

# TONY MATELLI

Sculptor Tony Matelli's work isn't real.

Source: <https://www.mastheadmagazine.com/qa-with-tony-matelli>

## Q: How did you start making your narrative sculptures?

When I was young I loved the paintings of Hogarth and Bruegel. They seemed like whole complete worlds, alternate realities that you could lose yourself in. I liked looking for every little detail, deciphering the story was a big part of that. Narrative has the power to draw you in and involve you. The paintings also seemed to convey a meaning or a moral which I liked at the time. Mostly I liked the feeling of being sucked up in a work, discovering more and more about a painting the more you looked. Like a complicated story or poem, it enveloped you and made you care about it. There is an emotional investment. I tried other modes of communication during graduate school but ultimately they proved unsatisfactory. There is a seduction naturally embedded in narrative art that I had to return to. Even though today I have moved away from narrative, the fact that I still make representational work sort of includes narrative. I still want people to have an empathic connection with my work. I believe art needs a seductive driving force and if it is to function as anything more than decoration, it needs a subject.



Tony Matelli, *Weed*, 2017 (L to R), Painted Bronze, Courtesy of the Artist

Q: Almost every single one of your pieces so meticulously resembles reality that they're easily mistaken for the real thing. Why hyperrealism?

Hyperrealism describes a kind of fetish. The genre itself holds no importance to me at all. It is a somewhat debased tradition at this point. When I started working in that mode my objective was clarity. Using my Weed sculptures as an example; I wanted the sculpture to be as close to the idea as possible. Therefore it needed to be as unmediated as possible, there could be no personal style in work, no "art". Rendering the weed in this mode erased the most amount of "art" from the idea. So for the first moment a viewer is allowed to experience the work as the idea itself, and only after contemplation does the art reveal itself. Then it becomes a philosophical object. In the future if I feel another way of working helps push forward a viewers connection to an idea I'll employ it.



Q: You started your career under Jeff Koons, can you tell us how this did (or didn't) influence your career as an artist?

Conflating my career and my employment at Jeff's is a mistake. The two things coincided but one had nothing to do with the other. It was just a job, albeit a super interesting one. I am a big fan of Jeff's early period so working for him was really exciting, but I guess Jeff's influence on me had happened way before I worked there. If I reflect on it I think the most impactful thing would be watching him give a studio visit. The way he talked a viewer through each piece while we were all working away was super interesting and probably rubbed off a little. Also, I suppose being an assistant has helped me work with assistants myself, but studios are extensions of personality. They really are psychic spaces made manifest, and we are very different people.

Q: Your recent works play with the juxtaposition between the old and new, the decaying and the alive, in *Four Seasons (Autumn)*, 2018, *Bust* 2018 and *Bust*, 2019 you bring together fresh pristine fruit made of cast bronze with crumbling and broken old sculptures. How do you think the past can be highlighted by new life and vice versa?

I feel things are most active when there is an oppositional force. I think we have a hard time appreciating kindness until we have experienced meanness or even indifference. Things live within their opposites. When both opposites are present I think it creates a kind of tension. Seduction and repulsion, violence and warmth, humor and sadness, this tension is the foundation for the grotesque, which is pretty often on my mind.



*Tony Matelli, Bust, 2019, Marble, Painted Bronze, Courtesy of the Artist*

**Q: Humor is a big part of your sculptures. How does it add to, and elevate, the message behind your works?**

I think humor is an amazing way to invite people into the work, but I don't think I like funny work much. I definitely don't like jokey work. I don't know....I know people like to talk to me a lot about humor, but I don't think much about it. In my mind the work feels different, it doesn't feel funny. There might be an absurdity to some of my things but I don't really like that word either. I like serious subjects done in a non serious way.

**Q: Ambivalence, hopelessness, and psychological homelessness are also recurring motifs in your works such as Sleepwalker, Lost and Sick, and Stray Dog. What makes you drawn to these themes and why?**

Psychological Homelessness is terrific, I love that! Those things are recurrent because I feel this way. These are very rich feelings for me. It's not exactly a world view but it's I don't know....a personality. A long time ago I described myself as a kind of Romantic artist who did not use the language of Romanticism. I still think this is probably true. I'm interested in trying to give form to emotions and feelings, my emotions and feelings. This goes back to making an empathic connection with a viewer - I want the work to function as an empathy magnet and for the viewer to feel it, and therefore we are sharing something. We are making a connection.





Q: The materials used in your works range from mirrors to concrete, silicone, and steel but you use mostly bronze. What do you like most about that medium and how important do you think craftsmanship in a medium is for artists working today?

I spend a lot of time thinking about materials. Everything has its problems, but bronze has the fewest. That's why I like it. It typically stays where you put it, it's strong, it paints beautifully etc.. In my work nothing ever looks like bronze so I could use anything, but I like that it's hard to work with. There is a seriousness and a level of commitment that it projects. That in turn affects the understanding and reception of the work. In regards to craft, I think within an art context, there is only appropriate craft. A

Josh Smith painting for example has exactly the right amount of craft in it even though it doesn't display "craftsmanship" in the way you are talking about it. For me a very high level of craft is totally essential, because it is often in opposition to the subject of the work. The work physically is so solid, stable and clear, but often represents these fragile, ambiguous, sometimes ineffable things. That's what I meant by not using the language of Romanticism. I think there needs to be conflict within an artwork, this tension between how something is rendered and what it renders is another way to increase the power of an idea. This is what I try to do, to give simple ideas and feelings power and weight through the conviction of its rendering.