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AN INTERVIEW WITH MAT KEMP

Mat Kemp is a contemporary sculptor from Essex, UK. Here, he shares insights into his innovative approach to art; his use of salvaged objects, the theme of nostalgia, and our connection to the environment as key influences on his work.

CG Can you discuss how your training in sculpture restoration, and bronze casting has influenced your artistic practice and the techniques you use today?

MK I was introduced to restoration as a child in rural Essex where my mother, a Biology teacher, had a side hustle of rejuvenating antique rocking horses. Making, creating and fixing quickly became the only thing I wanted to do. I loved helping her, getting lost in the detail. This early grounding led me down a sculptural path, I gravitated towards the technicians and work shops at college; it was akin to an apprenticeship. The confidence I gained in techniques, materials and equipment has been the foundation of everything I produce to this day.

Additionally, bronze casting taught me patience and various finishes. My role in the foundry was 'Chaser'; obsessively working on the finished surface, patina or polish, to make it perfect. I continue to apply this mind set to my espresso pod pieces in particular. I am never afraid to try new materials and techniques, this confidence is built on strong traditional foundations.

CG What initially drew you to use up-cycled materials and found objects in your art, and how do you select these for your sculptures?





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MK Although we were not poor, Arte povera has always been an influence to me. My mother once used the phrase, 'make a silk purse out of a sow's ear', this post-war doctrine made total sense to me as a child.

I am constantly on the look out for objects, some of which I have hung on to since childhood. The most recent example of this are the Owl pellets that I collected as a kid from my pet owl James, and fifty years on I have used them in a piece.

Connection to the environment where I live and work is essential. I have been living in London for thirty five years, so 'Urban Salvage' is embedded in many of my pieces. These are objects found on the streets, in parks and washed up by the river. They all go into my library of splendid things to be used in the future.

CG Can you elaborate on your creative process, particularly how you allow materials to dictate the direction of your work?

MK Often, I take an object or material and match it with another or several other objects. The results can be instantaneous or take years. I have one piece in the studio that has taken five years to complete, because it took me that long to find the final elements, and now it sits amongst pieces that have taken only a couple of hours. Although, I would say typically I spend two weeks to a month actually crafting the piece until it is a completed work.

CG Can you describe your creative process when working with found objects and recycled materials such as the espresso pods?

MK I am forever dipping in and out of the found material library that I have built up over the years. New objects are added and matched, the results are often one-offs or rejected.

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I knew I could source thousands of the coffee pods so could keep pushing the multiple pod format with different themes and sizes. Once I shape and paint them, the pods are almost unrecognisable from their original state. Changing the identity of these found objects is often a crucial part of the process, now they have a new lease of life.

CG Reusing Subbuteo figures in your work has become part of your signature style, what initially drew you to these figures, and what do they symbolise in your work?

MK The first Subbuteo piece used the actual figures I had saved from my childhood. They instantly added another dimension. They came to the fore during covid isolation, this concept of 'being together alone or alone together' comes from that strange time. Working under the isolated restriction meant what I could obsess even more over certain pieces that I produced throughout that period.

Each figure occupies its own image or domain, and encourages the viewer to look beyond to the image behind it. They add another layer to the overall perception. It has become a bit of a signature, though this will no doubt evolve in the future.



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CG Can you elaborate on your 'Intermission' series inspired by cinema, particularly the use of illumination and 35mm movie strips, and how it transforms the viewer's experience of your pieces?

MK I have been using lighting in pieces for some time, the development of LED technology has given more scope for creating. After I found thousands of 35mm slides cleared from a house in Glasgow, and simultaneously given some vintage black and white 35mm film reels by an editor, I immediately started to figure out how I would use them. My 'lightbulb' moment came when playing around with the recycled coffee pods and discovering that their size fits perfectly over the 35mm slides and film stills.

Each image is either isolated or framed by the pods. I add resin to the images, this both preserves the film and revives it. The addition of the Subbuteo figures encourages the viewer to look at the scenes individually; with backlighting and without, these figures draw you in. This overall affect is multilayered; you can look at the piece as a whole or go closer to the framed image and lose yourself in the detail. I have always wanted to work in movies, now I work with them.

CG Your recent work with Cube Gallery involves sculptural assemblages using salvaged comic strip cutouts, US presidents, or images of flowers. What inspired this series?

MK There is a strong biographical element in all these pieces, referring back to influential points in my life. The original comic books used were up-cycled from my own collection as a child.

Regarding the images of the US presidents, I am often influenced by US culture, and since my wife is from New York the topic of presidential discussion comes up often. The images I used are the ones they have in elementary schools to teach children in the US about their nations foundation and history. I wanted these pieces to provide the viewer with a link back to their childhood while playing with current celebrity culture, such as my piece 'Born to Run (Cat)' featuring Barbie and Ken.

I have been collecting images of gardens and flowers for decades, some from my own garden, some from my fathers garden, and various from all over the world. This is very much a work in progress, as are the gardens. I wanted to create a series that could emanate a sense of calm, and I think that the floral pieces bring these magical places into the home.

CG Can you share what you have drawn inspiration from, and how these influences have shaped your approach to sculpture?

MK I am a trained sculptor and love working in the round form and in relief structures; creating a three dimensional piece that works when hung or installed on a wall. The play of light on a relief mounted onto a wall is fascinating to me. Often the pieces are produced flat but only come to life when they are hung vertically.

Kurt Schwitters installations was very bold and he was experimental with his choice of materials. Alongside Etruscan tomb frescoes, I regularly visited the Assyrian friezes in the British Museum and more recently temples of Ancient Egypt. These places are both humbling and inspiring, always reminding me to keep telling a story through my sculptures.

CG I understand you also receive public donations of recyclable materials that would otherwise go to waste. What has your experience been, and does that influence the trajectory of your future works?

MK I have developed a network of people that put things aside for me before rather than disposing of them, ranging from old toys to machine parts. Someone has given me three hundred knitting needles, and I know these will be used at some point. I have an idea about what I will do with them, but it is likely they will lurk in the library until another material or object ignites the creative spark.



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