

**JEFFREY MONGRAIN:
ANIMATING THE QUOTIDIAN**

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Jeffrey Mongrain often works in sacred sites, placing quiet abstracted sculptural objects in cathedrals, chapels and synagogues where they play off the architectural and historical contexts of their settings. Swaths of beads flow like water from a prayer rail, a halo-shaped clay disc is affixed to a votive statue, and figurative plumbs suspended above crypts or confessional booths serve as symbolic objects, uniting the seen and unseen worlds. Many of these sited works have a memorial quality that derives in part from their proximity to altars, reliquaries, and tombs. In situ, it seems to partake in the process of recollecting and reanimating a dialogue with these hallowed environments.

When Mongrain's work is placed in galleries and museums, it remains responsive to the undercurrents of place, memory, science, and personal politic. Clay pillows bear the imprint of a human head and hold the amount of water respired by a woman during eight hours of sleep. Perforated bell sculptures ring out only in the imagination. Sculpted from Plexiglas, a pool of blood suggests the average amount contained in an adult human male and hence becomes a contemporary portrait as scientifically indicated in genetic code. Mute black discs dusted with graphite and iron powder have rippled surfaces that are material transcriptions of the sound waves produced by historical voices. These latter are tied symbolically to the locales where they are first exhibited, inscribing history into their forms.

With such works, Mongrain restores something that has been largely lost in the modern world. This is the sense that inanimate objects may serve as

carriers of hidden meanings. While this idea would have been second nature to medieval worshippers in some of the churches where Mongrain's work has appeared, after the Enlightenment the philosophical separation of mind from body cut off our access to the dream life of matter. With his sensitive melding of materials, form, and content, Mongrain gives objects back a hidden soul. His reductive abstracted forms are purged of specific reference opening them up to multiple interpretations to be activated by the individual spectator.

Mongrain's marriage of minimalist form and metaphor points to an interesting development in contemporary art. In the 1960s, the original proponents of minimalist art championed its reductive quality and pure materiality. "What you see is what you see", Frank Stella famously announced. However, over time it has become ever clearer that abstracted and streamlined forms can

also operate as receptacles for dreams, memories, and unacknowledged emotions. Their apparent silence offers a blank canvas for the projection of imaginative associations. This is evident in the work of artists like Maya Lin, whose minimalist wall of black granite in Washington D.C. has become a magnet for the nation's memories of the Vietnam War. It is also evident in the sculptures of Anish Kapoor whose mirrored discs and pigment dusted cones, rectangles, and spheres seem to offer glimpses of infinity.

Mongrain's work also has a kinship to artists like Robert Gober, Mona Hatoum, Katarina Fritsch, Maurizio Cattelan, and Petah Coyne whose works employ quotidian forms, politics, and sensuality in the service of symbolic meaning. Like these artists, Mongrain is interested in the way associations reverberate across objects. His ease with sacred spaces can be traced to his background. Raised in northern Minnesota, Mongrain briefly attended a

seminary as a young man. His works reflect both a theological discipline and a very Catholic feeling for sensate experience. This was reinforced by his seven years as a Lecturer at the prominent Glasgow School of Art in Glasgow, Scotland, during which time he was able to travel widely in Europe and absorb the overpowering visual and sensual impact of the great cathedrals and synagogues.

Over the years, Mongrain has placed temporary installations in houses of worship throughout Europe and the United States. While his work is not strictly speaking site specific (it can be moved and installed elsewhere without losing its aesthetic vitality), it is decidedly site responsive. Thus, for instance, when Mongrain learned that skeletons of medieval plague victims had been buried under the stones in the crypt of the Glasgow Cathedral, and that further, a diviner, utilizing a primitive ritual, had been brought in to indicate the

possible presence of other remains, he was moved to create *Diviner*. This work consists of a suspended figurative plumb modeled in white clay and installed so that it points to the place where the skeletons were discovered.

In the Christus Church in Cologne, Germany, Mongrain was told that the bell tower of the church had been used during the Third Reich for the instruction of the Hitler Youth. At the completion of their lessons these children demonstrated their allegiance and courage by leaping over a small fire. This oddly pagan throwback intrigued Mongrain, leading to the creation of *Northern Tinder* a pyre of cast amber resin logs placed on a thin powdering of artificial snow illuminated by a Nazi era streetlight. Placed in the location where these classes took place, this new fire to some degree purges the space of its historical ghosts.

Seminar Bell was created for the Scotus College Seminary in Glasgow. Here, Mongrain was struck by the fact that each year the seminarians observe five days of silence to commemorate the five days of Christ's muteness during his trial under Pontius Pilate. This bell is equally silent and enclosed with a rain of black beads which appear to imprison any peal it might make.

In a similarly elegiac work, Mongrain sited eleven small pillow-forms in the Garnethill Synagogue in Glasgow Scotland. These referenced eleven days of mourning and were placed above the seats of congregation members who had recently died. The work paid homage to the participation of synagogue members in the World War II Kinder Transport. Sealed within each pillow is a letter written by a friend or relative giving a brief description of that person's life.

In placing works in such theologically loaded environments, Mongrain walks a careful line between deference to religious authority and his own more open-ended secular desire to raise questions and encourage multiple understandings. His visually reductive forms are intentionally open to interpretation, making room for a dialogue about meanings and forms of beliefs which reflects their existence in a pluralistic society.

While such works reflect specific historical circumstances, the forms that Mongrain creates become part of an ongoing vocabulary. Plumbs, branches, bells, pillows, water, handrails, blood, discs, staircases, and the figure reappear, reconfigured in each new setting where they absorb new meanings while retaining traces of their original contexts. For instance, the pyre of resin branches reappears on the roof top of a confessional booth directly above the priest in St. Peters Church in Columbia, South

Carolina. These translucent branches, illuminated from below, suggest the burning away of sins or the questioning of the validity of absolution. A single resin branch, meanwhile, is an element in *Pierced Moose with Branch*, first exhibited in Minneapolis. Here, the branch serves as a context for a tiny emaciated ceramic moose, becoming a warning about the imminent threats to animal life posed by global warming.

To create *The Philosopher's Halo*, Mongrain hung a repositioned halo fashioned with clay, glass, marble dust, and gold leaf, in front of the face of a statue of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the St. Thomas Aquinas Chapel in the Corpus Christi Church, Baltimore, Maryland. In the center of the halo was a curved optical lens that offered a distorted view of the controversial philosopher's face. This subtle distortion modified our view of him and his view of us. The halo has historically implied holiness and

thus serves as a link between the realms of matter and spirit.

This circular motif reappears in *The Iris of Doctor John Daugman* where it suggests a Court House or Cathedral's ocular window, a significant image of authority. Here the center of the window-form contains a back-lit photograph of the left eye of the Cambridge Professor who invented the iris scanning technology currently being used for security by international airports. Installed so that it is set into the wall, the work suggests the possible Orwellian connotations of this invention. From another perspective it is simply poetic, perhaps suggesting a glimpse of a cosmic occurrence.

More abstracted discs, fashioned from black clay, become physical records of important spoken words. *Habemus Papem*, (We have a pope), originally installed in the National Museum of Catholic Art of New York City, is a disc whose

surface consists of a set of wave-like concentric rings defined by ridges and valleys. These reflect the sound pattern of the Latin words used on October 1978 by Cardinal Felici from the Vatican balcony to announce the election of Pope John Paul II. Another work in this sound series offers a visual transcription of Lou Gehrig's famous remark "I consider myself the luckiest man..." as he announced the illness that would necessitate his retirement from baseball. There is a hole in the center of this work, the size of the end of a 1939 baseball bat, which contains sand from home plate at Yankee Stadium where Gehrig stood as he gave his farewell speech.

Jeffrey Mongrain brings a human dimension to abstracted yet iconic forms. Obliquely referencing personal metaphor, history, science, sensuality, and the pervasive echoes of sacred venues he astutely balances form and content. Mongrain's richly coded images are visually quiet, physically

eloquent, and conceptually meaningful. Whether placed in galleries, museums, or in potent ecclesiastical settings, his sculptures retain a definitive corporeal quality. By animating simple forms and materials, Mongrain gently reminds us that the experience of the senses of hearing, sight, and touch offer the first line of approach to the ineffable realm of spirit.