Manufacturing Sympathies

Matt Boonstra says he’s been interested in sculpture, indirectly, for a very long time. “My family has a long history of being blue collar workers – industrial workers,” Boonstra says. “And it’s always been common practice to be out in the garage and working with my hands. So, that tactile quality was always present for me – there’s a certain familiarity.

“So, when I entered the academic setting, sculpture made sense. The plastic qualities I could feel in my hands. I could understand the materials, and it took off from there.”

After obtaining his undergraduate degree in sculpture from Eastern Michigan University, where MSU grad and associate professor Brian Nelson was a big influence on him, Boonstra came to Michigan State where he graduated in May 2009 with an MFA in sculpture. He says that his experience at MSU was “wonderful.”

“When I came to Michigan State, Professors James Lawton and Laura Cloud were fantastic in helping me reach the level where I think I needed to be,” Matt says, “so my ideas could be expressed not only through my words, but through the work I made. It was rigorous at times – studio art practice takes quite a long time, as I imagine is the case with other academic disciplines. Instructors challenged me, and I like to be challenged. Along the way, Tom Berding, professor of art and department chair, has been vital to my development as a professional artist, educator and scholar. Professor Berding helped me articulate my creative voice for professional practice.

“To move forward along with the rest of the creative and contemporary scholars out there was fascinating. It was one of the most striking things about being at MSU: to be part of that national and global discussion about academics, and for me, about sculpture.”

Being “part of that national and global discussion” became even more tangible for Boonstra when his sculpture,”Manufacturing Sympathies,” was awarded the prestigious International Sculpture Center’s Outstanding Student Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award for 2009. The International Sculpture Center (ISC) established the annual program in 1994 to recognize young sculptors and to encourage their continued commitment to the field. The jurors for the 2009 award included David McFadden, Curator, the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY; Jeanne Jaffe, Professor and Chair of Fine Arts, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA; and New Jersey sculptor Willie Cole.

Boonstra’s and the other artists’ work was also included in Grounds for Sculpture’s 2009 Fall/Winter Exhibitions Catalogue, and a biographical profile and photograph of their work was featured in the October 2009 issue of the International Sculpture Center’s award winning publication, “Sculpture” magazine, as well as on the ISC award-winning website at sculpture.org. The work was then featured in the competition’s first annual traveling exhibition, visiting The Salt Lake Art Center in Salt Lake City, Utah from March 13 through May 22, and the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center in San Antonio, Texas from June 3 through August 15, 2010.

The 11 award recipients and projects were featured in the Grounds for Sculpture’s Fall/Winter Exhibition, which was on view from October 10, 2009 - January 10, 2010 in Hamilton, New Jersey, adjacent to the ISC headquarters. Matthew traveled to New Jersey and The Grounds for Sculpture to set up his winning entry, and was on hand for the opening reception, an event that his

“Manufacturing Sympathies,” Matthew Boonstra, 2009
former MSU Professors James Lawton and Laura Cloud also attended.

“Matthew is exceptionally talented,” says Lawton. “His concepts and work are strong, and always make you think. Matthew’s time-based work addressing social and political issues illustrates the sophistication and originality of his work. He was one of the most engaged students I’ve encountered here at MSU.”

Cloud echoed this sentiment. “I wouldn’t have missed this event for anything,” says Cloud. “It is well-deserved recognition for truly outstanding work. Matthew and his work are compelling and thought-provoking – he truly has a gift for translating complex themes into accessible art.”

For Boonstra, that translation begins with a concept.

“I start off conceptually – thinking about my subject matter and the narrative that I want to create,” says Boonstra. “And that guides the creative process. For example, “Manufacturing Sympathies” began with research about industrial workers in the automotive industry. The title simply means that I have sympathy for these workers and for the manufacturing industry. In developing a story or narrative, I work toward finding a form from the research.”

“Matt is a really talented and engaged artist,” says Tom Berding, chair of the Department of Art and Art History at MSU. “And one thing that’s very clear is that he comes out of a certain lineage. Artists look for linkages and lineages – it’s a way to locate yourself – sort of an artistic GPS. And all artists go through that process. But the real journey of an artist is to find your own voice. Matt’s work is so powerful because he’s not only finding his own voice, but also connecting historically and contemporaneously to other artists.”

THE HUMAN CONDITION

“His is not a voice in a vacuum. It’s a voice that picks up on the idea of the artist as social commentator; the artist who has a heightened sort of alertness to the human condition as expressed locally in their own time, who’s aware of the political and economic landscape in which they work. It also seems to be work that is genuinely tied to his personal background. So, there is this sort of merger of a personal journey, a personal narrative and a broader orbit in which he situates himself which is this time and space.”

Adds Berding, “One could hearken back to the artists of the 1930s in America in a time of economic downturn and depression; a time, in some ways, not unlike today. And how the artist was an important part of history in documenting in a highly subjective way – from a human and very experiential point of view – what they saw, what they heard, what they remembered, and putting it together into something that’s memorable; that carries beyond its time.”

Boonstra says that creating and communicating his point of view begins with the materials that go into his sculptures, and he finds a great many of these materials on research sites. Some of them are traditional sculpture materials and some are not, but, regardless, he says that they all become integrated into what becomes the sculpture. For instance, part of his research for “Manufacturing Sympathies” was to go to employment agencies.

“You can't take photographs at an employment agency, so I started to bring my sketchpad,” says Boonstra. “I noticed the interaction happening in the job bank, and began sketching those figures. The seated figure was a woman who was essentially waiting in line, waiting for her number to be called. What came out of that experience for me was a certain amount of empathy that I had for the subject matter and for the person. And I think that came through in the sculpture.” Boonstra says that the interaction between the two pieces that make up the sculpture – the seated figure and the horizontal figure – is very important. Each uses materials commonly found on manufacturing sites.

“Automotive manufacturing plants have these huge milling machines that make parts for automobiles. And they pump out these iron shavings called iron chips,” Boonstra says. “I was looking into the bin, and I knew I had to do something with them, as I was still
working with the seated figure. It was just a matter of how do I get these iron chips on the form, and I thought that magnets made sense.

“For the horizontal figure, which represents manufacturing, I used motor oil to create the figure, with a DVD projection layered on top of it of me burning motor oil with an oxy-acetylene torch. What the piece symbolizes for me is sympathy and loss for the displacement of the industrial profession – the automotive industrial profession. The burning symbolizes my caring for it and preparing it in some way, as we do with things that are passing. I like to think that it represents my sympathies being with them and going out to them.”

Matthew says that “Manufacturing Sympathies” truly reflects the times, and means more than just the displacement of an industry. It involves people, too. “It’s a really frightening time because the profession has taken such a nosedive and decline,” he says. “So many of these generational families in the automotive industry trades – the labor trades – are being disrupted. It’s possibly breaking up the family system for some.”

For example, Boonstra notes, he did research with a family of multi-generational automotive workers – the grandfather was, the father was, and the son is an automotive worker. Now, the family has a newborn grandson, and whether he will have the opportunity to learn these trades from his family or not is in doubt. Whether it will be available or not is in question.

What’s not in question is Boonstra’s initial career path post-MSU. A native of Milford, Michigan, Matthew stayed busy and kept the creative process alive by teaching at Washtenaw Community College and Oakland Community College and by working in his own professional practice, which he says the profession calls “going out in the wild.” One of his first commissioned works was a sculpture for Owen Hall at MSU.

**OWEN HALL SCULPTURE**

“As a graduate of Michigan State University and three-year resident of Owen Hall, I had special interest in creating a public sculpture. The conceptual idea for my proposal to the Public Art on Campus Committee was directly related to the transformative experience I had as a student at MSU and a resident of Owen Hall.

“Owen Hall is a transitory space. Physically, residents are extremely mobile, constantly moving through and around the building. Intellectually and creatively as a result of their studies, students journey to places where they have never been before. These experiences last a lifetime. Using Owen Hall’s architecture as basis, and in particular the juxtaposition of doors, I aim to celebrate the transitional nature of collegiate life and the many thresholds one crosses. The doors are abstracted into open curved shapes to represent Owen Hall residents’ journeys and ambitions.”

As for his own continuing ambition, in the summer of 2010, Matthew and his long-time girlfriend Ashley were married, and a month later, he was offered and accepted a Visiting Assistant Professor position at Oklahoma State University. Boonstra says that he truly loves teaching and sharing his experience – and his experiences – with his students.

“It’s been such a transformative process for me being in school, that I like to share that experience,” says Boonstra. “And I hope that students can take my knowledge and do well with it just as I was able to do at MSU. For example, Tom Berding, professor of art and department chair, has been vital to my development as a professional artist, educator and scholar. He helped me articulate my creative voice for professional practice.”

Says Berding, “There’s a writer named John Berger who wrote a book called ‘A Painter of Our Time’, and basically one of the treatises of the book – it’s a novel, actually – is that an artist is both of his time and out of his time; steeped in his or her time, and yet able to live beyond their time, as well. Matt Boonstra’s imaginative use of materials creates compelling metaphors that both reveal the subject and go beyond the subject to capture the imagination. It’s those imaginative connections between form and content or subject and scale that allow us to dwell in the piece and really experience meaning; not just sort of allude to, but construct meaning in a very kinesthetic way; a really bodily, sensual way which makes it very memorable.

“There are many multivalent connections that Matt’s work evokes that give it a richness and density of experience instead of a simple one-liner. And that is what makes it compelling – all of these connections that get fused into the experience of viewing his work.”