

THE ARTFUL MIND

PROMOTING THE ARTS IN PRINT SINCE 1994

FEBRUARY 2023 



JON ISHERWOOD Photography By Bobby Miller



JON ISHERWOOD SCULPTOR

Interview by Harryet Candee Portraits of the Artist by Bobby Miller

“Recent sculptures represent the next development of my ongoing artistic dialogue with form, technology, and the associative sensations of imagery and shape. In my work, forms are compressed, distorted, or squeezed and made more intimate by subtle adjustments of scale. Carved lines contour the surface to emphasize the form’s growth, creating the illusion of expansiveness and provoking associations of patterning, layering and veiled imagery.” —Jon Isherwood

Harryet Candee: *When I look at the sculpture you have created for Broadway Blooms, I hear music. A symphonic force materializes. One that unravels and draws me in, and encouraging me to use all of my senses. What do you, as the creator of this series, imagine viewers to experience? What direct message are you sending forth to them?*

Jon Isherwood: Interestingly, when I was first invited to consider installing sculpture along Broadway NYC, I took the subway up to 79th Street. Coming up out of the ground, I was immediately struck by the abundance of manicured plantings in the center medians of Broadway. The question was how could I compliment those manicured areas? Walking down to Lincoln center, I had this flash memory of attending a ballet performance there and seeing the bouquets of flowers that were thrown onto the stage at the end of the performance, how they landed on the stage randomly yet

significant in the gesture. So, the questions and reflections developed from those initial thoughts and observations.

Flowers fascinate us in part because of their delicacy and ephemerality; by transposing their fragile forms into marble, the oldest and most durable of sculptural materials, I hoped to inspire viewers to pause and wonder at the productive tension generated by the delicate form and impermeable material. Like real flowers, my installation on Broadway was going to be ephemeral, but I hoped that my artistic offering to the city would be remembered long after the sculptures themselves moved on.

I hoped that the imagery would be accessible to the many people who navigate those intersections in their daily lives. Flowers are imbued with a universal symbolism and can create wonder and joy in their discovery. Placing them in a series of locations across neighborhoods, I hoped to promote

a sense of interconnectedness in spaces that can otherwise feel impersonal, anonymous, and alienating. The natural forms were to offer a visual and psychological relief from the roads, traffic, and architecture in which they are situated – sites of beauty and respite from the built environment.

Why do we give flowers? The act can convey love, celebrate accomplishments, offer comfort in grief, repay hospitality, or simply beautify a space and bring personal joy. Beyond their universal appeal, flowers carry diverse cultural meanings: From the imbued spiritual symbolism of the lotus flower, to the holiday tradition of poinsettias, and the association of roses with love. Across time and space, flowers reflect one’s connection to community and to one another. Nature gifts us flowers, a spontaneous eruption of beauty that brings joy and wonder, and in return we offer them to one another. The exploration of the idea of the gift was central. The simple fact we all were



Broadway 157th The Gifting Angel Photo: Jeff Goldberg Esto



72nd Broadway A Gift Between Two Fantastic Marble Photo: Jeff Goldberg Esto



Broadway 117th -Columbia University As always Yours Photo: Jeff Goldberg Esto

working through a devastating pandemic also played a big role in the potential messaging and personal translations of the sculpture.

Have you ever dedicated a sculpture you've made to an artist because of how much he meant to you?

JJ: No, I wouldn't say I have directly, but the still life/ flower studies paintings of Edouard Manet particularly "white Peony" was a big influence on the Broadway Bloom work and in some ways there is a certain homage to those works.

It wasn't until the 1990s when you shifted from working in metal to working with marble?

JJ: Correct.

What course of events led you to go from metal to marble?

JJ: There were a lot of issues in play. I had started

out studying textile design at Leeds college of art in the UK. The thought was there would be a pathway towards a job in the textiles industry. I soon found my way towards an interest in the materiality of products. One afternoon I found approx. 50 empty cardboard packing sleeves that had been the protective covering for florescent tube lights. After cutting stacking connecting the material together, I found myself making these strangely torso-like figures. I was accepted into the sculpture program at Canterbury college of Art and one of the first projects that was set by the professors was to Model the figure in clay; I found myself making hollow life-scale torsos. That moment of being able to effect the outer surface and simultaneously shape from the inside was inspirational. The next move was to take that method of working into steel: cutting, shaping, and forging steel plate into body-like columns. So, my work at art college primarily focused on steel: finding ex-

pression in found materials. Some years later, after looking at the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum in London, I was inspired to push more fluidity into the forms I was working with. I introduced concrete, modeling and shaping concrete over the steel. Tying to assimilate and sense of the weight and gesture of the body through hand-modelling the concrete.

The move to marble was an odd chain of events. One day a collector came to my studio with an invitation to work in stone. First, I thought this was completely the wrong direction to go in but after several conversations and exchanges we struck a deal that I would make three pieces in stone with the option to completely destroy them if I didn't feel that they provided any opportunities.

In what ways is working in stone a new medium for you?

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As the Earth Laughs 2021 Left: 2021, Rosa Portogallo Marble, 35 x 74 x 37 inches Right: 2021, Breccia Viola Marble, 31 x 55 x 29 inches Photo: Jeff Goldberg Esto



Given and Recieved 2020-21
Verde Rameggiato Marble, 33 x 55 x 43 inches Right: Rosso Cardinale Marble, 39 x 70 x 31 inches
Photo: Jeff Goldberg Esto

Ji: The process in stone is the complete reversal of working in metal.

What did you have to learn differently in order for marble to work for you?

Ji: The very clear difference between constructing a sculpture and working in marble is that marble in my case suggested a reductive process: carving, cutting, removing material to find form.

Steel and concrete were additive processes.

Did you happen to say, something like, at some point, 'Ah, the world of marble! It is strabiliante to work with!'

Ji: The beauty of marble is that it reveals itself slowly over time and you work the surface and shape it and come to a final polish or final soft finish. It's a material that reveals its beauty through those processes: the veining, the color, and oddly its transparency into its organic forming. The hand/ touch is so important, its your third eye!! You are looking at and feeling a surface simultaneously-- a kind of circular feedback to the brain to secure the intended expression.

When I found that I could bring texture and pattern to this material was when I knew that marble and



Arctic Shift 2016-18 Carrara White Marble 120 x 120 x 80 inches USA Embassy Oslo, Norway Photo: Jon Isherwood

stone were the materials I wanted to work with.

I am looking at Arctic Shift, as well as, As the Earth Laughs, both marble sculptures and most beautiful in their differences. I am wondering, what direction were you going in with each of these pieces? Maybe they are not to be compared. But I find the contrast in shape and form very similar and so very different that curiosity allows me to wonder about their relationship to one another.

JJ: *Arctic Shift* came about through a collaborative process of researching the concerns of the 8 countries who are members of the Arctic Council. The torus shape identifies the coastal profile of those countries, and the predictions of changing coast lines due to sea-rise over an 80-year period. Comparatively, *The Earth Laughs* is a combination of two floral forms and the petals grow out and reach out from a center. So with *Arctic Shift*, with the void in the center, is about the potential loss of the Arctic ice cap. I hope that the gesture and growth of *The Earth Laughs* expresses a more optimistic potential.

Is all your sculpture made by your hands?

JJ: All of the works start from my hand, and the shaping and forming of clay to make a very gestural shape. These forms go through an extensive translation from 3d scanning, 3d modeling, 3d printing, remodeling, scaling. Finally, tool paths are developed for 7-axis robotic carving, and then once the forms have been roughed out the very final stage is back to my hand to finish carve, shape and polish the work.

Can you go a little into explaining what process is involved in creating texture onto the skin of a stone sculpture? At what point in the process does this take place?

JJ: In around 1998, I was invited to work in clay at the University of N Carolina at Greensboro, and I found myself pushing the clay onto textured surfaces. I remember being encouraged to climb up a ladder and throwing giant balls of clay at plaster-cast forms. The clay picked up incredible detail from those surfaces and that seemed to provide a clear association with my early studies in textile design. The question next was how does that translate into a sculptural form? I was given the opportunity to scan those surfaces and through a 3-D modeling program, apply them to a digital

model. Computer Numerical Control (CNC) processes allowed the translation of those surfaces to a 5 axis stone milling machine, and the cutting and carving into the marble those patterns.

Have you ever mixed two different kinds of marble or other stone to make one sculpture?

JJ: Yes. Most recently I was commissioned to make a piece for the Verona Stone Theater, and I used a combination of a dark marble and light marble. First the material was stacked and layered, and then I cut and milled into the surface. I think it's the beginning of a new series and I am excited to explore it further.

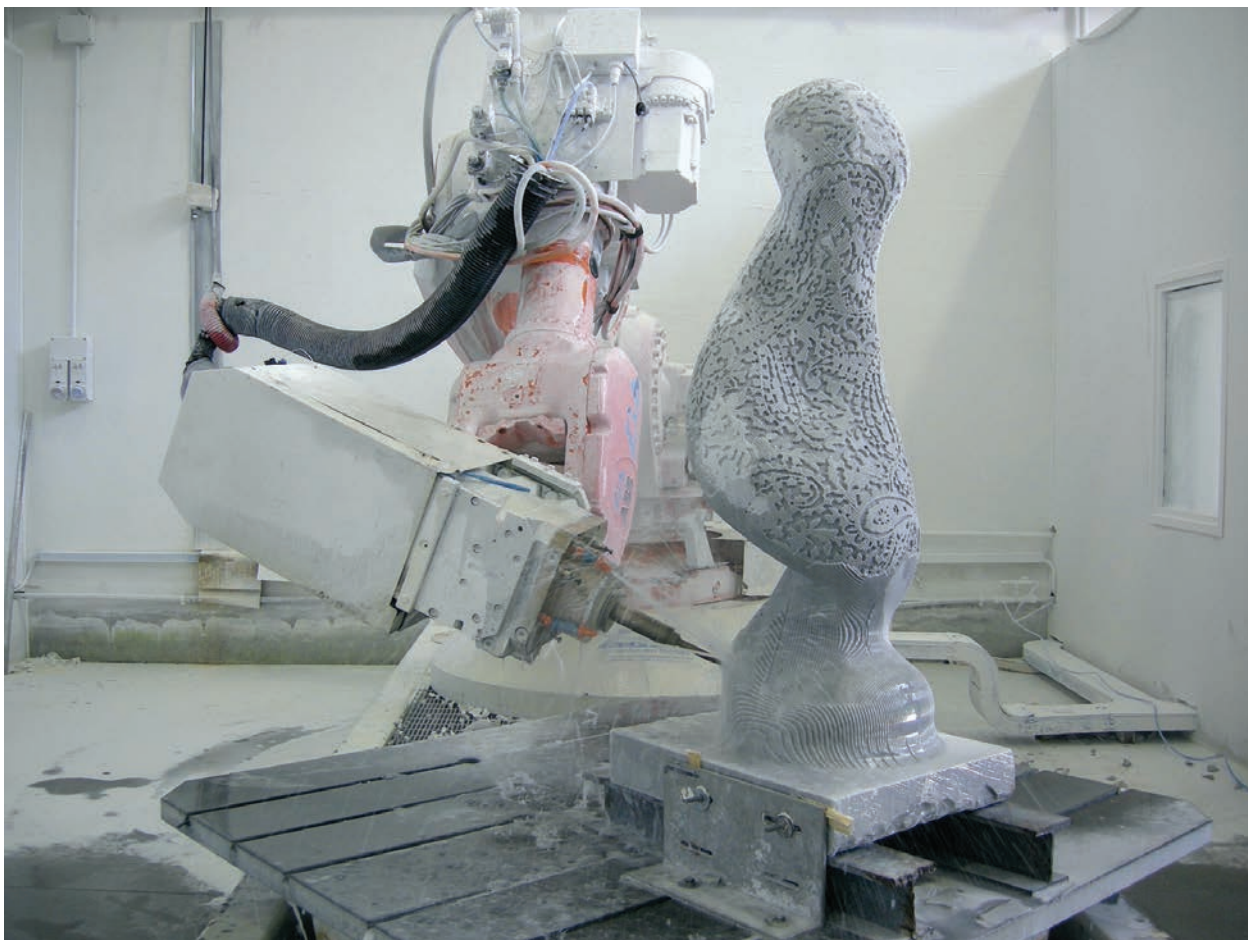
Would you ever consider returning back to making contemporary sculpture from metal again? You can't go back, you can only go forward, so they say, and I imagine that if you did, you would enthusiastically be investigating new ideas and ways to interpret your art?

JJ: It's an interesting question because now I am working on a new collaborative project for the new US consulate in Chiang Mai, Thailand. One of the pieces will be a combination of stainless
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Arctic Shift 7 Axis Robotic Milling Photo: Jon Isherwood



French Mist 7 Axis Robotic Milling Photo: Jon Isherwood.



New Beginnings Swanson Red Marble 18 x 16 x 17 inches Photo credit Jon isherwood



Siren 2010-13 White Marble 79 x 29 x 24 inches Photo: Michael Fredericks

steel and glass and the second is a 62-foot ceramic mosaic.

Tell us about your educational offerings that take place in Italy?

JJ: In 2005 I founded a “not for profit” organization called The Digital Stone Project. For six years, we provided opportunities for artists to explore stone carving using CNC technologies here in the US. In 2012, I developed a relationship with Garfagnana Innovazione, Italy in which we now for the last 10 years offer a month-long residency for artists, designers, and architects to explore carving marble with robots using marble from the region in Tuscany, and work together in outdoor studios at the foot of the Apuan Alps in dialogue and exchange.

Do the students pick out their marble in a quarry?

JJ: Artists have a choice of the marble they would like to work with. The marble available is the marble of the region. Since the preliminary robotic carving is completed before the participants arrive, the stone is selected in dialogue with the technologists at Garfagnana Innovazione: photographs, marble type, densities, specificities of the material are shared. The marble isn’t quarried for

them but there is much to choose from in the Quarry stock yards.

Is it a dangerous trip to get down to the bottom of the quarry?

JJ: When the participants visit the quarry, we are always guided by the quarry manager and a geologist. Everyone is required to wear safety gear and they would never encourage us to visit if there were any potential dangers. The roads up to the quarry are very winding and always a spectacular view down to the coastal towns of Pietrasanta and Carrara.

Digging out marble must be exciting fun. Do you enjoy this as part of the overall process?

JJ: When selecting marble for a project, one visits the extensive marble supply companies in Carrara and Pietrasanta. It’s like shoe shopping-- there are so many choices. At this point you are selecting from quarried marble that is in large blocks and that has been transported there from the mountain quarries.

How do you decipher if a piece of stone is right to work with? What characteristics do you look for when starting to find a piece of marble?

JJ: Obviously, size and proportion are essential. One examines a block to understand the direction of the veining, and how the form you are making will fit into that block.

The stone distributors have an interesting process where they spray the blocks with water, which helps you see the true coloration once the marble is polished. They also let you climb on top of the block (which is usually about 6 feet tall and 8 feet long, 6 feet deep), they let you look at all sizes and will even lift it up with a crane so you can inspect the bottom surface. It’s incredibly challenging because you’re trying to imagine or project a form into the dense material block.

Can you show us the difference in your sculptures that work better with different kinds of stones?

JJ: The best example might be the floral forms made for Broadway allowed for more colorful and flamboyant, dynamic veining to enhance the floral concept. A more architectonic, vessel-like form needs to have a less busy coloration so that you see the form more singularly.

Is there a difference in your state-of-mind when you are commissioned to do a piece of art, and Continued on next page...

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Fibonacci Duet 2020 Red Granite 50 x 79 x 64 inches Photo credit: IFMM



Fibonacci Duet 2020 Grey Granite 90 x 55 x 55 inches Photo credit: IFMM

when you create art for yourself?

JJ: Yes, absolutely. When you are working on a sculpture for the public realm, you have a different responsibility to communicate to a larger collective audience. I have learned that I have to collaborate in these instances with all of the varying stake-holders.

From the perspective of being a teacher, lecturer, what would your first few introductory classes in sculpting be about? In what ways can you introduce relatable parts of art history and commentaries into your class?

JJ: Over my career as a professor, teaching at various institutions, my intro class would always be titled: "What is Sculpture?". The intention here was always to introduce materials, processes, and related histories. I think the traditional context of working from the figure and still life are very valuable as you are asked to respond to form and objects you see before you. But I have always tried to re direct the approach from the "go to" tra-

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ditional materials.

My all-time favorite project is to give each student a long stem wine glass with a flower in water. The request is to simply transpose this information using the material provided: one 16 ft long pine-wood 4" x 2" into a sculptural form twice their height. All tools in the woodshop allowed for the fabrication. It's so exciting to see how people translate the transparency of the glass, the differing opticality of the stem in the water and then of course the flower and petals.

Tell us about what it was like working with Anthony Caro and what did you learn from this man that was considered to play a pivotal role in the development of 20th c sculpture?

JJ: It was an incredible opportunity in that I was brought into the professional world of a very established artist; I learned how the studio works, I learned how communications occur with galleries and collectors. But foremost was working directly on the sculptures and absorbing Tony's aes-

thetic, getting to travel all over the world, and looking at great art with a great artist.

What did he teach you that you will always remember?

JJ: You tend to the studio like it's your job. Don't live and work in the same place. Secure a daily 9 to 5 routine. Working in series allows you not to be precious; it allows variations to occur when you are pursuing a certain theme, and through risk you must trust yourself.

What is the significance of art to you?

JJ: I think it's very straightforward and simple. I think that for those who choose to make art, one is making that decision because this ever-developing language is the clearest available and has the most potential to express your feelings, your emotions, your ideas, your thoughts.

What kinds of investigative art projects have you been busy with that you can tell us about?



Progressioni 2022 Marble 66 x 60 x 18 inches
Photo: Jon Isherwood



In Bloom 2021-22 Silkscreen Print 22 x 30 inches Photo: Jon Isherwood

JJ: I feel like I am always in experimental mode. I made a series prior to the work I just mentioned above that was laminated plywood. The cheapest plywood you can buy and its produced incredibly dynamic forms. I have experimented with 3D-printing distorted honeycomb cells that are then filled with colored resins which were carved into. In some ways I was trying to make a composite marble.

My screen-printing process has been complex in that it has involved embossing, hand cut stencils, using photo processes to translate imagery, collage, and lamination. I love the tactile process of screen-printing.

Has travelling to parts of the world, such as China, given you a broader perspective on ways of making your art? And what might some of those ways be?

JJ: All travel has been significant and influential. In my student days, traveling through Europe; spending time in Cyprus; then professionally trips

to China, Japan, Cambodia and most recently Thailand and my many trips to Italy, carry great influence. Not only is it the artwork one sees, but the experience of differing cultures and identities.

You are considered to be a very seasoned artist with a very long resume. Tell us, what in your opinion, was the height of your art career so far?

JJ: Tomorrow, I hope!!! But I must add that the opportunity provided by Anne Strauss and the Broadway association/ NYC parks to exhibit my work along eight locations from Lincoln center to 157th Steet was incredibly rewarding. Everyone I spoke with over the 18-month period the work was up were so welcoming and expressed thanks for the installation. That kind of response from those communities of people was heartwarming.

Is it not amazing how we can get a big idea going from a small flame? Not knowing where the idea will come from but knowing it will develop eventually. It becomes a challenge when an artist is

in limbo, between projects and not knowing what to do next. How does an artist conjure up ideas for the next project?

JJ: When I was in art college, a professor once said to me, "It's likely you'll only have one idea. And the beauty of that lies in the simple fact that you have a lifetime to explore it."

The Broadway Blooms came out of a desire to explore the idea of the "gift" I know more than ever now that that's my only idea!!

www.jonisherwood.com

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