

On pushing in different directions



An interview with artist Nathaniel Mellors

April 9, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2338 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Independence](#), [Success](#).

Your work encompasses a number of creative practices—filmmaking, sculpture, animation, sound design, puppeteering. Is it liberating to have so many options at your disposal, or when you're faced with seemingly unlimited options for expressing ideas, does it make it harder to choose a path? Do you ever suffer from option paralysis?

I quite often think it would be liberating to just fucking make and sell paintings. You know what I mean? Option paralysis. That is interesting. I've never experienced that, honestly. I think usually there is some central idea or image that occurs for me which is like a battery for me in developing some kind of narrative or some sort of characters or certain ideas to explore. Then, pursuing those ideas carries me through and leads me to certain forms. I suppose with scriptwriting and making videos or working with actors or with puppets it's all still the same kind of process. The choices that you're making about puppets or sculptures or animatronics or these different forms, there is always some reason as to why it's been made that way. In my mind, there is usually some kind of logic at work, no matter how perverse those particular choices might seem to the viewer.

You've worked a lot with animatronic figures and other kinds of technology-driven art, but you seem cognizant that technology and spectacle is kind of meaningless unless it's in service of good ideas.

I think it's true. It's very hard. I'm thinking about guitarists, now that you said that. Like the perennial problem of people being in sway to technique, so they can't ever get past that. They are technically amazing, but boring. There is definitely a lot of art that suffers in that way. I was in a fortunate position when I started doing the animatronic work. I was at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam where there was quite a lot of technological support. Not having any real technical ability, I was able to develop an approach that was kind of semi-liberated because of my ineptitude. My work didn't suffer from perfection because I literally didn't know what I was doing.



Nathaniel Mellors: Progressive Rocks 2018. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

There was just a retrospective of your work in NYC. How do you generally organize your creative life? Are you always working towards a show or trying to convince someone to fund something?

I'm always on the verge of retirement. [laughs] I'm always telling myself I am not fucking doing this again. It depends. What you're talking about is kind of symptomatic of the environment people are working in a lot of the time. I do think that in America it is potentially hard for people to do this thing where you just make whatever you want to. This idea that you just make stuff. You just make the art you want to make. Because, basically, what you're talking about, something that I've always strongly believed in, is really hard because you feel disempowered to do it due to the business of the art world. Artists should be the ones deciding the terms of contemporary art through the work they make, but often it feels the other way around.

Why is it not that way, because artists don't control the spaces?

Because they feel insecure about careers and because people are usually saddled with gigantic debt, particularly in America, after their art school education. It's really hard for them not to assimilate into a predominately commercial structure right from the beginning. I'm lucky because I've had some public support through various European structures and the Netherlands and countries where they have a different model. I left London and went the Netherlands because I was struggling. I was in debt and I didn't know how to go forward in a way that was ambitious. I felt like I could go forward at that level, but I couldn't really develop within those kinds of constraints. It was in the middle of a booming art market in the early to mid 2000s where people were opening new galleries every week and lots of new art was being sold, but it wasn't the kind of work I wanted to make.



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That was one of the reasons I left London and I think in America it's even harder. I don't really know what the answer to that is except to say that maybe people have to start trying to do it a different way. You've got to be resourceful and you've got to be very confident and inflexible and find ways to make work. Maybe making good work just involves losing money... and who is in a position to do that?

Your work is often comprised of large-scale pieces which, I would assume, present many complications. How do you know when something isn't going to work? Or do you keep problem-solving with the materials until it eventually bends to your will?

I think it depends. I will certainly abandon things. I've spent six months or a year on a script in the past to develop something until it feels like it's working and eventually I'll know. You sort of know early on with things whether there's space you can move into with an idea. You can feel that the space is there or that potential is there with certain ideas. Then it's just a question of following these lines of thought and most of the time it's like that, it eventually works. I don't usually hit a wall. I'm quite good at stepping sideways around blocks and trying to look at problems as opportunities. There is quite a lot of improvisation that happens along the way, but at the bottom, the deeper things that are going on need to be in place from the beginning in order for everything else to work. Quite often there are these intense periods of writing where you're working through ideas in all of these different ways. I've certainly given up on bits of writing and trashed a lot of paintings. Certain ways of working are more forgiving than others, that's for sure.

If it's a big animatronic piece—a big robot head—it's probably much harder to say, "You know what, let's just scrap this. I'm not really feeling this anymore."

Yeah, I've got a few expensive... well, I don't want to call them failures really, but I've got a few things sitting around in the studio, a few wayward creations, that haven't found their home. They need to be sent off on a fucking backpack tour of Europe to find themselves.



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Your wife is a painter. What are the benefits of being in a relationship with another artist?

This is a hard one to make a generalization about. Honestly, in the past I had reached a point where I promised myself I would never date another artist again, but this relationship has been brilliant, and great for both of us. We're fans of each other's works and there's a kind of crossover into each other's work, even though we're working in totally different ways. It's been mutually beneficial.

It's only gotten challenging with a child, a two year old, and a pregnancy in the mix, but those are challenging things for anyone under any circumstance. We are lucky because we can sort of take days off. We can sort of do two or three days a week and, with a bit of luck, still be productive. I think it's harder when you're younger, when there's this feeling that you're trying to fight for your place. That can be really hard. Another artist can understand what that feels like and what the demands are, but you've got to be secure enough to give each other space and not be obsessively trying to drive your career career at the expense of your relationship.

The question of whether two artists can get along has a lot to do with the myth of the artistic temperament—the idea that two very self-involved creative people can't possibly be compatible.

I suppose it depends on your levels of self-absorption, how those things function for you, and what your working patterns are and your personality. We've been lucky. It's not always easy, but I feel like it would also be really hard to be in a relationship with somebody who was working a regular 9 to 5.

You have a background in noise and industrial music. Why do you think you gravitated towards making visual art rather than being a musician? Or do those two things feel connected for you?

I don't know. I mean, I never stopped doing music. I still have some projects, but at a certain point making visual art took off for me in a way that music didn't. The musical thing that I was part of was through friendships that I had—and still have—connected to where I grew up. It's connected to the sort of provincial, local part of Southeast England where I was in my teens. It was this very funny scene—post-punks, hippie, industrial, goths, and psychedelics. Lots of people doing LSD and speed. Growing up there, I didn't know anything about contemporary art. I only really knew about people like Francis Bacon or Picasso. I only knew about Throbbing Gristle and going to see shows, that sort of thing.



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Knowing that I wanted to paint and draw took me to university where I discovered this whole realm of contemporary art, performance art, installation, and video. In a way, that swallowed everything up for me. I felt like I could bring everything I was interested in into that world somehow. I could bring the music stuff I was interested in into my art-making, but it didn't quite seem to work the other way around... though now, on reflection, I see how that's possible. Art was something I could develop on my own terms, whereas music was something I did that was very much about working in groups of people where I was not by any means the most talented person involved. I'm honestly not technically a very good musician. I can write and improvise, but it's not where I'm best suited. It's a tricky question and something I think about—why do you end up doing *this* thing instead of *this other* thing?—but I think you gravitate towards the thing that feels the most natural.

It's interesting when people have multiple creative lines. It's healthy to do these different things that inform each other.

I think so. I want to explore that idea more. My ambition for the next year is to do the family stuff, but also just to write and paint and do some stuff that I can do in one room for awhile. I'm more excited about what I can do in one room—maybe writing, painting, and doing some music—than I am about taking on a big project which involves working with a lot of people for a big deadline with big budgets and whatnot. I like to think of the process being like the tides going in and out. You can't always try pushing forward all the time with one particular methodology. You've got to push in different directions at once in order for the overall arc to be moving in an interesting way. Otherwise, you just end up becoming a mannequin of your own fucking self, which is

really often a trap for anybody that does something interesting.

If you aren't careful your art becomes product. You become like a creative director of a brand that happens to be your name.

You see this all the time. People become less an artist and more just a manager of their studio. Whenever you look at that stuff, it's always like, "Oh well, there was the early stuff that was really cool and then there is just all this other stuff that sort of refers back to it." I don't want to do that. I want to make something new.



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Nathaniel Mellors recommends:

Books

Howard Zinn - *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Perennial)

Clayton Eshleman - *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld* (Wesleyan, 2003)

Susan Sontag - *Styles of Radical Will* (Picador 2002)

Brian Catling - *The Vorrh* (Vintage, 2015)

Georges Bataille - *Visions of Excess* (University of Minnesota Press 1985)

Music

Coil - *The Ape of Naples*

Catherine Ribiero + Alpes - *Paix*

Swans - *Children of God*

The Fall - *The Unutterable*

Throbbing Gristle - *Thee Psychick Sacrifice*

Film

Pier-Paolo Pasolini - *Porcile / Salo*

William Klein - *Mr Freedom* (1968) / *The Little Richard Story* (1980)

Aleksei German - *Hard To Be A God*

Name

Nathaniel Mellors

Vocation

Visual Artist





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