of sound. These wall-mounted works, which resemble monochromatic paintings, are described by the artist as “sound transcriptions,” that are three-dimensional graphs of a pattern produced by vocal interjections or ambient sounds. *Atrial Septal EKG: 1st Open Heart Surgery, September, 1952* documents the sound of a single heartbeat from a young girl whose open heart operation became a landmark event. The work was conceived and first installed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the operation was performed. Mongrain’s first sound transcription, *The Eagle has Landed*, was created and installed in Newcastle, Australia, near the satellite dish that received the first transmission from the moon landing of Apollo 11 on July 21, 1969. Following in this series of visual sound transcriptions was a work created for the Diego Rivera Museum in Mexico. Titled *Green Grows the Grass*, the work featured a familiar cowboy song with the four words in the refrain; the elision of the sounds became the basis for the modern slang word “gringo.” The artist stated, “I think of these works as a visual version of the memorial texts. They are always initially made to be ‘place specific’ to where they are presented.”

Habemus Papem from 2005 documents the exclamatory phrase “We Have a Pope,” uttered by Cardinal Felici in 1978 when the election of John Paul II was announced from the Vatican balcony. The most recent in the series of sound transcriptions is *The Maple Leaf Rag*, documenting a fragment of the famous composition by Scott Joplin; the music was scored in Sedalia, Missouri, home of the Daum Museum where it will be premiered.

In his freestanding and site referential works, Jeffrey Mongrain takes the viewer on a journey into the world of experience and meaning on several concurrent levels. Physically and visually, Mongrain’s forms are simple, elegant, and even austere, drawing upon the humble elements of the tangible world with which we are entirely familiar and comfortable. The form is revealed with grace and virtuosity. At the same time, each of these simple forms encase mysteries; these are the signifiers of association, reference, memory, and science that inhabit Mongrain’s world. Secrets and revelations co-exist in these works, and it is the powerful tension that vibrates between worlds of site

and symbol, and of the tangible and ineffable that keeps Jeffrey Mongrain's work alive and evolving.

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¹ All of the artist's quotes were assembled in conversations and correspondence in September and October 2006, unless otherwise cited.

² Glen R. Brown, "Jeffrey Mongrain: Invocation of Absence," *Sculpture*, vol. 20, no. 5 (June 2001): 15.

³ Holly Flora notes the dramatic range of meaning achieved by Cimabue in paintings that sometimes tell "opposing stories: one of glory and beauty and the other of vulnerability and violence." See Flora, Holly, *Cimabue and Early Italian Devotional Painting*, (New York: The Frick Collection, 2006): 31.

⁴ See Janet Koplos, "Jeffrey Mongrain at Perimeter," *Art in America* (July 2002): 98. *A Night's Breath* from 2001 is floating black "pillow" that retains the impression of a head that has rested upon it. The indentation of the pillow is intended to hold exactly 8-1/2 ounces of water, the average amount transpired by a female over the course of eight hours of sleep. This work is in the collection of the Museum of Arts & Design, New York.

⁵ Glen R. Brown, "Contemplations on the Spiritual," *World Sculpture News*, vol. 9, no.1 (Winter 2003): 21.