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Matthew Ronay in his installation at Nils Stærk, Copenhagen Foto: Christine Løkkebø.

## Work being pray - A conversation with Matthew Ronay

The American Artist **Matthew Ronay** is at the moment showing his exhibition *Ind and Out, and In and Out, Again* at gallery Nils Stærk. We met at the gallery before the opening, to talk about the meditative nature of work, muscle memory and the pressure of having to explaining your works.

AF MYNTE CORELL

**The installation is a couple of years old now, when you first showed it in 2013 at the Biennale in Lyon you talked about mythologies. Do you find that your work, or in particular this work, changes it's meaning over time?**

For this work I haven't, but absolutely I think, for me, the concepts or the narratives that I come up with are only guides for possible ways of interpreting the work. And so often that can change or should change for the viewer. And as I change myself, obviously some times the meaning shifts. I also think that the symbols are in an constant state of revealing themselves.

**Your works are often shown as an abstraction of something real, do you use your art to process and understand the world?**

I do, in the sense that after the works are made, or while I'm working on them, I have a chance to think about the contents and what happened in the process of making the works, but mostly the works are in a way born within themselves.

**You talked about being creative and being inspired comes from your body or more specifically a muscle, can you explain to me what you mean by that?**

My thinking on that is often when we conceive images we think of something and then we do it. So if you wanted to make a drawing or a sculpture of a dog, you might think of a dog and then make it, but for me most of the images that I come up with starts with drawing. When the pencil is on the paper I'm not thinking. The reason why I'm talking about muscle memory is that the muscle knows when to move, because there are signals sent from the brain, but it's possible that the message is sent closer to the actual thing that moves, its not necessarily always sent directly from the brain. When I'm drawing I feel the muscles in my hands and in my arms have cultivated a certain way of moving. That way of movement has a lot more to do with muscle memory in the same way as an athlete practicing over and over again so their muscles get memory of how to perfectly

do a certain movement. So it occurred to me, maybe the images that I create is like a muscle memory from drawing over and over again - that there are certain kinds of images that my body does that are not necessarily willed by my mind.

**You talked about creativity or the felling of being creative is sexual in its nature, it sounds like being creative is a kind of lust for you?**

I think maybe desire is a more precise word. The reason why I made the analogy about sexuality was more to say that there are moments when you feel desire, and then you act up on it either on your own or with someone else. So for me, I tried to make the analogy about creativity as sexuality in the sense that it's a wave of desire that floats over me to do something. It's almost related to ego death, you must do something to say "I'm here and I'm alive". Maybe the sexual impulse to reproduce is the same to create.

**You talked about work being prayer. It sounds like you use art, and the process of making it, to meditate and to find a kind of peace within yourself. Can you tell me a little about your thoughts on that?**

It took me a long time to be able to admit to myself that what I really enjoy is the process of working, and that for me, the repetitive nature of working I find tranquil, and so when I am working - lets say if I am making thousands of little holes in to a piece of wood – there is a certain mindframe that you go into. It wasn't until I had myself started meditating that I realize that that was a space that I had always accessed. And what treated my inner being kindly was to put time into an object to show your trace by subtracting the material to show each line and each hole has a moment of time - a kind of energy you can impregnate in to a piece of wood. It didn't occur to me that it was a legitimate way to relate to why I do what I do. I was trained to think of artworks more in terms of concepts and philosophies and so it wasn't until I was able to admit to myself that what I enjoy the most is the actual labor and the recording of time.

**Do you think that your work has more of a value in the process of making it? Is the process of making art more interesting than the actual artwork?**

Yes, for me it is true, and I think my experience, although I love to look at other peoples artworks, I find sometimes writing or music or cinema to be a more primary inspiration. The finished artwork are the end of the journey for all of the ideas, so the process of getting here, was more exciting for me than looking at the work as a finished thing. That being said, I do think that if I felt more comfortable with knowing that things don't need to be explained, then I would enjoy better what I've done, because when I looked at it, I wouldn't have to think of what it is, what it means, and what people would take from it. Many times I've tried to relax and be comfortable with the fact that things aren't explainable, but somehow in the end, as people re-expect some kind of explanation – I'm not sure that adding any language to the work actually does it better or not.

**Do you think that it is a problem in general when talking about contemporary art that people are afraid to interpret it differently than what we have been told by art history – the notion that certain works or symbols carry certain defined meanings?**

I don't know if it's necessarily a problem. I think its good to discuss and to think about things and I think that languages almost are an economical way to discuss and to say what we feel and what we think and to describe what we see. I do feel that maybe we are not as equipped (23.20) as we could be to experience things emotionally, or in some sort of mysterious other way of absorbing content that's not just in terms of making divisions and trying to make things specific or concrete. I mean, for example, when you walk into a sacred space there is a quality of being in a space that isn't translatable to writing. I think what's interesting about artworks is that whether they are music or poetry or object-oriented it is a really amazing way to estimate those kinds of experiences.

**A thing I like about your works and this work in particular is that it can be a single piece or it can be an installation or a performance. It has diversity to it. Usually I find that most art works are really particular in its media. Do you like to mix these divided ideas or understandings about art and its media?**

I do because I think when I conceive the works - when I am drawing, I often draw one thing at a time. There are times where I have drawn an entire installation in one drawing, but more often I am drawing a single sculptor. What always excited me is that you can strengthen or intensify the possibilities by combining everything, and kind of making it a bigger statement. I think for a work like this, adding performance or a ceremonial kind of aspect gives it another possibility. In terms of that it has specific use, these things all come together under the idea of ceremony or something transforming, the more senses you can involve in the piece the richer are the possibilities.

**You have added some new pieces to the exhibition, when you add something new to an old exhibition, how do you choose which works to exhibit? Are the particular works of art meant to be understood as isolated or combined with the original part of the exhibition?**

I don't think that there is necessarily a continuous narrative for these groups of works. This is a new way to experience my ideas. I wanted to find a way where I could experiment with imagery and ideas one a smaller level with sculptor, because I feel like it's more my natural talent. And so this was a way for me to work with the imagery, to find out whether it works for me or not. They are not quite studios for something larger but they allow me time to experience these shapes and forms and ideas before I would maybe commit to something bigger.

**At some point your work was more political, and recently I heard you talking about the psych and self. Does your work in some way pick up inspiration from what's going on in society, or do you feel an urge to express these things in your art?**

I do, but I think it is intuitive and it's not ever illustrative. I crave lots of information. I am usually taking in information and then it sits inside me and then it comes out almost subconsciously.

**So it is a way for you to process how you experience the world?**

Yes exactly, I think almost all artists crave information. I think that's part of the curse. You want to understand, and take things in. Of course that can be for different people obviously different things, but it's like you still kind of have a greed for information, and you take the information in and you develop it, and process it, and it comes out in different ways, and in different things that you do. What shows the most in my work is my fascination with the natural world. I crave a lot of information and images from and about the nature, I don't feel like I necessarily chose those things, I was just magnetized to them. When I really searched myself for what was important and inspiring, and how I would want my work to be, I definitely came back to the physical world, and I think it is just incredibly fascinating, and I think that in the moment when you are looking at it, it tells you exactly what you need to know.

**Thank you**



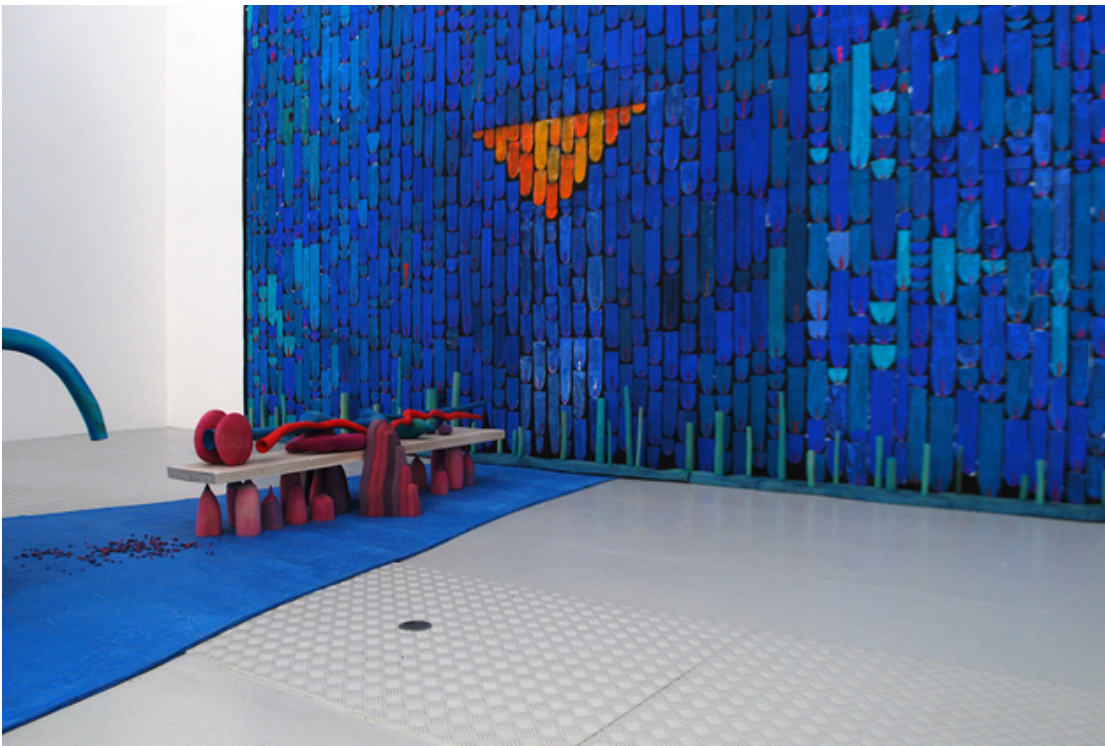
**Matthew Ronay:** *In and Out, and In and Out, Again* (installation view), Nils Stærk, 2015. Foto: Christine Løkkebø.



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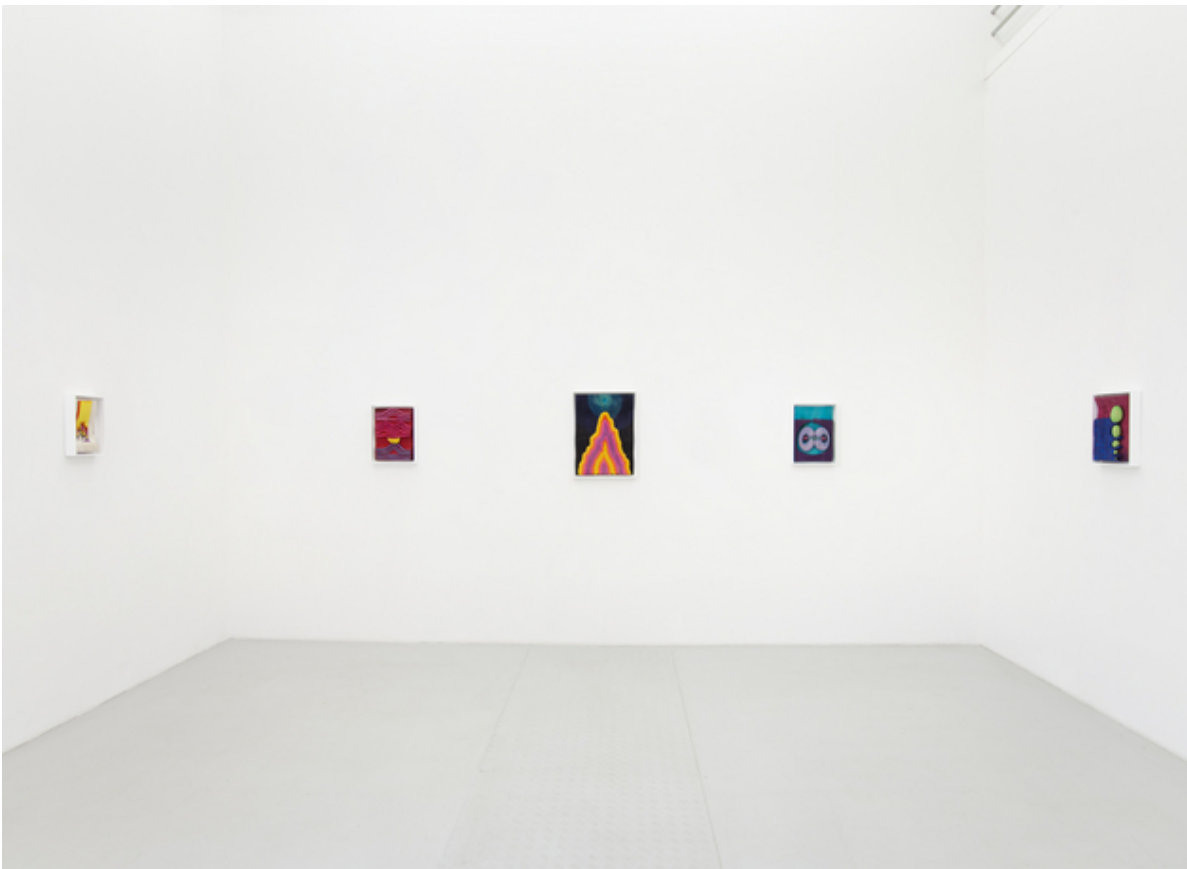


**Matthew Ronay:** *In and Out, and In and Out, again (installation view)*, Nils Stærk, 2015. Foto: Christine Løkkebø.



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**Matthew Ronay:** *Clogging Sacks*, 2015, 36.5 x 30.8 x 5.43 cm, Basswood, dye, gouache.



**Matthew Ronay:** *Incubating Chimeric Zygotes*, 2015, 41.9 x 28.6 x 5.7 cm, Basswood, dye, gouache.



**Matthew Ronay:** *Perspiring Pearl Tipped Pylon*, 2015, 55.2 x 41 x 5.5 cm, Basswood, dye, shellac-based primer.





**Matthew Ronay:** *Pulsing Mound Interred Infinitely*, 2015, 60.1 x 44.4 x 5.4 cm, Basswood, dye, gouache.



**Matthew Ronay:** *Carriers Concoction*, 2015, 40.1 x 30.8 x 5.4 cm, Basswood, dye, gouache.



**Matthew Ronay:** *Humid Virus Beacon*, 2015, 54.4 x 41.4 x 5.5 cm, Basswood, dye.