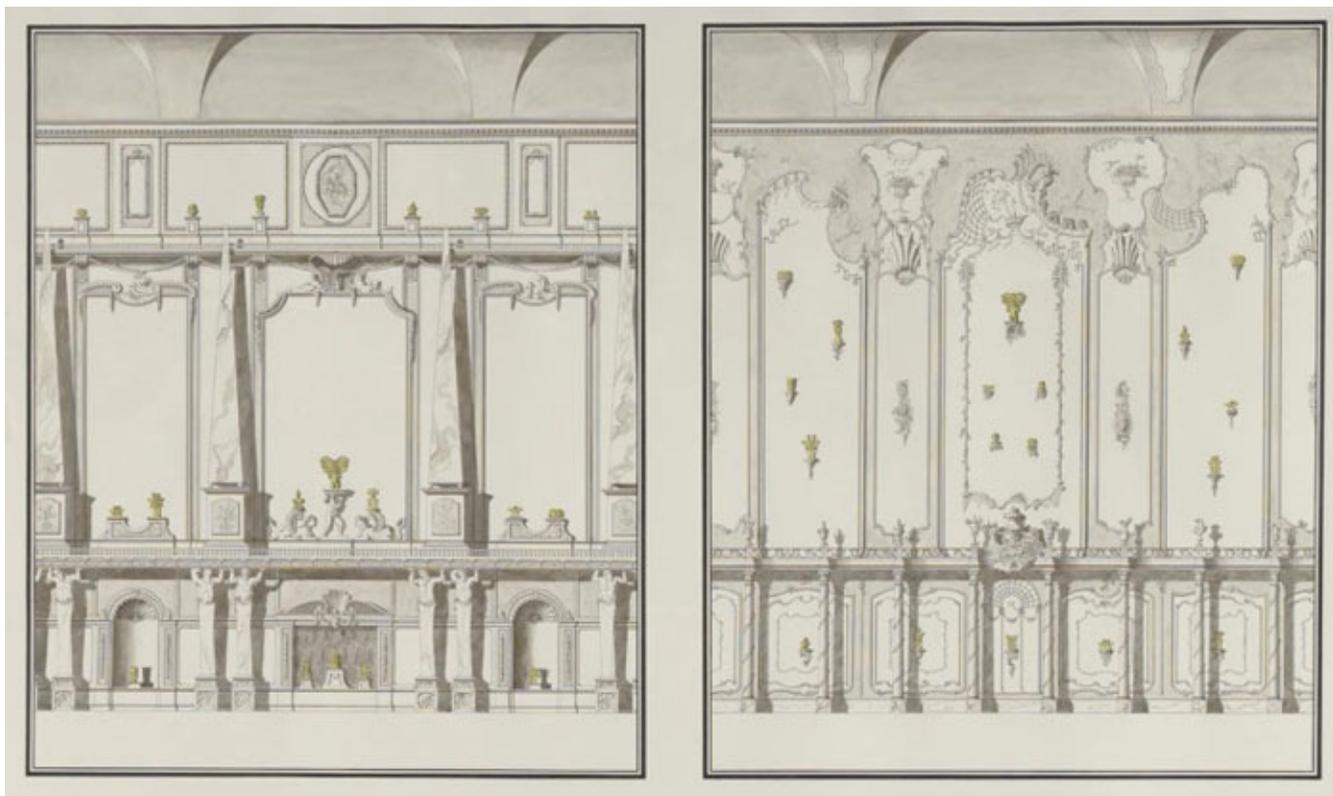


Hull, Timothy, *Timothy Hull Interviews Pablo Bronstein*, *Museo Magazine*, Spring 2010

PABLO BRONSTEIN
Interview by Timothy Hull

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pablo bronstein, *first and second installations of precolumbian objects at the metropolitan museum, 2009*, ink and gouache on paper
(courtesy of pablo bronstein and herald st., london)

My interest in interviewing Pablo Bronstein grew in part from lingering questions I had about his work, recently re-raised upon viewing his small but formidable solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Quietly subversive and beautifully wrought, the drawings in the Met show grew out of something akin to a specific commission, as Bronstein was asked to create work that envisions the past, present, and possible future of the institution. In essence, the Met asked him to create an institutional critique of itself. The work in the show is sober but cheeky and so subtle as to be potentially overlooked by the beleaguered museum-goer. The implicit power of Bronstein's drawings lies in a critique so gloriously veiled as to masquerade as praise. Although Bronstein is relatively under-represented in the New York gallery milieu, his work is widely exhibited in galleries and museums across Europe, particularly in Italy and in

London, his adopted hometown.

Timothy Hull: The body of work you have created for the Metropolitan Museum of Art is deceptively conservative in appearance. Within a context such as the Met, do you think that your work succeeds in being subversive by using the language and aesthetics of conservatism?

PABLO BRONSTEIN: Conservatism is a complicated word to use, though you are right to use it, in that to play with ideas about conservatism was part of my intention for the show. For me, something truly conservative would mean that it would have to be within or want to be preserving an ongoing tradition that it adheres to. There is obviously not an ongoing tradition of seventeenth-century-style ink drawing of twentieth- and twenty-first-century architectural concepts. The conservative appearance of the drawings relates to décor—to the old-fashioned things hanging on the walls of apartments of the rich, or in the Metropolitan Museum. Certainly I wanted to make a comment (which the print series “Poodle Piranesi” makes more clear) that many people go to the Met seeking inspiration for their interior-decoration schemes. I imagine that the average visitor to the Met is someone particularly prone to decorating his or her house, and probably according to a certain decoration style. The Met’s Decorative Arts departments play very much to their average visitor in displaying the furniture in period-room recreations—and note that a large number of the recreated interiors are eighteenth-century French or English, perennial favorites on Park Avenue. A second “conservative” layer would be the abundance of classical elements in the drawings—columns, pediments, statuary etc.

I am not an architect, and these drawings are not plans, concept sketches, or designs, but rather imitations of designs. In an architectural drawing, however, at least in England, these motifs would firmly place the political inclinations of the architect in the Prince Charles School, one of architectural nostalgia and Classical revivalism. That said, I am not particularly interested in subverting what the Met does, or in subverting the worldview of the average museumgoer. If my work aims at a confrontational subversion, it would be directed more toward the sections of the art world that push for a particular aesthetic despite claims to be interested in the concept. If I’m being a little thuggish about it, I could summarize encountering much hostility from people wanting their conceptual art to look like “conceptual art,” or their political art to look like “political art.” That said, the presence of my work on a slick white wall can become a little churlish, and so, at the Met, I loved the opportunity of being able to speak about the subject matter within the drawings, without having to make the first reading of the work be about how it “performs” off the white wall.

Hull: So, do you think that the museum is a more appropriate context for your work than the white-cube space?

BRONSTEIN: I think both can be appropriate. For the last few years, the shows I've done have somewhat taken into account the nature and history of the institution or gallery.



pablo bronstein, *magnificent plaza*, 2007, india ink and wash on paper in artist's frame
(courtesy of pablo bronstein and herald st., london)

Hull: Your work seems to heavily rely on the mishmash of postmodernism. Do you see postmodernity as a *carte blanche* to sort through and piece together the past to come up with new approaches? Or perhaps postmodernity is a futile movement eclipsed by the

present? What period do you think we are in now, if not still the postmodern era?

BRONSTEIN: My response to high Postmodernism in architecture comes from growing up around the already-faded buildings in London. As perverse as it may seem, it is through those buildings that I initially approached classical architecture. What we recognize as high postmodernist architecture is from a specific set of historical and cultural circumstances. These Pomo buildings are still being built, but normally, in a more sober vein than in the early 1980s. I am interested in seeing these buildings as representative of a particular economic and cultural moment, which for my generation was already historically distant. Postmodernist architecture is absolutely still with us as an ethos. We are all children of Thatcher and Reagan, and we judge architecture according to how well-catered we are by it, on a very specific level. But I would be lying if I denied my formal interest in these early postmodernist buildings, and so, re-invention is absolutely a part of it.

Hull: What would a more sober Postmodernist building look like or function as?

BRONSTEIN: A sober Postmodernist building can simply be one of the millions of bland office blocks that make up the financial sectors of big cities or the large hotel chains that allude to the past, for example. But a successful contemporary Postmodernist building is one that makes you feel comfortable. It makes you feel as if the building had been made for you and represents you somehow. It is a building that is expert in understanding its client. The Tate Modern by Herzog & de Meuron is one such building.



pablo bronstein, *blackfriars tunnel*, 2006, ink and gouache on paper
(courtesy of pablo bronstein and herald st., london)

Hull: What can you say about rummaging through aesthetic epochs and art history to arrive at something new, or to make a prescient statement about the present?

BRONSTEIN: I think you're talking about allegory, the simultaneous reading of one text through the other, so a Baroque viewer looking at a still life with a pomegranate would be directed to the legend of Persephone with its moral connotations. If there were a recurring allegory in my work, it would be about the collapse of public space, as well as the controlling ways in which architecture can affect us. My approach is allegorical because of the method not being direct. In order to criticize, I would over-praise. To give a slightly hammy example, if I were interested in critiquing an over-zealous development, I might, in a drawing, become an over-ambitious developer, and make the development seem even larger.

Hull: You once said that you undertake the "guise of the architect," but why not be an architect? What freedoms does being an artist give you? What can you say in two dimensions that you perhaps cannot say in three?

BRONSTEIN: Architects generally don't build their own buildings, and most of them have very colorful ideas on paper. The basic difference between an architect and me is that I do not follow a brief or (normally) work to a client's specification. I do not want to help people lead better lives through design nor do I want to produce solutions for how the city should behave or cope. If I had to state a proximity to another profession, it would be that of an architectural historian with the main difference being that my response to historical architectural subject matter is the creative response of making things. I very much envy the political weight of the architect for the ability to make buildings that hugely impact people's lives, but with that power comes not only responsibility but people meddling in the outcome, and many interested parties affecting artistic production. It is also a lot easier, as an outsider, to comment on a profession. From within the field, you are dictated by fashions that you are less able to notice.

Hull: So, you feel much more liberated to fantasize and conceptualize as an artist rather than as an architect?

BRONSTEIN: My parameters are different, for sure, and so are my aims. Generally with my drawings, I play both the client and the architect, which is something architects normally don't get to do. But the word "play" is critical, as my work could be seen as marginalia around the architecture profession from within the architecture field.

Hull: It seems that neoclassicism is out of style in architecture but very much in style in

fine art these days. What can you say about many artists' fascination (and yours) with classical motifs and imagery?

BRONSTEIN: I'm afraid I don't really look at much contemporary art, so I can't comment as far as other artists are concerned. I find high neoclassicism a bit cold and academic. There are wonderful neoclassical architects, but I always go more for baroque or weirder manifestations of the classical. What I do like is the aspiration to neoclassicism. For example, I love the idea that neoclassicism is "classy," and so you can observe the same impulse to classicize in a boujie Atlanta bungalow and a wonky eighteenth-century teapot with a repeating key motif. I share the same drive as the teapot or the Atlanta housewife.

Hull: Why do you not look at contemporary art? Is that a conscious decision or a matter of circumstance?

BRONSTEIN: I just don't think I am the target audience, that's all.

Hull: Can you just say something about where you pulled the "boujie Atlanta bungalow" reference from? It seems rather specific.

BRONSTEIN: Every single cover of Architectural Digest magazine features one, normally clad in beige, with a good set of French windows and lots of scatter cushions on the American-style sofa. I should have been less specific, perhaps, as there are many such houses in Miami. Anyhow, is an Atlanta bungalow more specific than an eighteenth-century teapot?



pablo bronstein, *the departure of the temple of dendur from egypt*, 2009, ink and gouache on paper
(courtesy of pablo bronstein and herald st., london)

Hull: Do you think your work takes a political position? There seem to be implicit political statements, especially in the AutoCAD drawings of the Met as a multi-use structure, or when you re-imagine the Temple of Dendur's removal from Egypt. What kind of politics are you pointing at here?

BRONSTEIN: The drawings in AutoCAD at the Met make specific comments on the economic situation the Met is currently facing. The ink drawings reflect an over-dramatized and over-glamorized version of the glory days of the museum, a time when the museum had seemingly limitless resources and a seemingly endless future. The Temple of Dendur deliberately creates a dramatic impression on the visitor because of the way it is set up: it harks back to the glory days of Imperialist collections such as those of the British Museum or the Louvre. In reality, the temple was a gift to the American government and was probably brought back in sachet-sized micro-cubes, and then reglued by toothpick.

My drawing presents the temple's export as being part of an earlier history of museology. All of the drawings present moments of unparalleled glory for the museum: there's a design from the 1920s for a masterplan to take over the entire area of land from Central Park to the East River, with the existing museum as the jewel in the crown of the development. In all these drawings, the aim was to show the very limited, and in many ways, contained institution of the present through the opposite vision, that of its founders and earlier developers. That said, the Met is one of the only museums of this scale in the Western Hemisphere that is not interested in collecting social history. It still has a very nineteenth-century ethos of only showing "the best of the best" rather than the "best example of a screwdriver" or the "best example of a lower-middle class doorknob." The drawings on CAD were an internal response from within the show to those grandiose drawings. The curator, Gary Tinterow, and I both felt that such pomposity was possibly subject to being misunderstood by viewers as simply celebrating the power of museums. The six CAD drawings are grim architectural solutions to the Met's current crisis, all rendered in a sham neo-Georgian style. The drawings are rendered in the flimsiest commercial architecture style, the kind of constructions that a provincial shopping center in Birmingham would be ashamed of.

Hull: You seem to play with images of power *vis-à-vis* the structure and icons of architecture. What is your work's relationship to imperialist uses of architectural symbols and spaces, especially in relation to your use of the aesthetics of the nineteenth century, a time in which colonialism was on the rise?

BRONSTEIN: I am more concerned with tensions between public and private space within a country than with international relations. I am particularly interested in the image of the public square, or *piazza*, as a symbol of democracy and citizenship. Because classicism is historically associated with democracy and public ownership of space or a building, private developments utilize classicism in order to dissimulate the profit motivation underneath the development. Very often land that was once public is manipulated into private ownership, and the public is left unaware. The architectural language of publicness is very important in this coup. And these spaces, whether they be Paternoster Square in London, or the Winter Garden in the World Financial Center, are undeniably successful. On a wider level, I am interested in the idea that architecture expresses its meaning overtly. That prisons look like prisons in order to intimidate or brutalize would be one example, although it's also very interesting when buildings camouflage themselves. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis talks about a prison that looks like a luxury office block in LA.

Hull: And what about museums that look like museums?

BRONSTEIN: There has lately been a strong museological fashion to play up on the history of the museum itself. The British Museum opened these fabulous Enlightenment rooms a few years ago that present the collection in a “period museum setting” corresponding in date to the founding of the British Museum. What’s interesting is that the objects in these rooms act like props in aid of the general effect rather than objects that could be considered of significant appeal in their own right.

Hull: Colonialism is presently like a ruin. Vestiges of it still exist, but the structure is in disarray. You seem to be pre-occupied with the ruin as metaphor. What can you say about this?

BRONSTEIN: The ruins I depict are all simulated, not only in that they are all representations, but they are representations of simulated ruins. I don’t draw buildings in decay. I tend to draw building sites, which visually share a lot with archaeological sites, though the architectural process is opposite. If I use plastic columns and scatter them like ruined fragments, they are more redolent of fake ruins in Las Vegas than those of ancient Greece. Nonetheless, in presenting building proposals in the guise of dead architects, or in visualizing a building from the 1980s with the patina of 200 years, there is definitely something a little macabre. A few years ago I became very interested in arguments concerning the origins of architecture—“What was the first building?” and other Enlightenment questions. The hut made of leaves as a covering for a small god leads to a rustic temple using trees as pillars, which leads to the glories of the Parthenon, which depicts the same trees and leaves, now carved out of stone. I then read this argument about the first architecture being a tomb, a hole in the ground to put the dead in. I loved this idea, as I love monuments. London is full of monuments that remember the dead, and that is how colonialism is still visually manifested on a very official level here, as monuments to men that died while conquering Africa.



pablo bronstein, *erecting of the paternoster square column*, 2008, ink and pencil on paper in artist's frame

Hull: You also make dances about architecture. What are these dances trying to convey about buildings and space that words or other means cannot? What is the significance of utilizing the tropes and gestures of ballet?

BRONSTEIN: I treat stage design as an extension of architecture and decorative art, and so the stage as an abstracted box is enticing to me. With my use of ballet, I concentrate on examining *sprezzatura*, which is a system of codified elegance incorporating gestures, poses, and movements. *Sprezzatura* historically spills out into classical ballet, and it is a series of gestures that have come to signify effeminacy. My use of it on one level is about the structure of the dancer's body, and how seemingly elegant and effortless positions consume a huge amount of tension and expertise. But more to the point, the stage I construct for a performance, whether purposefully built, minimal, or making use of existing architecture, is a symbolic piazza of some sort, a kind of symbol of the city remade or abstracted. These *sprezzatura* dancers acting or dancing within the city become idealized, if rather camp citizens. They are ornaments in the city and embellish it through their poses. But on another level, there's also the constant presence of symmetry, which I don't seem to be able to shake off. There are also the references to the baroque origins of their movements, which mirror the architecture of the performance area and sometimes confront the power structures inherent in the viewing space.

Hull: I am interested in the fussy, queer aesthetic of the antiquarian, the decorator, and the dandy that come forth in so much of your work, especially in the suite of drawings titled "Poodle Piranesi. Though these qualities are often implicit, they are markedly present in your work. Do you embrace the fact that these qualities make your work able to be perceived as queer? I believe that this queerness could be precisely what makes the conservative aesthetic deceiving and actually subversive.

BRONSTEIN: Leaving aside the contextual issue about what constitutes conservatism in contemporary art, I fundamentally agree that the "decorative" can have a subversive function—look at the work of Jack Smith. Layers upon layers of decoration and garments, smother the performers, trapping them in department-store nostalgias. I try to explore queerness through my work in the extreme virility of the architectural moment depicted: sword-and-sandal feats of shifting huge monuments through the sand, or erecting an enormous column with manpower and ropes alone. That said, to worship power and scale in architecture is like loving men in uniform. It is subversive but only by default and not by choice.

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