

BOMB

The Space of Intimacy: Daniel Wiener Interviewed by Fawn Krieger

Painting and sculpting faces.

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Daniel Wiener, *Anonymous Animal*, 2018. Apoxie-Sculpt. 34 × 48 × 2 inches (left); *This Inward Spiral of Whoop*, 2019. Apoxie-Sculpt. 34 × 48 × 2 inches (right).

Epoxy is a bonding agent. It is used to repair and mend, to join and insulate. It is also the primary sculptural material Daniel Wiener has relied on for over two decades. We visited his current exhibition, [Wide-Eyed and Open-Mouthed](#), at Lesley Heller Gallery and discussed the work: the process of making it and the experience of sharing it.

—Fawn Krieger

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What inspired *Wide-Eyed and Open-Mouthed*?

Daniel Wiener

Ten years ago I decided to concentrate on making faces. As soon as I started making these flat and sculptural yet expressive visages, I was entranced by all the possible variations. What if I curve the mouth upward on one side? What if I make the mouth big and fill it with tiny teeth? What if there are multiple sets of eyes? I didn't think about the meaning of the overall undertaking but was involved in the engrossing day-to-day decisions and making. My wife might say I became obsessed.

As time went on I realized that the faces' expressions reflected a common reaction to this era. That I was dumfounded, flabbergasted, and bewildered by the rise of authoritarian nationalism seeped unconsciously into this group of work. I never start with an overarching concept for an exhibition, but I guess this one developed a theme on its own. The show ended up as an emotional response to being at a loss—"wide-eyed" with disbelief and "open-mouthed" with astonishment, along with a fair amount of panic.

FK

I interpreted "wide-eyed" as in innocent and "open-mouthed" as in a sustained position to receive. With both of our interpretations there's a sense that the body is frozen or stalled. It makes me think about your masks as Medusa's subjects, frozen in fear.

DW

Frozen in fear, not just because of the political situation but because fear is one of the motivating factors in my work. For most of my life I have been afraid of words. Frequently I am overwhelmed by other people's words, as if they could bury me. My own words whirl like a tornado of inchoate thought fragments which I dread taming into writing or speech. Plus I have often been in terror of speaking to another person, frozen in fear when face to face with another living, breathing human. Consequently I have looked for alternatives to words. Sculpture, a physical, mute art form, made mostly alone, is my chosen medium.

The face as a medium of communication is also a physical alternative to words. They're my partners in crime, both thing-like and language-like at the same time.



Daniel Wiener, *Bitter Taste of Fugue*, 2019. Apoxie-Sculpt. 24 × 24 × 1.5 inches.

FK

Hearing this makes me feel very moved by your courage and trust to share these words with me. I have followed your work for over twenty years during which time you've maintained two methods of working: drawing and sculpture. It strikes me that the impact of merging these two forms has been a dramatic breakthrough for you, which seems to have brought with it a certain liberatory artistic self-acceptance.

DW

Totally. This project picked me up and swept me away. For the first time I truly felt like I could say to myself, "I am an artist." Of course this is silly since I have been making art for forty years, some of it quite good, even. I have always believed in following enthusiasm and intuition, and this time it worked. The beast of my chronic self-doubt hibernated for a while, which allowed me to get on with it, with fewer impediments than usual.

FK

Your pieces appear two-dimensional but are actually incredibly sculptural in every sense. With this in mind, could you speak about the technical process you have developed to fabricate this body of work?

DW

I start with a tablet of plasticine clay. As if the tablet was a piece of paper, I draw into it using carving tools. After that I make a rubber mold from the clay drawing plus a mold of the mold—a positive and a negative version. The carving-drawing is my favorite part of the process. It is slow, ruminative, mesmeric. Despite the tedium, the anticipation of what will come next is totally thrilling, like a rumble in slow motion. At its best, it feels as if the drawing does its own thing without my direction, and a mistake is as profitable as a not-mistake. Like the resulting answer from a Ouija board. What can I say? I know this sounds like Zen mumbo jumbo, but it's an apt description.

FK

Whenever I think about negative and positive space, or in your case molds, it's impossible for me to separate it from more symbolic forms of duality. Are the positive and negative casts in quiet conversation?

DW

I shy away from dualities, which often ossify into conventional hierarchies like good and bad, body and mind. The molds, whether positive or negative, are tools for invention instead of repetition. The recursive use of the same mold for endless variation is the beating heart of this project.

In the exhibition, *This Inward Spiral of Whoop* (2019) from a positive mold and *Anonymous Animal* (2018) from a negative mold are hung next to each other, so it's easy to see their dialogue. They're like siblings from the same parent, identical in so many ways and yet so different from each other. Neither is more significant nor valid than the other. Maybe they even love and resent each other at the same time.



Daniel Wiener, *Too Far-fetched To Solve*, 2019. Apoxie-Sculpt. 36 × 49 × 1.5 inches.

FK

I'm curious how time informs your process, especially because there is so much labor that's not seen within the completed work. We've discussed how it's hard for you to wait to de-mold your pieces. How is time connected to emotions, for example, around anticipation, expectation, euphoria, satisfaction, doubt, regret? Is there a way that these feelings embed themselves within the works through a kind of mystical or quantum entanglement?

DW

Yes, while pressing the colored Apoxie-Sculpt into the mold, I can't see what the piece looks like. I get hints from the back, but mostly I'm using my mind's eye. As a piece takes more time, each decision is made with trepidation. Will I ruin the whole thing? Will it be close but no cigar, a flop? Waiting eight hours until the piece has hardened, I have to restrain myself from chancing a look. The moment

of truth when I finally see it is exhilarating, balancing on the brink between disappointment and happiness.

Some of the emotional content of these faces comes from the apprehension of working blind. For years I've had an intuition that the "how" of a work of art is as important to its meaning as the "what" and the "why." Until your question, I've never been able to expand on this intuition because I've been trapped into talking about process in mechanical terms. Now I see that the quiet, internalized drama of the making becomes tangled in the character of the finished piece. So thanks for that question, Fawn!

FK

☺ It's funny to think that in constructing your "faces" or masks, you are literally looking from inside them. There's something really human about that; it's the only way we can ever experience our own faces. Are you thinking about how this sequence parallels an experiential understanding of self and other?

DW

You are right that working on the back of a face is analogous to a self's relation to its own face. The physical making correlates nicely with the activity of communication, exposing the work we do inside ourselves, behind the scenes, to create our outer expressions.

My sense is that we can only know someone deeply and truly if we are face to face on a regular basis. In each other's presence. But we still don't fully know the inside—it's the paradox of presence.

I also feel like my sculptural faces suggest what is happening behind actual faces as if we can finally see the mental turbines hidden in actual interactions, which is another parallel to working on the back of the pieces.



Left to right: Daniel Wiener, *Solitary Carnival*, 2019. Apoxie-Sculpt. 24 × 24 × 1.5 inches; *Rolling Words Around*, 2019. Apoxie-Sculpt. 24 × 24 × 1.5 inches; *Bitter Taste of Fugue*, 2019. Apoxie-Sculpt. 24 × 24 × 1.5 inches.

FK

I'm really drawn to the tactile quality in all of your work. I have the desire to touch *everything*. Why is that?

DW

Everyone wants to touch my work. My work is made with touch, is about touch, and invites viewers to touch. Touch is yet another alternative to words. The desire to touch creates an intimacy between a viewer and a sculpture. The space of intimacy is also the subject of my work—two beings face to face in close proximity.

[Daniel Wiener: Wide-Eyed and Open-Mouthed](#) is on view at Lesley Heller Gallery in New York City until October 20.

Fawn Krieger is a visual artist, teacher, and arts administrator based in New York City.

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