

THE SEA AND THE CITY

Jedd Novatt interview

RAJESH PUNJ



CHAOS ZATITU - CONSTRUCCION V - ESPIRAL, at the Alfa Arte foundry, Courtesy: Jesus Rodriguez

How deep do you have to go to know what it is to be at the mercy of the water? Of the deep blue that initially carries you that you eventually succumb to. Submerged in the open sea, space, light, and loneliness are intensified ten-fold, as you become more aware, with each breath, of your self and significance. Removed entirely from what we know of the world. American sculptor Jedd Novatt, located between his studios in Paris and the industrial city of Eibar in northern Spain, close in kilometres to Bilbao, with a home in the South of France, talks about his early years of diving, as character building, and influential to how he sees and experiences space. The kind that we are aware of on dry land, to what it is to be in an abyss of water.

Space becomes something else entirely when you see it from the sea, and as rewarding as oxygen when you are entrapped by everything of the city. As it is as if Novatt's sculptures are an examination of the value of space, that allows his sculptures to stand, or likely fall back into it. Works that for their presence and unpredictability "allow for a tremendous tension, as the work is standing up against the walls, against the ceiling, against the floor, which is what I want of a work. I want the sculptures crashing into corners. So there is a constant sense of movement." Novatt's steel and paper structures playfully disobey the laws of gravity, as everything from the ground up of his frameworks appear to demonstrate the order and equal disorder of everything on earth. And by conceiving of his assemblages as permanently unstable, Novatt enthusiastically explains his work as about the possibility and potential for change. Of his "playing with perspective and depth, whereupon I want that we are not sure of what we are looking at. Is it convex or concave, of what is going on exactly? And so when you start staring at them, drawing for drawing, as with the sculptures, the more you come into contact with them, the more to start seeing things, and start to realise what you see as fact is actually fictional." Curating into the open plan spaces at Waddington Custot, Novatt's sculptures are in no way solid celebrations of steel, but in his company appear decided by lesser certainties, such as the pull and push of opposing forces. That as he sees it, have the enchanting ability to hold something up, as much as haul it back down to the ground. Likened to cumbersome figures,



^ Jedd Novatt with Chaos 8, 2005. Studio, Provence, France, 2018. Photo Courtesy: Jooney Woodward

standing strong and steady from the entrance, only to look violated and more vulnerable from the back wall, Novatt's playful approach would have us believe that his three-metre tall sculptures are susceptible to the same sensations as his audience. That for their duality emphasises the artist's preoccupation with material and emotional transformation. A light and shadow metamorphose them into something else again. As space, structure, volume, and material, are less permanent and more involving and evolving.

As the anatomy of everything, stone, steel, bone and body, as Novatt sees them, are all subject to the same conditional changes, that are as much about the seasons, as they are the feeling of being alive. And with that comes the illusion of longevity, of the idea that we convince ourselves of our own invincibility for a time. Replaced with the more pressing reality that our lives are ephemeral - as much on the earth as of it; similarly that the architecture that surrounds us is open to the influences and alterations that affect us all. As though a building suffers the same.

Sculptures from his aptly named Chaos series, that are empty of the organs of the human body, still retain something of the human spirit - permanent in spite of their potential collapse. And it is the strength of his choice of material, as well as the idiotic elegance of his forms, that leads one to wonder about how we are all valuable as vulnerable entities in space, human and architectural. In situ Novatt's works are intentionally chaotic against the architectural order of the newly constructed cityscape outside. And by involving his sculptures to situations and sites, as with his invitation to take his three-metre sculptures over to one of the last brutalist sites in London, at Smithson Plaza, it is as if the certainty of everything around them is called into question. The more we will his sculptures to stay upright, to want them to exist, the greater our belief in materials we might otherwise have considered as beyond us, which Novatt examples as 'going beyond the material'. Creating skeletal structures that possess all of the materiality of the modern world, whilst taking on the sensibility of the individual. Effecting space in the same way that the human begin activates and alters the environment by their presence alone. They are sculptures as self.

Interview

Rajesh Punj: *Apologies I wasn't able to attend your talk yesterday.*

Jedd Novatt: Maybe it's better in a way.

RP: *I have just returned, late yesterday from Antwerp.*

JN: Okay.

RP: *I think it would be interesting to begin by talking about the two and three-dimensional works we have here, which interest and intrigue me enormously.*

JN: Thank you, as am I.

RP: *I want first to understand the collages or*



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^ Jedd Novatt at PAMM, Photo Courtesy: Robin Hill

> Jedd Novatt works in his studio, Image Courtesy: Jooney Woodward.



drawings, in relation to the heavier sculptures, and of how they co-exist in the exhibition?

JN: Every work I do is independent. So this is this and that's that, but obviously they are all inter-connected, which interests me. What these large prints are able to do is (to encapsulate the sculptural experience). I think very intensely about my work when I am looking at the sculptures. The distance to the work alters the experience, and what interests me is that unlike a lot of sculpture the experience continues no matter where you are in relation to the work. So if you stand up close to a sculpture, our involvement is as successful as seeing the work from a distance. And yet what we see is completely different from what appears on the opposite side of the same sculpture. And that is a big part of it for me, and has been for many years, that I think that regardless of where you are looking at the work from, that it is always a fulfilling aesthetic experience.

What started to happen is that the more I would look at my works, and people would send me images of my work (from a museum in Miami), a framed image looking up at the sculpture as an image. I realised what interested me a great deal about my work, was this. The idea that here is the non-representational form, and then you go another step further, standing here or there, in whichever direction you go another step further forward - creates and encourages these continuing abstractions of the original abstractions, that appeals to me greatly. It is a very good question; I never think of a work in relation to another work - I don't do this to do that. They are all trying to figure

out a puzzle that interests me, and they are entirely independent of one another.

RP: Is there then a sense that the drawings are in anyway sculptural? Or do you instinctively detach that from the work, of the weight and volume, to replace that with a flatter, firmer abstraction?

JN: I think what (the drawings) do is question dimension. So the two-dimensional challenged what we understand of three-dimensionality. Works in which I think you would agree there is a phenomenal amount of space.

RP: Yes I would agree with that, like the sea beneath the surface of the water of your youth.

JN: That is what it is, the drawing successes in (explaining that). So it is the drawing, whether involving three or two-dimensional work, that contributes to its success - which is my way of understanding the drawings. And so I look at the collages as ways of playing with ideas of space and of depth, in the literal sense. Crucially it gives me the ability to think about an idea differently from the three-dimensional. So I am very excited by these works, they are brand new.

RP: So all of the drawings are new to you, as much as they are to us?

JN: Yes, entirely new.

RP: Which makes you see them in the way we do, with the same level of intensity, and relational wonder, of the drawings to the sculptures.

JN: They are all based on wood blocks, from which I have created a series of dimensional drawings. So we could make one in one particular way, and turn it around, and have the space black and the form grey. And also I mixed all of the colours myself, so there are three different blacks, three different blues, and that starts to create all of these variable effects.

RP: By doing so are you intending to allow for a new way of how we see sculpture, that introduces space as surface. With these works it really appears as if we are looking 'into' space as sculpture, into the soul of a material form, without having to comprehend the scale and material value of the work first. And with these coloured colleges might we be able to experience some of the same sensations of the physicality of the object in the round, by having everything delivered to us over a flat plane, that of the image as a window?

JN: Yes.

RP: So you are already deciding on grades of colour, when you talk about three different blacks, and three different blues?

JN: I actually think more about light than I do colour. My work is determined by light and shadow. So you have greys, you have blues, and reds against a black sky. You see an odd light against a black sky that is coloured red. And what I realise is when you stare at

any of the drawings, that they start to change. That planes and perspectives are going forward and back. A column might look to be going forward and then it switches on you completely, and you are inside it - which that interests me a lot. It is not that I am interested in the optical element that comes as a by-product of the success of the drawing.

RP: So you really consider them as space and volume bearing drawings.

JN: Of course, there is as much space in one of these drawings, as there is in any one of the sculptures. Which interests me when thinking about sculpture and of the form.

RP: It is interesting to comprehend your understanding of the two-dimensional being comparable to the three-dimensional, of the surface and into the drawings.

JN: I think it is fair to say (that the drawings) depart from the two-dimensional, because they feel structural, so spatial. I talk not just of the space, but you can feel the volume.

RP: You have already suggested that these are all works independent of one another, but obviously it is as well, that they depend on each other, as with the sculptures, steel branch for steel branch. Appearing ready to keel over and collapse.

JN: Of course they all relate to one another - there is no one intention for everything. Again it is a very good question. They are all my works on paper, in steel and in bronze. The choice of medium is my way of thinking through things that interest me. So you do it this way, which affords you to look at it from a different point-of-view. It is also a way of challenging yourself as an artist, when you are constantly trying different materials and mediums, because you continue to learn from them. Finding 'that is interesting', and 'that gives me an idea', and it could be an idea on paper that makes me think to apply it to my sculptures, or the other way, 'form made flat'. I just want to keep feeling very excited by everything. But of course, going back to your question, they relate entirely to one another.

> Works from Jedd Novatt Chaos series will be installed on Smithson Plaza London, Feb-Jun 2019. Image copyright Barney Hindle. Courtesy: Encounter Contemporary.





RP: *What we see of your work now is based on what exists already.*

JN: Also what starts to happen, is that when you step back, as I have already suggested, it appears one way, and then when you come closer the work alters to appear entirely differently. So position and perception constantly influence what we see, which happens in the same way with sculpture. And again with sculpture, every element is unique, and you can end up looking to the drawings for the solution to the sculptures.

RP: *Thus do you feel the compositional complexity that is inherent in your drawings, is born of your sculptures?*

JN: I don't know. Another very good question, I just don't know. I don't like to overthink the process, I like to keep working, and by making them I can actualise what is happens. I make the work and then you see, and you decide where it leads you, because there are things that happen that can be accidental. With the elements of each of the drawings, if we concentrate on those, it can look like certain parts are one behind the other, but in fact, it can come down on it and (turn in a different direction entirely). So there all these monumental subtleties that shape what is happening.

RP: *Is that uncertainty determined as much by your choice of palette, as the play of interlocking elements?*

JN: Yes. Of my playing with perspective and depth, where again I want that we are not sure of what we are looking at. Is it convex or concave, of what is

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^ South London VI, woodblock monoprint, ink on paper, 2018

> Jedd Novatt works in his studio, Image Courtesy: Jooney Woodward.

going on exactly? And so when you start staring at them, drawing for drawing, as with the sculptures, the more you come into contact with them, the more to start seeing things, and start realising what you see as fact is actually fictional.

RP: *Like a Maurits Cornelis Escher drawing. Where everything metamorphoses into something else.*

JN: You think you understand the work when you look at it until you realise the work is moving in a hundred directions. Which begs the question, what exactly is happening? What is it about it that is impossible to understand? Which is what I like to look at in other people's work, is that it requires time, observation, a level of meditation of the work. So all of a sudden you see things that you didn't notice, of balance and weight in the work- and that to me is important.

RP: *You are wanting an audience to invest a certain amount of time in your work, by experiencing them, and insisting that they see them again, to return when the light is different, when the day is riper, fresher, cleaner, colder, and our minds and imaginations are open to seeing and receiving more.*

JN: Those that live with my work will say, as they did last night, 'I was looking at the work that I have of yours, and I have had it for many years, and I looking at I saw it in a way I have never seen it before'. It is completely different. So for sure I find that gratifying.

RP: *Is that to do with a works location, lighting and life span?*

JN: Some. Each work has to succeed, independent of

where it goes. It has to succeed in itself, and obviously as well they are very affected by their environments.

RP: *Which brings me back to my original point about seeing the works under differing circumstances, of light and landscape, and of the related shadows. To see a work that is entirely static, unfold as though animated.*

Florence Ritter: And of the commissions and works that you have in-situ. Of the Chatsworth House installation that you are probably aware of, will have a totally different impact, to the works here at the gallery on Cork Street. Yesterday we had a question about 'joints', and I even see them within the sculptures as human elbows. There is a wonderful tactility to these very masculine forms.

RP: *The monument as man.*

JN: And that is where you start to see things when you are looking at passages of the work. When you start to look at everything, what interests me is that I want every part (of the sculpture) to succeed. So if you think of it musically, you have all of these different phases, and if one didn't perform, (then the entire piece might fail); and so for me this has to work - the subtly, the shape and form. Whereby you literally start to question every tiny element, as I want it to be a new or 're-experience'.

RP: *And that by definition becomes incredibly complex. The idea that you will the works to be successful, visually as well as physically - that they occupy space as positively as architecture does.*





JN: Incredibly complex I hope.

RP: Are you someone constantly drawing and detailing your ideas down on paper - preplanning, presupposing the scale and sensibility of a sculpture?

JN: There is some spontaneity of course, but each work in my head has a certain appearance, as I think about it. And this work will lead to the next work, and to the next, and so you are following on from before. I hope what I do is extremely difficult. I hope it requires a lot of work. I want that it all requires a great deal of thought (on my part). I sincerely believe that it should do that.

RP: Crucially if we look at and into the sculptures, of these steel stick structures, placed one on top of the other, as though 'a house of cards', are they entirely about chaos and imminent collapse of everything

I realise is when you stare at any of the drawings, that they start to change. That planes and perspectives are going forward and back. A column might look to be going forward and then it switches on you completely, and you are inside it - which that interests me a lot.

upright; or are we looking at artworks that are much more balanced than that. That address gravity as this equal and opposite force, likely to hold something upright as easily as it is able to pull it to the ground.

JN: Balance, lack of balance, are they falling? To me, and I explained this last night at the talk, that they are about stopping something happening, the point between it going up and coming down. Of literally stopping something at the moment before its collapses - so just that moment; which interests me a lot, of how to capture that very subtle moment of just before and just after.

RP: And do you play with that as a physical experiment? How does that manifest itself in the studio might be a better question?

JN: I don't know, I just know it. I really can't explain. It comes very naturally (to know when something is about to go). It is very natural to me.

RP: It is that moment, the time and ground between something existing, and it no longer being present. Which might mirror the precarious predicament of all of our lives, to want to exist in spite of everything.

JN: Right, it becomes the result that is interesting, because they are made of steel, and yet there is nothing static about them. If you move one foot in any direction it becomes a completely different experience. And each becomes a different form, with a different reality, and a singular way it exists in space. So it might appear as if part of the sculpture is lifting, when from another position it can be flying in another direction. So literally as you navigate your way around the work, it becomes something else. So that, as I have said, interests me, that the work is constantly moving in so many directions. (You can ask of each sculpture) is that connected or is that floating? Is this element hovering? Those uncertainties are meaningful to me, and the works on paper have that same quality again.

RP: So, as you suggest, they are all animated to a greater or lesser extent by the light, in spite of the sculptures being static.

JN: I would say a great deal of energy is involved.

RP: And in terms of the scale of a work, how do you go about determining the size of one work over another?

JN: If it feels right, each one involves a different thought process. This feels right for this work, and that is appropriate for that work. It has never been arbitrary or naive. It is always something that feels right to me.

RP: Is it that you will have created something on a smaller scale, and then worked it up?

JN: Sometimes that happens, sometimes not. I can have done smaller pieces, and thought that would translate well on a larger scale, and I have also had it in my head on a larger scale. So it can go between both poles.

^ Installation view, Jedd Novatt *Conversations with Gravity* at Waddington Custot.

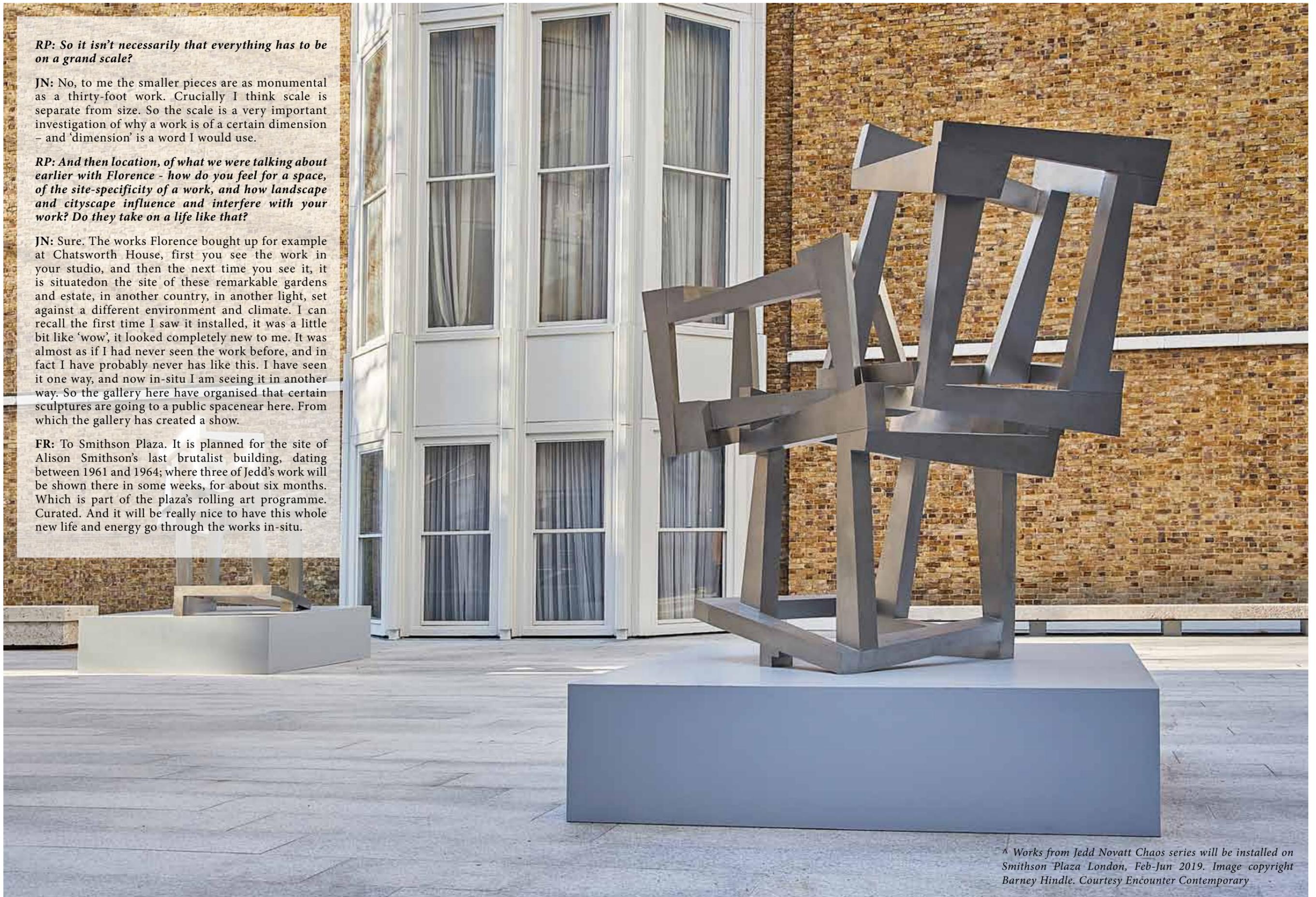
RP: So it isn't necessarily that everything has to be on a grand scale?

JN: No, to me the smaller pieces are as monumental as a thirty-foot work. Crucially I think scale is separate from size. So the scale is a very important investigation of why a work is of a certain dimension – and 'dimension' is a word I would use.

RP: And then location, of what we were talking about earlier with Florence – how do you feel for a space, of the site-specificity of a work, and how landscape and cityscape influence and interfere with your work? Do they take on a life like that?

JN: Sure. The works Florence bought up for example at Chatsworth House, first you see the work in your studio, and then the next time you see it, it is situated on the site of these remarkable gardens and estate, in another country, in another light, set against a different environment and climate. I can recall the first time I saw it installed, it was a little bit like 'wow', it looked completely new to me. It was almost as if I had never seen the work before, and in fact I have probably never has like this. I have seen it one way, and now in-situ I am seeing it in another way. So the gallery here have organised that certain sculptures are going to a public space near here. From which the gallery has created a show.

FR: To Smithson Plaza. It is planned for the site of Alison Smithson's last brutalist building, dating between 1961 and 1964; where three of Jedd's work will be shown there in some weeks, for about six months. Which is part of the plaza's rolling art programme. Curated. And it will be really nice to have this whole new life and energy go through the works in-situ.



^ Works from Jedd Novatt Chaos series will be installed on Smithson Plaza London, Feb-Jun 2019. Image copyright Barney Hindle. Courtesy Encounter Contemporary

RP: And will those particular works be elevated onto plinths?

FR: They will sit on a pale marble stone. Which as a combination of steel and marble we envisage is going to be very beautiful. As the architecture is very linear, reductive, and the plaza is a throughway, but still a place where you are encouraged to sit, and because of the linearity of the building and Jedd's sculptures, you have this almost tumbling quality, everything works, of the building in relation to the sculptures.

RP: Do you plan to photograph, to record this temporary relocation of the works?

FR: Yes.

RP: Clearly that is important to you, of the photography that comes with the works relocation - that further encourages your cannon of colleges.

JN: Yes, it is interesting, all of the different ways of seeing something. Again the question is excellent. With the gallery having created this incredible exhibition to show these sculptures in the gallery, and then to exhibit them outside in a really remarkable space - I went there and it is really quite remarkable. It is truly ideal for these three large works. You literally couldn't create a better space if you wanted to. So for me it makes sense because the gallery has opened a door to my even having the experience to coming back and seeing them in my studio, seeing them here, and of seeing them outside; but in a controlled space because of the architecture. Which is ideal for this project.

FR: They are the same people that look after the Rockefeller Plaza and Chrysler building in New York.

JN: So I will have a chance, as other people will have a chance to see them in a fairly controlled environment. But also the footprint of the space becomes important, and that affects the installation. At the plaza it is the same thing. There are three different spaces that you have to go through, and making your way through those spaces you see aged buildings, that lead one to this completely contemporary space, where you have my works; and that contract delivers a tremendous dynamic.

RP: Architecture and art side-by-side. So will you determine the exact location for the works?

JN: It has already been done. Jake (Twyford), one of the directors of the gallery, who is extremely good at curating the placement of art, he took me to the site, and his vision for the works is 'dead-on' to what I would have done.

RP: Is that as important to you, with this exhibition, of the location of your works?

JN: We have a natural dialogue. Obviously very much so, but remember these are large works in an interior space, and we are not in one of these cavernous old garage's, we are in an elegant gallery, and it remains a really ambitious thing to place these really large

sculpture, and have them work so well in the space. So there are certain limitations where you want some distance from two large works, and then you want the surprise of introducing a work to the adjoining space at the back of the gallery, that appears like an enclave. That allows for a tremendous tension, as the work is standing up against the walls, against the ceiling, against the floor, which is what I want of a work. I want the sculptures crashing into corners. So there is a constant sense of movement.

RP: Thus space is a consequence, a condition in your mind all of the time.

JN: Yes, of course. Inevitably, because I think the space is the form.

Also what starts to happen, is that when you step back from a way, as I have already suggested, it appears one way, and then when you come closer the work alters to appear entirely differently. So position and perception constantly influence what we see, which happens in the same way with sculpture. And again with sculpture every element is unique, and you can end up looking to the drawings for the solution to the sculptures.

> Jedd Novatt works in his studio, Courtesy: Jooney Woodward 1

