

## Fruitful Potentials: Tony Matelli

February 13, 2019



**C-P:** You were saying how your run with Andréhn-Schiptjenko stretches back nearly twenty years, if not actually twenty this year. Given that this also marks your sixth solo with the gallery, I'm curious to ask about your history with the gallery.

**T.M:** The first show I did with the gallery some twenty years ago wasn't my first international show but it certainly was among my first very important ones, doing a proper gallery show with an established gallery. I think the gallery got in touch with me, likely having seen the work I was doing then at an art fair or it might as well have been my first gallerist Stefano Basilico who got us in contact. They invited me to do my first solo here in 1999, which I guess is in fact will be twenty years ago. Thinking back, I was so nervous about it then. We shipped some works that were still unfinished that I got around to completing at the gallery and it is funny to think that for this show too, I'm still finishing works in my hotel room in Stockholm and at the gallery only days prior to the opening.

**C-P:** Where in your career in relation to graduating from art school will this have been? Had you already been working as an artist for some time?

**T.M:** I'd done about two shows in New York but I actually got started quite young. When I got out of graduate school it was maybe a year or two until I had my first solo. Things went quite quickly. I wasn't quite confident to a start about how to run a studio practice with an international exhibiting schedule, after transitioning from school, with everything that comes along with that. It was pretty early though, I was still quite fresh.

**C-P:** Can you recognize that one pivotal moment early on, where it dawned on you that things were happening for you in your career?



**T.M:** As far as my first show goes it was always something I expected to happen for me while at school. There was always an idea in mind that this would come to happen no matter what, with the question instead being when. In a way, my momentum coming out of school was so strong that it didn't really feel like there was ever a break between graduate school and showing as an artist. I didn't have enough of a break to feel that it was starting to pick up again at a certain point and rather it just felt like a continuation from where I left school.

**C-P:** The work you are doing today, does it relate still to what you were doing at graduate school or has it deviated significantly in other directions since then as can be imagined?

**T.M:** I would say I started making mature work in my last month at graduate school considering how I see myself as an artist today. Before that I was making very different kinds of work and then again I think the role of a student essentially is to try out many different languages to see what really fits. You are trying out various ideas to find yourself. When you find something that all of a sudden makes sense and you find a clarity and a sort of harmony with the world; that will be the right kind of language for you. That happened late in graduate school for me and since then more or less has been a continuation. I of course work in various bodies of work that are different from the other but there is always a recurring conceptual thread that finds its way through all the work that I do. I've had radical shifts in the mood of the work but you can see an aesthetic and sensibility that has been quite consistent.



**C-P:** I think many people, myself included, think of figurative and human-like hyperreal sculptural bodies that have a unsettling air about them, when thinking of you as an artist. I would imagine you will have had quite strong reactions to some of your work over time, there is your *Sleepwalker* for example. Where I'm getting at is asking if you can recall a particular moment that significantly confronted you with the perception other people have of the work you've put out?

**T.M:** One thing I can reference; and this is an old reference; when I was still in graduate school a fellow student said something that has guided my career since then. She said something along the lines of my work being so cold and dull while myself being so vibrant and interesting and wondered how I reconciled the two. The question I guess was why I was making certain kind of work while obviously to her being a different kind of person than the work itself. I thought she was right and I acknowledged that it was a façade and my pretending to be interested in making certain art and that's when a shift started to happen in my approach in making art that is more romantic and more autobiographical, deriving from my own experiences and feelings about the world.

*Sleepwalker* which you mention in regard to your question is one of the works I made that sparked quite some controversy or perhaps intense interest you could say.

**C-P:** What sort of comment about the world and present conditions did that particular work aim to make?

**T.M:** To me that is a work about crisis; a depiction of a person in crisis who is out of sorts with themselves. A person who is in obvious need of help and empathy. It's a depiction of a person who is both simultaneously there and not there at the same time which has a lot of political and emotional resonance forme. That series of work has always been about that; to represent a moment that is not one thing or another, but rather two things at the very same time. That's always a good place for an artwork to be; to in one image represent two completely different things.

**C-P:** What are the locations where *Sleepwalker* has been out in public?



**T.M:** One was on Wellesley College campus outside of Boston where it was confronted with a lot of hostility. It had to do with a lot of things. Around that time in the US there was a discourse that was happening at college campuses around the notions of trauma, trigger-warnings and personal safe spaces. There was a general idea that the students at a school should be able to dictate the curriculum, but the adults at that school did not live up to their end of the bargain; by saying "No you are students and children, young adults; let us adults handle your education". That happens all over campuses right now; a pathology in the US. So the *Sleepwalker* happened there around that time.

It was a women's college and the students hated it, for instance since it is a representation of a man which some people were very uncomfortable by but moreover it's also sensitively rendered which gave people quite a visceral reaction to it. When the students complained against it and the faculty didn't want to listen, the students went absolutely apoplectic and eventually vandalized it and made a petition against it online.

**C-P:** How does something like this affect you personally as the author of the work? I remember this, it was so worldwide.

**T.M:** To me it was mind-blowing and all of this was happening when I was there. The headline wrote itself: "Women's college terrorized by a sculpture of a man". To me the controversy had so little to do with the work so it didn't affect me negatively. I knew for these students it was going to happen no matter what was in that environment; it was waiting to happen and with me showing up there it was really just the moment in time for it.



**C-P:** There's also your sculptural presentations that have this apparent gravity-defying character that I would think many people pin to you as a signature trait?

**T.M:** I think of it as a psychedelic realism. I'm not a drug user but what I find interesting about a LSD trip or a mind-altering trip is that it allows you to remove content from physical reality. What I like about the inverted sculptures I've done is that it tries to do just that. Making something just as hyperreal as I can possibly make it and yet one mere element is altered and it abstracts the whole thing. So very little

has changed about the reality except for the one thing that completely changes how you perceive the object. I see now that this is a feature in a lot of my work; not necessarily in all of it but in much. And this quality is something that I quite like about the work when I stand back and look at it; something that feels both real, meaningful and important to do in the world and which is something I want to think of a lot more.

**C-P:** What can be said about this current body of work featured in the exhibition at the gallery where you juxtapose figures that bear the look of classical figurative sculptures with seemingly organic edibles like fruits and vegetables? Why this choice?

**T.M:** Something else that is distinctive that binds many of my bodies of works together is the idea that they reflect on the passage of time; many of the works have both something that is fresh and something that appears rotted or is suspended in time somehow. There are many freeze moments in light of time in my work. For this sculptural series I wanted to put two cultural artifacts together; one that is absolutely ephemeral; the perishable object which can be the head of roman lettuce or fresh grapefruit. Then you have the other highly elevated cultural artifact that is more an eternal object; the statutory that speaks so much about our class-based relationship with culture. So you have two objects together; one of importance and one of almost no importance that is only on the earth for very short amount of time. What does it say about time?

I get a feeling of my body with them because I feel my own kind of decay within the decay of the antiquated figures. The statuary components of the works represent something at the end of their life; something that reached its full potential while the components that depict food represent something at their very peak and at the height of potential. And food is one of those things where we are so very consumed with its age. We always ask in terms of food if it is at the peak of freshness. Is it still good? A fresh piece of food is the very epitome of potential. The simple act of putting those two things together has meaning I believe, and strikes me as the perfect balance to address these things like time and the potential of things.



Images of artworks and installations at the gallery; photo credit: Jean-Baptiste Béranger  
Courtesy of Andréhn-Schiptjenko and the artist

Tony Matelli's ongoing solo exhibition at Andréhn-Schiptjenko runs through March 9 at the venue of the gallery of Linnégatan 31 in Stockholm

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