

*[John Newman by Steel Stillman (catalogue essay for exhibition “Everything is on the Table” at the Tang Museum, Skidmore College, 2012)]*

John Newman has invented a sculptural language all his own. Neither exactly representational nor wholly abstract, his sculptures marry organic and geometric grammars, and provide access to what Duchamp called the fourth dimension – a space defined by speculation. His work encourages us to look beyond what we think we know, and to revel in what is out there. Born in Flushing, New York, in 1952, Newman came of age as a sculptor in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. A student of minimalism, he slipped its bounds by delving into quantum mechanics and non-Euclidean geometry – finding metaphors and mysteries of the invisible in the one, and structural echoes of medieval armor and dinosaur skeletons in the other. His early works were fabricated and cast out of aluminum, bronze, iron and steel, and hung off the wall or settled on the floor, their scale approaching, if not exceeding, that of the human body. Full of complex curving shapes, they were intriguing hybrids, descended as much from plant or animal life as from mechanical devices.

Then in the mid-90s, Newman’s work changed. Opportunities to travel inspired him to make sculptures that were smaller and more handmade. In Africa, India and Japan he encountered new means and materials – from basket weaving to flower arranging to hariko, a Japanese form of paper-mache. Back in his Tribeca studio, he began employing an evermore eclectic range of ingredients that today includes, among other things: extruded aluminum and copper; marble, satin rattail and sisal; and objects either found (dead tree branches, a psychic’s crystal ball) or painstakingly made (polyhedral spheres). Newman mingles his chosen elements, grafting them into amalgams that shun the cobbled-together, truth-to-materials effect of assemblage. Indeed, in his work, materials yield a portion of their autonomies to participate in the more synthetic bricolage of the whole.

Over the past 20 years, Newman has made several generations of often colorful, sometimes flamboyant and invariably smart sculptures that are displayed either by themselves on pedestals or in groups on larger tabletops, where they parade their differences and clamor for attention. Nature and the man-made remain significant polestars, but as his work’s formal vocabulary has

broadened, its philosophical reach has deepened. Many of his pieces involve some kind of balancing, conceived not just as a literal weighing of one element against another – though that is part of it – but as a goad to visual thinking, to the unraveling of the associative implications that one part of a sculpture might have for another. In “Discussion Stick” (2007), for example, two elaborate but fundamentally dissimilar wood configurations – one, chariot-like, consists of wicker spirals from Calcutta that whorl out of a striped cube; the other, suggesting a plume of smoke, is laminated from laser-cut wood and Masonite, and provides a perch for a terra-cotta bowl the size of an eyecup – are attached to opposite ends of a torqued cylinder of blown glass, which is propped on an Ethiopian headrest. These elements, several of which had been kicking around Newman’s studio for years, waiting, like so many words or phrases, to be needed, are held together by similarities of color, shape and substance, and by associations that bridge continents. Whether viewed as a swirling three-dimensional, multicultural abstraction, or as the unlikely but believable construct of a dreamer, “Discussion Stick” is as well an ophthalmological device, something for viewers not merely to look at but with and through. Like the discussion sticks that belonged to ancient Chinese scholars, it is an instrument of authority, available for use within our own community to moot important matters. “Discussion Stick” raises these and other possibilities concurrently; if they seem incompatible, perhaps we need to get our eyes examined.

In Newman’s world, rationalist epistemologies (math and science) meet visionary ones (math, science and art). The development of his work echoes the rise of cyber-technology, which increasingly confounds distinctions between the real and the imaginary. But unlike the Surrealists, for instance, who looked to the unconscious to articulate similar conundrums, Newman turns his gaze outward; like the great jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman, he keeps his questions and his images open. A speculator in the most far-reaching sense, his sculptures are metaphors for what, for now, lies beyond our ken, and he posits connections that one day we may have words for.

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