



Jedd Novatt Recent Sculpture

La Piscine-Musée d'Art et d'Industrie André Diligent,
Roubaix, France, June 2008

Tom Flynn



When I first wrote about Jedd Novatt's sculpture back in November 1999, I was struck by a particular quality in his work which was to do with a sense of arrested movement, of internal energy momentarily stilled. At that time, Novatt was making quite complex arrangements of irregular, open space-frame boxes standing precariously on top of each other as if poised at the limits of balance.

The works seemed to be in some way event-orientated, to refer to a prior destabilizing occurrence. Physical proximity to the work intensified one's susceptibility to the implied possibility of its imminent collapse.¹ I wrote at the time, "It is perhaps the quality of controlled danger (for they are surely falling rather than rising), that lends the pieces their particular *frisson*."²

In the intervening eight years, Novatt's work has grown, both in physical size and in the scale of its ambition. His most recent creations confirm that the latent sense of peril generated by his earlier sculptures was never his primary intention. Rather it was an accidental (albeit exhilarating) outcome of a more considered investigation into traditional sculptural concerns with balance, gravity, weight, and a certain kind of visual energy illuminated by abstract form. I use the word 'traditional' deliberately. Much of the art produced today – from photography to performance – is classified as sculpture, even though it bears little or no visual relation to the three-dimensional, body-orientated sculpture produced prior to the modernist revolution.



Jedd Novatt *Chaos 12* 2004-05

Nevertheless, the theoretical issues that underpinned pre-modernist sculpture were not superseded by modernism, or by those objects and practices that emerged as a result of the further expansion of sculpture's boundaries during the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the expansion of sculpture's boundaries that brought such a cacophony of postmodernist practices served merely to underscore the continuing relevance of traditional pre-modernist sculptural values. These are the values upon which Novatt goes to work.

While in no way nostalgic or derivative, Novatt's art is in an important sense related to Minimalist sculpture, most notably in its persistent engagement with certain core concerns inherited from a much older sculptural tradition. As Alex Potts has noted of the Minimalist objects made in the 1950s and 1960s:

"The distinctive combination of a substantive and complex occupancy of space with spare, non-imagistic shapes put the viewer in a position where a sense of the work as physical presence, which prompted a variety of shifting apperceptions, was made to seem just as important as any form or image it presented."³

Clearly Novatt's work shares little common ground with the closed, self-sufficient, High Minimalist objects of Robert Morris, Carl André or Donald Judd to which Potts alludes. Instead Novatt recruits the spectator in the dramatic realisation of the work, drawing on more traditional ways of intensifying the viewer's engagement.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos San Sebastián (left), 2007-08
Chaos Eibar (right), 2007-08

The intention here is not to classify Novatt as a post-Minimalist – although I see no negative connotations in that – but rather to emphasize those qualities in his work that sustain our attention and which speak to our propensity to recognize in the most strictly abstract forms certain correspondences with the human body. "Sculpture is a proposition about the world," wrote William Tucker and Tim Scott, "about a finite order (completeness), and by implication about our existence in the world."⁴ Novatt's sculpture – and particularly his recent large-scale work – invites us to meditate upon those concepts, to ponder what it is to be alive.

Novatt's new sculpture includes a series of (three) meter-high bronzes – the *Chaos San Sebastián* series and another series of (three) meter-high works entitled *Chaos Eibar* (**above right**) He has also made what can be considered his first monumental piece, the bronze *Chaos Vascos I* (**right**), which stands just under four meters high. In an important sense one can see these new large-scale sculptures as a culmination of his creative project to date and as a point of departure for what may lie ahead.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos Vascos I, 2007-08

The new large-scale sculptures are chunkier and more physically emphatic than his earlier work. This is not a requirement of scale or stability, although clearly those are considerations, but instead seems to be an aesthetic decision that makes the work visibly heavier and which also seems to slow it down.

Some of the earlier balanced box pieces could seem almost airborne or about to levitate, perhaps in part a consequence of the relative delicacy of the rod elements from which the irregular boxes were constructed (each linear strut is individually fashioned and carved in wax before being cast in bronze). The rods in the new large-scale works continue to add visual complexity to the composition but have become more assertive and are noticeably more sculptural in their own right.

Clearly there is a limit to how far Novatt is prepared to expand the relative proportions of each wedge-shaped component and these may be dictated by the need to maintain a balance between qualities of openness and weight.

Do Novatt's structures consume space, or describe it? In a sense they seem to borrow it. Imagine one of the *Chaos San Sebastián* series constructed not as space frames but as conjoined solid objects with all their outer walls filled in. The irregularities of the cross-members would be expressed as a series of irregularly overlapping edges on each planar surface rather than as they are now as emerging and receding struts that describe both breadth and depth. Paradoxically, the 'wonkiness' of Novatt's open space frames (their refusal to provide outward visual confirmation of a rigid internal geometry) ends up being as instructive about volume as it would have been had the surfaces been rendered as solid. At the same time, the works poke fun at the strictures of formal drawing because they confirm the perceived realities of space and gravity as clearly as any conventionally built structure simply by virtue of having to stand up and be balanced.

Some time ago, Novatt began subverting his original structural language by breaking open some of the sides and angled connections of the individual boxes (for example in the work entitled *Chaos Susse 22 Paris* of 2007). At the same time he allowed the vertical and horizontal bars of each irregular cube to adopt more obtuse angles and offline abutments.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos Eibar, 2007-08

This had the effect of both intensifying and making more expressive the overall complexity of the visual matrix while increasing the quality of dynamic instability. We can see this process extended even more imaginatively in the new work entitled *Chaos Eibar*. Here the elements have begun to divest themselves of their cubic credentials and have started to express a springy elasticity. The logic that previously united the two components as geometric cognates has almost dissolved and they now seem conjoined by pure sculptural contingency. One feels an urge to bend them back into shape and yet the visual evidence confirms the absence of any prior state of regularity. The critical fracturing of the outline contour of the sculpture allows the space outside to flood in and conspire in the work. Conversely, the space inside is liberated, being no longer bounded by the geometric strictures of two gravitationally joined cubes. That new dialectic of inside and out has profound consequences for Novatt's future direction. In adapting and expanding his language he has removed some of the constraints imposed by formal geometry. His work might now progress in any number of exciting directions.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos Eibar
2007-08

If the sense of instability has disappeared, there remains an implied narrative or temporal aspect. The upper box of *Chaos Vascos I* has come to rest on the lower box at a haphazard angle as if it has slipped from a more secure position above, prompting us to ponder the possible permutations of the two elements' prior spatial relationships. Was the larger structure previously balanced on top of the smaller one? How was it dislodged? Is it safe? It is a characteristically Novattian turn – bold, somewhat ironic, not without humour, and yet now strangely heroic as a result of the increased scale.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos San Sebastián (detail)
2007-08

Not every sculptor is capable of working on a large scale. Conceiving of large-scale work requires an ontological realignment, an adjustment in attitude towards the world and one's relation to it. Scale and size are two quite different things, of course, scale being to do with relationships between existing objects.⁵ Big can be beautiful, but it can also be monstrous.

Chaos Vascos I (**right**) is the largest work Novatt has made to date. It was cast in a foundry in San Sebastián in the Basque country of Northern Spain. This is more significant than it may seem, for the region was the home of two of the twentieth century's most respected sculptors – Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002) and Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003), both of whom Novatt greatly admires. The work was named in homage to its place of manufacture, but Novatt was also aware of the foundry's proximity to Guernica, the Basque town bombed by the Luftwaffe in 1937 during the Spanish War of Independence, an event that inspired Picasso's eponymous masterpiece. While *Chaos Vascos I* was not intended to memorialize that specific historical event, it nevertheless makes oblique symbolic reference to a more universal notion of political disequilibrium and to the ways in which human conflict impacts on the built environment.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos Vascos
2008

I was struck by an early photograph of *Chaos Vascos I* taken at the foundry shortly after casting. The picture shows a foundry worker standing with his hands clasped behind his back, staring up at the work, which towers over him. The image offers an eloquent reminder of the curious relationship between the sculpted object and the viewer and how meaning is generated in their silent interaction. The spectator lends scale to the work, drawing attention both to its singular identity as object and to its difference in relation to the human body, while the work affirms the reality of the human presence from which it derives its *raison d'être*.

The space-frame structure of Novatt's work carries subliminal references to architecture. When scaled up, we begin to apprehend the work in a similar way to the way we relate to buildings (*Chaos Vascos I* calls to mind the famous photograph, *Men at Work* (1932), by the American photographer Lewis Hine, showing a couple of steeplejacks perched hundreds of feet above the New York skyline on the steel framework of the Empire State Building during its construction.)

The structural stability of the new large-scale pieces invites us to consider the viability of a building designed on such visually irregular principles. Postmodern architecture has already taken such challenges upon itself and in recent years we have seen a plethora of gravity-defying buildings that toy with notions of structural displacement and visual paradox.⁶

As in many monumental exterior sculptures, *Chaos Vascos I* uses the ground plane as an element of the work. This serves to draw attention to gravity which, as William Tucker noted, “unites sculptor and spectator in a common dependence on and resistance to the pull of the earth.”⁷ The relationship between *Chaos Vascos I* and the ground on which it rests conditions the way we read the work. Instead of mirroring the horizontal ground-line by standing four-square, the work is tilted, causing one of its corners to rise up, thereby placing the load-bearing burden on the three remaining corners. Paradoxically this has the twin effect of both reinforcing the work’s connection with the ground by emphasizing its dependence on it, and of separating it from the ground through formal asymmetry. Much of the work’s visual energy derives from the apparent instability of the lower box element which sits off-kilter relative to both the ground and the box above. Moreover, while the larger upper element is clearly positioned in such a way as to provide a compensating balance relative to the leaning lower box, its downward tilt in the direction of the raised corner imparts further visual energy as it threatens to rock that corner back down towards the ground.

Novatt’s large-scale works dramatize the contradictions he is committed to exploring – how far certain abstract constituent elements can be reconfigured, pushed and pulled, so as to maximize the visual tension between equilibrium and disequilibrium. Again this points to an underlying continuum running throughout the history of sculpture.

Just as fifth-century Greek sculptors sought to exploit the human body’s potential within the required protocols of proportion, harmony and restraint, so abstraction continues to prove amenable to a disciplined articulation of the body and its place in the world, albeit by different means. Hence one might see the disposition of weight in *Chaos Vascos I* as analogous to the torsion of the human body in the position known as *contrapposto* in classical sculpture in which the weight is shifted onto one leg.

Such concerns provided the foundation of the sculptural standard, or *canon*, devised by the ancient Greek artist Polykleitos.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos Vascos I
2008

Polykleitos's "paradigm of measured humanity" recommended that sculpture aim to be "proportioned with meticulous exactitude, composed around precisely calculated cross-relationships between weight-bearing and free, tense and relaxed, flexed and straight, and finished with painstaking care." This reminds us of both the ancient lineage of abstract sculpture's core concerns and of the essentially abstract nature of ancient sculpture.

Novatt's decision to move into a larger scale has increased the sense of drama in his work. In this regard it is worthwhile drawing attention to the formal economy of means with which he works. There is little extraneous information or visual noise to distract from the central focus on gravity and balance. Variety is largely restricted to subtle contrasts in the thickness of the cross members and the resulting patterns generated by the different views as one circumambulates the work. The graduations in the cross-members creatively complicate the receding perspective lines, accentuating and contradicting its vertical and longitudinal axes. This relatively simple conceit imparted a dynamic quality to the earlier small-scale works that is even more effective in these new larger pieces.



Jedd Novatt
Chaos Eibar, (detail)
2007-08

For the most part, the new meter-high sculptures have a crispness of line and edge where cross members join, but there is contrasting softness here too. The gentle curves to the angles in the *Chaos Eibar series* (**above right**) are tactile and inviting, lending the work a haptic quality more often associated with craft. This in no way undermines the work's intellectual thrust but rather introduces a note of corporeal familiarity that helps draw the viewer into its orbit.

Successful three-dimensional sculpture cannot be fully absorbed by the observing eye. This is as true of Canova's neoclassical masterpiece *The Three Graces* as it is of the most complex abstract compositions by Eduardo Chillida. Such works always appear to keep something in reserve, part of their internal or external form remaining elusive and unfathomable no matter how long one spends walking around the work.

Novatt's sculpture is approaching that place where we struggle to reconcile what we see with what we think we know, where what we see never fully explains the full implications of the work. The variations in structure (where some corners join and others don't), the irregularity of conjunctions (where some members correspond with their spatial equivalents and others don't) and the contrasts in shape (where a sharp edge on one side gives way to a soft edge further along, or *vice versa*) all serve to deny a full apprehension of the work from any one viewpoint. Not only must we move around it in an attempt to divine its true shape, but even a complete peripheral tour often fails to explain how it stands up, leaving one with an enjoyable sense of doubt.

In attempting to grapple with the abstract concepts that have preoccupied sculptors since pre-classical times, Jedd Novatt has set himself a significant task. That task becomes all the more challenging in the context of the art world's prevailing preoccupations.

Walking around any major contemporary art fair today one is struck by the preponderance of pictorial, media-related, post-Pop, manufactured objects purporting to be sculpture. Much of this work involves the appropriation and reification of imagery from the realms of advertising, medicine, consumerism, natural history, popular culture, cinema, pornography, food, and so on. The imagery has generally been reconfigured, adapted, corrupted, subverted, scaled up, scaled down, re-engineered, magnified, miniaturized, or transposed into another medium. The aim of such work seems to be to maximize visual impact, intensify shock-value, and guarantee immediate recognition. Long-term over-reliance on the short-term visual pay-back offered by this kind of contemporary art has led to a decline in the critical faculties required to assimilate more complex, historically informed and intellectually demanding work. And yet, curiously, instead of making more serious work seem boring and unfashionable by comparison, it has instead served to enhance its aesthetic value and significance.

In his book, *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, the art historian James Elkins describes how he spent "part of an afternoon" looking at Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage Portrait* in the London National Gallery. As Elkins comments, "the painting is exceedingly demanding, full of things that are hard to see and spaces that are hard to imagine." After a good half an hour scrutinising the picture, he retired to another room feeling "deeply tired". He goes on to say, "People who spend time looking will recognize what I am describing: hard looking is actually very draining." Elkins likens this to the exhaustion felt by concert pianists who sweat after just a few minutes at the piano.

"It's not because they're nervous, or because the concert hall is warm. [...] Pianists sweat because of the quality of attention they bring to bear on what they're doing."⁸

What Elkins draws attention to is not merely the energy and concentration required to engage properly with serious works of art, but also the sometimes intangible human benefit that accrues from that engagement.

Moreover, while the quality of thought and care expended by the artist might in itself deserve commensurate investment from the viewer, it is the quality of the finished work that ultimately testifies to the seriousness of the artist's commitment and which justifies the time spent in concentrated looking.

Jedd Novatt's work is full of contradictions and visual surprises, many of which demand time and commitment on the part of the viewer in order to reveal themselves in all their complexity and subtlety. The rewards are many and various and infinitely life-enriching. But then the finest abstract sculpture has always been difficult to walk away from.

Tom Flynn
London, March 2008

Notes

1. A similar thing happens in certain works by Richard Serra, notwithstanding Serra's own denial of any prior intention to this end when conceiving his work: "I'm not interested in the sculpture toppling or in the sculpture being threatening or in the nature of menace." – Richard Serra, interview with Robert C. Morgan, in *Richard Serra, Writings, Interviews*, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.191.
2. Flynn, T., *Jedd Novatt*, Exhibition catalogue, Blains Fine Art, London, 1999.
3. Potts, A., *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, Yale University Press, 2000, p178.
4. Tucker, W., & Scott, T., 'Reflections on Sculpture' (1967), in *Art in Theory: 1900-1999*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Eds.), 1992, p785.
5. "Scale has to do with internal relationships and not necessarily of those of size, which is either big or small. Something could be enormous in scale and small in size. Scale is really independent of size." – Richard Serra, 1994, p47
6. The Californian architect Eric Owen Moss's *The Box* in Culver City, California is an example of the use of tilted volumes in contemporary architecture.
7. Tucker, W., *The Language of Sculpture*, Thames & Hudson, 1974, p145.
8. Elkins, J., *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, Routledge, London, 2004, p173.

