

# Tony Matelli on the power of objects



March 3, 2017 - Tony Matelli is an American sculptor who lives and works in New York City.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2048 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

**How do you approach making a new piece? Has the way you conceptualize and execute your sculptures changed since you started?**

It hasn't changed at all. I would like to say that it has but it almost totally hasn't. It's been the same since graduate school. I came upon a way of thinking about making things that felt natural and, even though it's slow, still makes sense to me. Before then, I was mostly testing out different ways of thinking and different ways of going about making an art object. Now I just search around a lot in my head about how it is I'm feeling at a particular point in time and think about how to make an object that would be a kind of philosophical marker for the kind of feeling I'm having.

If I'm generally experiencing these really big feelings—ambivalence, loss, confusion, happiness, whatever—I just try to identify the feeling and find something that speaks to that, maybe just in terms of mood or maybe in some very direct way. I have to admit, I'm not very fast at this. I think I could probably be a lot faster but this is the only way I know how to do it now. So, after you identify your feelings, you then make a drawing or you write something on a post-it note and after maybe a month of looking at that word on a post-it note, something will just pop in your head. An image. A thing. It's not very scientific. It's almost like a romantic way of working, guided by feeling and intuition.



*Untitled, 2014, Silicone and Stainless Steel*

**Many of your works are installed outdoors. Is it important to you that people be able to experience your work outside the confines of a traditional gallery space?**

No. It's not that important. It depends on the work. I think some things benefit from being outside. They conceptually expand when they're outside. For instance, the *Sleepwalker* sculpture, I think the logic of that piece expanded when you put it outside. I also think it's actually a very poignant work when it's inside.

But once you situate it outside of a domestic environment or a gallery environment it really maximizes the subject of that work, which is largely about displacement. So that gets amplified when you remove it from a gallery context and situate it in the public realm. When you have lots of people moving around this statue or sculpture representing a person in a sleeping state, in a non-waking life, the contrast becomes really amped up once you put it outside.

***Sleepwalker* caused a scandal after it was installed on a college campus. People talked about feeling triggered by seeing the piece, which was the first time I ever heard that term being used.**

Yeah, same here. That was a very unusual situation for me because it was the first time I experienced those kinds of politics. The whole situation was pregnant with all of these ideas I had never been exposed to—safe spaces and different kinds of campus rhetoric that you hear so much about now. People like to make fun of that kind of

language now, but back then when I was hearing it for the first time, it was a little confusing in that I couldn't quite figure out where exactly it was coming from. What political forces were at work? Were these political forces of the right? Were they political forces of the left? Were they neutral? I didn't know how to interpret it at the time.



*Sleepwalker*, 2014, Painted Bronze





*Sleepwalker*, 2014, Painted Bronze

On that campus it certainly seemed to be a puritanical reaction to the work, even though it was coming from the left. It was very hard for me to square those ideas. In the midst of all of that, I was learning a whole new way to think about how campuses work. Now you hear about it all the time, but for me it was very new and having it associated with my work was surreal because it seemed so arbitrary.

**There's a lot of different ways to interpret an experience like that—and it could all feel like a huge misreading of your work—but it must be gratifying on some level to have elicited such a strong reaction, even if it's not necessarily the reaction you might want.**

Right. I like to think that it speaks to the power of the work and the sensitivity of the rendering of that piece. All of that stuff was very interesting. I don't know if gratifying is the right word, but it let me know something was there. Something is being communicated.

I got an amazing handwritten letter in the mail—shaky handwriting on a kind of old fashioned looking letterhead—from this guy who went on to say, "Thank you for your piece. I'd been a sleepwalker for many, many years and through many years of therapy and hard work I am no longer a sleepwalker. Now I see the sculpture everyday as I go on my daily walk." It spoke to him in a very real and personal way. It was one of the few positive reviews of that work at the time. I thought to myself, "Who else is getting a letter like this?" About a work that speaks so directly to their experience? This person was moved enough to hand write a letter. That was very gratifying and meaningful to me.

**Your work often depicts things—people, plants, ropes, food—in a very hyper-realistic way. Your recent sculptures look like classical statuary that has been worn down by time, covered with fruit that looks fresh and pristine. It's a funny depiction of something that looks old covered with something that looks brand new—all of it actually**

made of materials that will never age, never degrade.

Both are forced. It's a kind of accelerated entropy and an arrested entropy at the same time. I always thought of those sculptures as being about a kind of eternal youth or something like that. They speak to both eternal youth and the passage of time. I think both forces need to be represented. I think the best way to talk about eternal youth would be to represent degradation or decay in juxtaposition with that other force.



*Hermes (detail), 2016, Painted aluminum, concrete*

Like for instance, maybe the best way to talk about romantic love would be to also talk about extreme violence. I like that duality very much and it's not just as a literary subject matter or conceptual issue but also just a formal issue. Shiny and bright and rocky and gray. Those two things together seem to make a kind of poetic sense.

**After seeing you work in person, one can't help but wonder how the sculptures are made. Are people generally more interested in *how* you make things or *why*?**

People often ask how things are made. Almost everything is done here in my studio and I have a team of people—painters, fabricators—that I work with. Often that's the most fun part for me. Today, I went to meet with some concrete fabricators, for example. I love that stuff. I love materials. It's generally a process of deciding what you want to make and then figuring out how to make it. In theory, it's simple. The more complicated thing is figuring out not just what you want to make but also why.

I think I come about it in a bunch of different ways, but to me the most clear way to say is that for a long time I always wanted to make things that felt somewhat situational in our world, that didn't feel like art objects necessarily or feel "art-y" or have a art language that was immediately identifiable. I like things that occupy real space—sculptures—because then they get in your way. They're actually taking up your space. And you can't

just behold them. You need to reckon with them in a different regard.

When I make a sculpture of a weed, for instance, it isn't a painting of a weed. I want it to appear almost factual to the viewer at first. For however temporary the moment is, the viewer can be in a psychological headspace where they experience a real weed just for even a fraction of a second when they see my thing. And then they can figure the art stuff out after that, but that initial moment of seeing is important because that is the real experience of the work. Take *Sleepwalker* for example—from a distance it's good to think that it's a real figure because that's what I'm speaking to. And then, obviously, I understand that that breaks down after about a millisecond. But still it puts that person in a funny space. It shifts the way they rationalize artwork. It puts it in a different place. It becomes more visceral.



*Weed*, 2009, painted bronze

It puts the experience in a body and emotional place rather than just an intellectual space. That's also why I think there's an eradication of style at all costs in the work because I think style, like "artistic" style, needs to go. It should look real. It should look like the thing it's supposed to be. I'm sure in five years, 10 years, 20 years, somebody's going to be like, "Oh this is really stylized work" but to me, that would be another signpost of "art" and I think artwork can suffer when it's too art-y.

**So when you make something, is it crucial that you entirely work out the concept—the "why"—before you start thinking about materials? Should the concept dictate the form?**



I think that's good for some people. For me that's good. I think other people are different. There are other people that really do just get some materials in their hands and then find something in those materials. That's what is very cool about artists. A lot of times the process can lead them to a place that is more emotionally engaging than a simple, concrete idea can ever be. I think there's a lot of room for lots of different ways of thinking. I often think about if I was ever a teacher... what would I tell people? How do you not damage someone by giving them bad advice? I guess I'd tell them to think seriously about what they make but then stop thinking and just do whatever feels right. That's good, right? Because you never know. Everyone's so different. You have to just experiment until you find the thing that works best for you.



*Old Enemy, New Victim*, 2007, silicone, fiberglass, paint, steel, yak hair

#### **Authorless music.**

Any of those categories that are for tasks such as meditation or working out, etc. My current favorite is [Power Music Workout](#). It's the music equivalent of [nootropics](#).

#### [This Old House](#)

I don't care about houses. It's a good show for getting excited about building something, anything. Great material inspiration. Bunch of cool guys.

#### [Waking Up Podcast with Sam Harris](#)

Understanding the human mind and thinking rationally in an irrational world. Independent thought as survival strategy.

Delirious New York by Rem Koolhaas

Obviously the subject matter of the book is incredibly interesting, but what has really stuck with me are the formal aspects of his writing. His pacing and structure have given me the perfect template for formulating my own thoughts. This book taught me how to write.

The Annotated Fall

Dedicated to the lyrics of the band with the best name in music history. Even if you don't like the music, you can read the lyrics as poetry and the annotations are an amazing history project. A beautiful use of language.

**Tony Matelli: Figure** May 6 to October 22, 2017 [www.aldrichart.org](http://www.aldrichart.org)

Name

Tony Matelli

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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