

# Tommy Støckel

## interviewed by Marina Lopes Coelho

*With simple materials and hand made geometrical compositions, Tommy Støckel reinvents minimal art tradition, with an eye to Dürer and a taste for Las Vegas' anachronistic architectural ruins.*

**Marina Lopes Coelho:** When observing your work one sees a dichotomy. On one hand, there is the preciseness and high-technological aspect of the geometrical shapes and its computer-generated calculations for mathematical growth and fractal patterning. On the other hand, there is the simplicity of the material utilized, such as paper and cardboard, which are usually used for temporary models, added to its manual execution, which also presents a hand-craft or DIY aspect. Would you like to talk about your relation to technology and the reasons for your preference of using these particular materials?

**Tommy Støckel:** I like that the works are actually very human, that they have a handmade quality. In the beginning, when my works started being very geometric, they were relating a lot to Minimal Art. I actually tried to do something, which had exactly the same finish as those classical artworks from the sixties and the seventies. But soon I realized that it was not really a practice that I would like to have myself. If you want to obtain a result similar to those – similar for instance to Donald Judd or John McCracken – then you need to have a completely different workshop, you need to work in a very different way. Then the artist would be removed from the process of making the artwork, and through this removal of the artist in the process, you also remove, or create a distance to, the viewers.

I started working with materials from the model-making world because it was something that I really could work with, controlling the outcome. It was important to have a level of precision in the work, but only in terms of what is possible to do as a human being. I thought of types of works that the viewers could be able to see how they had been made and also their small imperfections. I used the materials as I acquired them, not really processing them

more than just cutting or assembling. They became more and more like ready-made materials. It was also important for me that the viewer could identify both with the processing of the materials and that they came from the local art supply shop. It also became an interest for me that the work at a slight distance would look completely artificial, but when you would get closer to it, you would notice that they do have small imperfections and they are really handmade in my studio and not fabricated in China, completely perfect, made in bronze or in marble.



**MLC:** Most of the titles of your former exhibitions such as *The Shape of Things to Come* (Charlottenborg Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen, 2005), *Even Great Futures Will One Day Become Pasts* (Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, 2006), *When Pasts and Futures Meet* (The Nordic Embassies, Berlin, 2008), *Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow* (Arnolfini, Bristol, 2009), make reference to the concept of time, in both optimistic and melancholic ways. Your works present an optimistic concept of time, when alluding to a futuristic visuality in a undefined future, and at the same time, a nostalgic and apocalyptic sense of decay and destruction with no possibilities of things to come.

What is your relation with this concept of time that you develop in your work?

**TS:** When I started working with sculpture, I was working with the spatial aspect of the sculptures, with different sorts of distortions of space and distortions of the materials. After some time I needed another challenge, and another aspect I could add was the idea of time having an influence on the work, as they have this temporary quality because, even though they seem solid and permanent, they are actually very fragile and temporary. I started making sculptures, which had been finished at some point but then had been left somewhere to decay by themselves, or to be vandalized. I tried to come up with the most interesting and exotic ways that the sculptures could have broken, or could have decayed: someone knocked it over, or the surface would peel off and other materials would appear underneath. I also invented the idea that when they would break, other things would appear from inside the plinth. Slowly, I started to develop the sculptures as installations, with cardboard walls, which appeared to have fallen down, as a way of trying to work with a very traditional romantic idea of decay.



This very romantic idea of decay was inspired by many different things. First of all, the romantic idea of the anticipated ruins of the English gardens

from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Inspired by thoughts of why people would have these gardens where they would create small ruins of antique temples hidden somewhere within. Also, it was inspired by science fiction, especially the idea of apocalypse, and the fictions that I would imagine: cities and continents that we know today in a state where everything would be destroyed. I am interested in these descriptions of imagining what we recognize in our everyday it in a different state. And it was also inspired by post-modern architecture of the seventies, specifically an American architectural group of the seventies and eighties who created buildings in the shape of fake ruins, but also through experiencing decay in Berlin today.

**MLC:** About the exhibition at Smart Projects Space, 3 Sculptures: There you dealt with time in the opposite way. You were showing something that was happening during the setting up of the exhibition with the photographs on the walls.

**TS:** The photographs actually showed the stage after the exhibition. They are photographs of the exhibition being taken down. This was again like trying to create a time paradox. When you would enter the exhibition you would see three big minimal sculptures, and at the same time you would see on the walls the documentation of the sculptures being taken apart. Underneath the quite boring conservative surface of the artworks, you would actually see completely different structures, which to me is where the real interesting sculpture was hidden. The materials were very important because the surface was made out of three colours of polystyrene: green, white, and yellow. You would see on the photographs that, when I took the sculptures apart, many of the materials broke, because they were so fragile and they had been glued together. And of course, many people, at first, think that I am showing the photographs of the construction of the work, and it was just being shown in reverse. But actually the photographs really show the process of taking the work down, and then I rebuilt them. I think it was also important that people saw that these materials could not be used again. They were standing right in front of the sculpture that should have been taken down. It becomes more convincing in the idea or question of “how can the sculptures be there if you already see the documentation of the sculptures being destroyed?”

**MLC:** You describe your sculptures and installations as scenarios, simulations of architectural ele-

ments and spaces. Sometimes these spaces are representations of real architectural spaces placed in the representational space of the gallery; as the works you presented in the fourth part of the show at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, *Isn't Life Beautiful?*, which represented the city's ancient Roman ruins, for example. At other times, they are simulations of fictitious spaces placed in real architectural spaces—as with the installation you have created on the terrace of the Felleshus/Pan Nordic Building of the Nordic Embassies, in Berlin, for the show *When Pasts and Futures Meet*, in 2008, which was a simulation of the remains of a previous wall. Could you talk a little about these different approaches of your work towards architecture and how they relate to the time concept we just talked about?

**TS:** I think that actually none of the architectural elements that I do actually relate to anything real. A couple of times, I have made these fake pillars, fake columns, and they would sometimes mimic the other columns that were in the space. But otherwise, something like the work for the Kunstverein, there is no architecture that looks like that. The architectures that I use are like stage sets. I try to give context and meaning to the materials when I work with them. In that way, I want them to really appear like stage sets for theatre or film. I would say they are all stereotypes as well. They are all kind of generic ideas of what a wall is, or what a ruin is, or what ancient architecture is.

I do find the fake ruin of the eighteenth century very inspiring as a fiction, and I do find a place like Las Vegas a very interesting place in terms of the unproblematic anachronism that the whole thing is. There is actually nobody who has any problem with building pyramids or rebuilding roman temples or building medieval castles in the middle of the desert right next to each other. Another thing, which also relates to some of my work—especially the polystyrene ruins, or the walls that I have done—is that, there is somebody in Virginia, in the United States, who was recreating a Stonehenge in full size in polystyrene. There are all these things which people just feel like doing, and they just do them using materials like polystyrene and cardboard. I want my work to be the same thing, to have this kind of temporary aspect.

**MLC:** The installation you have created for the show *Tommy Stöckel's Art of Tomorrow* at Arnolfini in 2009, which is composed by different groups of equally shaped structures in diverse scales, might be

interpreted as a visual abstraction in geometrical forms and shapes of possible distinct systems of social hierarchical institutions and their power relations—the state, corporations, army, family, tribes, religion, and education. Could one say that this specific work is concerned with the abstract architectural forms of social organisation?

**TS:** *Tommy Stöckel's Art of Tomorrow* was in a way trying to think of time, looking forward, but in a more rational way. It was for an exhibition where I was invited to do a work about futurology, the science of predicting the future. For that, instead of thinking of what futurology usually is about, I decided to bring it to a very personal level and try to predict how my own art production could possibly develop in the future. I tried to see logical ways in which my work could develop, not only the really good and interesting ways, but also the ways that you normally would not want if you are a young artist, or that you maybe would not respect an artist for moving into.



There you could see the idea of it developing into architecture, or into more minimal art, and through that into furniture design. There were other

branches that would show my work developing into Op Art, working with signs and language and diagrams, and also another branch in which I chose trash materials and ended up working with clay, something that I have never imagined myself working with. At one of the dead ends of this big diagram, there were these abstractions over a hand made in clay, which I think is something as far as possible from what I do now, or what I really want to do in the future.

They are all models in a way, generic models of something, or representations of something. I would say that it is a big diagram, which has the shape of a kind of cogs in a machine. They are all systems, which are interconnected at the outer edges of these wheels or circular systems. It is just a shape that I came up with. I wouldn't say that there is a hierarchical system at all. I would say that some of the circles are bigger, with more variations and maybe more presence in terms of time in the development. It is really based on very personal ideas of art and in terms of a general artistic career, and I hope that many of these things would not happen to me, that my work would not develop in those ways.

**MLC:** The work you will show at *Abstract Possible* in Zurich, *Exposed Structures* (2006), is also a composition of equally shaped and different sized structures, which are replicas of the truncated form in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514). Could you say a bit more about the work and its relation to this famous engraving and its reference to geometry, architecture, mathematics, and time?

**TS:** The works that I had been making before this were almost exclusively sculptures that consisted of plinths and objects. When I made this work in 2006, I wanted to break with the idea of the presentation platform, and tried to make a work which was quite big and spread out on the floor. I chose some simple geometric shapes and repeated and reduced in size, again and again, so that it became like fractals, sculptures that grew like a fractal or mathematical trees. I basically have these objects randomly placed on the floor, with no real specific relationships to each other, loosely lying around. I saw them as building blocks for other sculptures that I could have been doing. But then, through the system of this sculpture, all these shapes exactly in that configuration would be copied and reproduced to half size and placed around and then again copied and reproduced half size and placed around, and again and again, becoming a very strict system.

The Dürer's solid—as I think it has been called—is basically just a really nice shape. I thought it would be very nice to use it because of the way that it is kind of regular, but still looks out of balance, and of course it refers to art and mathematics—which also is a nice reference to make. But otherwise, I don't think that there is any other real meaning to the idea of using Dürer's solid. Also, the other objects in the work are parts of a process in the art work — like pieces of paper, which have been cut, cut and folded a bit. But they have not really been assembled to be proper solid, and there are some which are just printed on paper lying around ready to be cut out and assembled to shapes.

**MLC:** And ultimately, I would like to ask you if there are references to art history, such as works, artists, or theoretical essays and authors, that inspire you?

**TS:** I think I wouldn't say that I get my references only from the art world. Of course there are many interesting artists and many things influencing me, but generally inspiration comes from everywhere, as much from cheap fiction, as from high architecture or high art.

What has been influencing me recently is the oeuvre of Ronald Bladen, the minimalist sculptor, who came up with a way of making very large minimal sculptures, but somehow managed to keep a very human approach in terms of material and creation of the works. If you think about the "finished" quality of his contemporaries, how their works really look, you think that he is a hobby artist, compared to them. I think that it is really inspiring seeing somebody who managed to work in that way.

### Captions

1 Tommy Støkel, *Exposed Superstructure*, 2006. Paper, inkjet print, polystyrene, styrofoam, 45 x 230 x 230 cm. Installed at Charlottenborg Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen

2 Tommy Støkel with *Exposed Superstructure* and Wade Guyton's *Untitled (the floor)* at White Space, Zurich. Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.

3 Tommy Støkel, *Exposed Superstructure*, 2006 (detail). Photo: Marina Lopes Coelho.

**Tommy Støckel** (\*1972 in Copenhagen, Denmark). Lives and works in Berlin. Graduated from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, in Copenhagen. Among the exhibitions in which he participated are: the solo show *Ten Transports That Shaped The Work*, at *Jacob's Island Gallery* (2013), in London; *Conductivity*, at *Location One* (2012), in New York; *Abstract Possible – The Stockholm Synergies*, at *Tensta Konsthall and Bukowskis* (2012), in Stockholm; *Freilassung*, at *Museum Lichtenberg* (2012), and the solo show *When Pasts and Futures Meet*, at *The Nordic Embassies* (2008), both in Berlin; *Abstract Possible – The Zürich Test* (with *Wade Guyton*), at *White Space* (2011), in Zürich; *Dystopia*, at *CAPC Museum of Contemporary Art* (2011), in Bordeaux; the solo show *3 Sculptures*, at *SMART Project Space* (2010), in Amsterdam; the solo show *Tommy Støckel's Art of Tomorrow*, at *Arnolfini* (2009), in Bristol; and the solo show *From Here to Then and back again*, at *Kunstverein Langenhagen* (2008), in Langenhagen.

**Marina Lopes Coelho** was born in São Paulo, where she was trained in graphic design and photography. She has graduated at the MAS in Curating Contemporary Art at the ZHDK in Zurich. She works as a freelancer photographer and curator in Zurich and São Paulo. She is the founder and curator of the independent art space *Kunsthalle São Paulo*.