

Martin Holman

## Passing it on, once more

### The hard and soft sides of Stephen Nelson

'The only thing that makes me happy, in terms of practice, is the making. I'm sure most artists would say this – the building, the creating, the forming, and when you stand in front of a work and are moved by what you've done. The process is so exciting to you that you're actually in that state where you think: "Did I make that?" But it's not bullish.'

What Stephen Nelson makes is a kind of diary. In fact, the notion of recorded activity, of an archive of gestures made, observations noted and occurrences seen is very strong his work. Most diaries do not see the light of day, and when they do, their revelations either bore the pants off their disconnected readership or they work up our imaginations like a limpet mine biding its time before it blasts from its fragile casing.

Nelson's objects and drawings relate to this latter effect. Not precisely, you understand, as nothing about what he does strays beyond the perimeter. And that may be the core of its interest: Nelson is the one of the best informed onlookers at work in a London studio. From that vantage point, he makes; he makes up his own mind; he makes some more; and he makes his moves.

That move may be into my territory. Where I am, or where I have found myself, stopping and looking. Looking? No, probably seeing - seeing what Nelson makes me see that is there and that, at the same time, is not but it could be. Then, again, he may destroy what he has made, although the imprint of the events that brought it forth is never lost. It moves forward with him. 'I just move on. I need space,' he says. 'They're very immediate things to me. And when I move on, I don't think it's destructive, I just move on...; they're just documents of history.'

Whose history? His? Yes, partly, although a curious onlooker never neglects to record how the mega impinges on the micro. Nice mineral, stunning form, but what human cost



was on the price tag? A worthwhile diary acquires that scope effortlessly; it is the writer's first nature. Fanny Burney's diary was her era; Samuel Pepys was his; and Richard Crossman made a memorial of his (well, actually, his and many others'). I did not know the last three personally, nor live in their times (much); but I've read their diaries to reuse what they found – pulled it up to me and passed it on. I do not need to know Stephen Nelson; although he shares my time, his world is different. Nelson once settled in the Horn of Africa; grew up in Liverpool; dived in the Dead Sea; tracked wolves in the Apennine mountains; lived in Rome; brought British artists to Tanzania; crossed America; sailed the Mountains of the Moon; talked with giants.

The last two may not be accurate; in fact, I made them up. The spread of thought that Nelson facilitates allows whimsy as well as igniting much tougher resonances. I am not seeking precision. Because in his objects, their shapes and surfaces, colours and volumes, patterns and patinas, weights and inclinations, and whether they linger on the outside or enquire about the space within, hang from the ceiling, crowd the floor (perhaps hop on a coffee table for extra height), or if they are paper and stick, wire and cloth, bronze or wax, watercolour on paper, or just skid across the wall like a lizard who leaves a



multicolour trail in memory of its own angulating tracks, whichever (and they cover all of these, and some), I find that I absorb an extract of another day – or space, or place, or manoeuvre – like hearing this morning's reading from the *Book of the Week* on Radio 4. And I make it mine.

Nonetheless, associations with the exotic are no strangers to the work of this British artist. There is 'exotic' as in 'outlandish', 'unusual' and 'romantically strange', all of which I find permissible. And there is 'exotic' in its 'ethnographic' guise which, for me, belongs to the 'eye of the beholder' category of detachment, especially if that beholder's eye is fixed on television, the web or other modern methods of knowing the world from a screen. That is an 'imported in', not a 'given out'. For Nelson, I sense, that 'brought from a foreign country' aspect of his practice is purely fact, not wonder; these things exist in the world that is more immediate for him. Strikingly, for a European, there is no '-centric' about his outlook. Cloth that is much-washed, sun-dried, patched and added to, that covers form in what Nelson makes but could cover shoulders, is salient in another sense: it is emotionally cold in space where satellites shrink the globe to an instantaneous click of a mouse. Nelson will not neglect the warm side.

Whereas many artists seize the moment, Nelson passes it on to the next, and to the one beyond that. Communication seems to be chord that is running through the varied manifestations of finding, thinking, handling, assembling, placing, observing, inviting and discarding that are like subtle tugs upon the root of a tooth. It is transmission (even with that



word's viral connotations) in a 'pass-the-parcel' aesthetic of regenerated materials: each manoeuvre leaves its thumb print, the grease of the palm like the sticker on a cabin trunk washed up in a thrift shop, but really only in transit with the sensation of an over-night disembarkation. I have never been there, but I metaphorically sniff it and I may as well have been. I care about it now that I can smell it.

Nelson cares; he has an eye for the 'fine' that makes his art 'fine art', like the gait of a wolf or its socialising ritual. These sculptures are not about travel as in, well, travel, but as in circulation (what blood also does to keep us going); about replenishment, growth, even life-support. Their physicality is their strong suit: it projects making into the viewer's domain, willing that person to 'make something of this', to figure it out. Nelson's work is made up of 'possible objects' rather than sublimated autobiography, and that is a token of their generosity. That physicality appears also to want to extend beyond form to the senses, especially to touch because the hand is the crucible of human activity.

An object of Nelson's does not stop to consider whether it should stop. Coral does not do this either; instead it accumulates old matter and remakes itself; it grows higher and pushes itself outwards. It pushes itself, taking on new colours and in parts becomes very sharp so that it hurts. You can take a bit to become a souvenir; it finds itself with another who never saw it grow but who is captivated by its form, weight, volume, surface, by the way it falls backwards or tilts to the side. Until it is passed on, maybe reshaped.

Even if I did not know this Stephen Nelson personally I would feel that a sense of myself flows through the things he makes. They pass on to me.

*July 2008*

© *Martin Holman 2008*