LINEA

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Speaking with Tom Otterness

This past September Ira Goldberg spoke with Tom Otterness at his new studio building and workshop in Brooklyn.

IG: What initially brought you to the Art Students League?

TO: When I was in high school in Wichita, Kansas, I knew about the league. I was researching where to go. I didn't want to go to college. I wanted to do serious studio work. In high school, I won awards, scholastic art awards, and got a bunch of gold keys. I ended up getting a scholarship from the league. That was really the deciding point for me.

IG: Now that scholarship, I assume, included just tuition for the year. How did you plan on surviving once you moved to New York? And was that your first time in the city?

TO: It was my first time in New York. It was my first time on an airplane. It was the first time for everything. [*Laughs*] I must admit I didn't plan much. I wanted to be cool, and I didn't want to ask too many questions. You just be a man and show up, you know. I assumed there would be some kind of campus and dormitory or something. [*Laughs*] And I showed up at the league desk, and they said, "Well, you know, you can stay at the Y on West 90th Street." And I thought, "Well, that's a plan."

IG: Didn't your parents question this with something like, "Where are you going? Did you check this out first?" [*Otterness laughs*] Did they just say, "Good, you got a scholarship to the league. Don't forget to call once a week."

TO: I come from a kind of artistic background. My parents were loose about this. My mom had been a waitress in New York during the thirties, and so she knew what was up. If she did it, I could do it. I think she worked at the Copacabana. She knew the high side of New York. I got some amount of money from my parents that kept me alive here.

IG: While a student at the league, you didn't take any sculpture classes—all drawing and painting, and painting with abstract artists.

TO: Yup.

IG: You studied with Robert Beverly Hale and Theodore Stamos. Would you talk about your experiences studying with them? You studied painting for much of two years.

TO: It was a schizophrenic beginning because I focused on Robert Beverly Hale in the afternoon as this High Renaissance anatomy teacher. And with Stamos during the evenings, I thought, I'm going to go abstract and get modern.

Growing up in Wichita, I worked with David Salle. We had studios together from the time we were 14 or 15. We had two very good teachers—Bill and Betty Dickerson—who were regionalists of a sort. They knew Edward Hopper. We painted in a Diebenkorn-like style. I came to New York with this background. So getting radical meant getting abstract. By day I was Renaissance, and by night, I was an abstract painter. It seemed like a divided personality. I loved Hale, and I pursued drawing very intensely. The same was true with Stamos. And so, I just took them both on.

I remember the first crits with Stamos. Just terrifying. He could be really brutal. He'd sit there with his legs crossed, smoking, and issue these blistering critiques about whatever would come up. You'd line your paintings up execution-style. As I watched the next one come up and get whacked, I got more and more nervous. I finally grabbed my work and ran out of the studio for maybe the first couple of times.

IG: What types of things would he say? Do you remember?

TO: Yeah, but I don't know if it's fit to print.

IG: That's ok. Let it all out.

TO: [*In mimicking voice*] "Oh, it looks like an old Kotex." Or, "What are you doing that for? Aaagh." His comments were perceptive, but it was rough. It was no sott thing.

IG: Did you get a lot out of studying with Hale and Stamos?

TO: Yeah. Hale seemed like the best anatomist I ever found. He had a deep understanding of classical form that meshed with a keen insight into modern art. You could study this hyper-classical system with Hale, but when he did a painting for the instructors' show, he'd throw a drip on the wall. This would drive everybody crazy because most of the people studying with him wanted to do brown Renaissance paintings and to resurrect the past. He showed you this tradition, talked about its worth, all its value, but pointed you in the direction of Pollock and Warhol.

IG: How did your career start to evolve after you left that wonderful experience with Hale and Stamos?

TO: My main art practice was as an abstract painter. You know, I got into this Godlike relationship with Rothko. He had just committed suicide months before I came to New York. I eventually worked at his studio, a job I got through Stamos, one of his executors. As I left the league, my main practice had become this kind of very serious, suicidal black painting. And then I would have this side study of Michelangelo drawings. In a sense, this work turned into source material for my later work. Drawing really served as a core for what came later.

I went back to Kansas to recover for a year. When I came back to New York, I got a studio with friends of mine. I still have friends from the Art Students League who I talk to and hang out with. Anyway, we got studios together and kept working. Within two or three years, I got into the Whitney independent study program. That was my window onto contemporary art. It was like another world from the world that was the league. I had this training at the league that was kind of a foundation. I felt like nobody else got this. But then I carried that into the Whitney.

IG: I'm curious about the germ for your current work. Did it start in that program?

TO: I seemed to take a long time. When you are a student, you kind of fish around and do a lot of things. In that period I did a lot of film, photography, sort of conceptual work. It wasn't until maybe 1978 when I did my first sculptures. And these were really part of this group, Collaborative Projects. We had about fifty artists that would get together and do shows, big ones, eventually in Midtown on 42nd Street. I had done two-dimensional work out on the street. Kind of like sign painting, international signs. I would pop them into 3-d and make these little tiny figures to sell

Clockwise from top left:
The Real World, 1992. [Detail]. Bronze, multiple figures and dimensions. Commissioned by the Battery Park City Authority for the Nelson A. Rockefeller Park, Battery Park, New York City.

The Real World, 1992 [Dodo detail]. Bronze, 35 x 28 x 21 in. Commissioned by the Battery Park City Authority for the Nelson A. Rockefeller Park, Battery Park, New York City.

The Tables, 1991. Bronze, 138 x 456 x 114. Temporary installation Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.

Big, Big, Penny, 1993. Bronze, 71 x 65 x 13 in. Temporary installation: Tom Otterness in Indianapolis.

for $4.99 on the street in front of the Modern, at Artist Space, and up in the Bronx. We set up souvenir shops in conjunction with these Colab shows. Kiki Smith, Jenny Holzer, Becky Howland, and many other people did major works and then made souvenirs that could be sold really inexpensively. It was almost like a conceptual joke, but I got into it.

IG: You obviously took to three-dimensional work fairly quickly. Did you find that it was just a better medium for what you needed to say?

TO: It let me be on my own. Nobody seemed to be doing sculpture there at that time. It was something I'd done, like my little lion when I was in the third grade. I'd done a head when I was fourteen. And I had a natural talent for it. I learned how to make sculpture out a book, Louis Slobodkin's *Sculpture: Principles and Practice*. I didn't really study with anybody.

IG: Your figures seem to combine qualities of whimsy and transparency with a dark irony. I sense a message about greed and corruption along with an influence of a 1930s aesthetic.

TO: I mentioned these regionalist painters I'd studied with in high school. I love the thirties, its style especially. Thomas Hart Benton, Kansas. All that stuff. The sculpture started first with those little $4.99 guys. From there, my work sort of evolved. I made an architectural frieze with a very modern kind of thirties look, more like a Russian constructivist, like Malevich. Very simplified forms. The frieze depicted a narrative of a king being overthrown by workers. That's where my sculpture started having that type of content. I did other little monuments after that. At one point I went to Italy, visited Pietrasanta, and I did my first bronzes there. Plaster allows a certain kind of form. Bronze allows for a different kind of animation, and I'd been looking at a lot of animation and did a lot of drawings. Things sort of broke through at that point. I had these little figures that I could twist and literally animate from wax toys. I'd cast these prototypes with their arms outstretched, and then warm them up and twist them.

IG: Did you do animation from these?

TO: I am now doing some, but I didn't then. But I drew from twenties and thirties animation. I got a lot of ideas out of that.

IG: When did you get your first big break?

TO: It really happened through Colab. I joined this big collective. Diego Cortez, Liza Bear, Coleen Fitzgibbon, Robin Winters, Jenny Holzer, Kiki Smith, Betsy Sussler, John Ahearn, and on and on . . . more than 50 artists. We just killed each other during meetings, but we managed to do projects.

IG: And Colab was what?

TO: Collaborative Projects. In order to get money out of the organization, you had to join up with two or three other people and devise some work that was collaborative. That was the principle behind it.

Our big break as a group came when we made the Times Square show, which was kind of a watershed show on 42nd Street in an old massage parlor, in 1980. That made a bang, and a lot of dealers came to the show. From there Brooke Alexander came to me and offered a show. I gave him some drawings of this frieze idea, and amazingly he went for it. It was a big investment on a crazy idea. But for a long time, ten or fifteen years, he was my dealer.

IG: How did the public commissions get started?

TO: I had always done work on the street and in a group: posters, paintings, or whatever. So the idea of doing public work was inherent in what we did as a group. But then the real commissions didn't start until '87. The one in Battery Park was one of the first. At the same time, I was doing one in Los Angeles, a federal courthouse. I didn't realize then that they were very good commissions. [*Laughs*] You think, "This is nice, give me another like this." The Battery Park one was very good.

IG: Did it snowball after that? Did one follow the other? The list on your resume of exhibitions and commissions during the last twenty years seems endless.

TO: It does cascade. The big thing that got me my first public commissions was Brooke Alexander and Rudolf Zwirner financing these big tables. Alexander and Zwirner were private dealers who financed a project of 45-foot long picnic tables with little tiny figures, like the Battery Park figures, which told a complex, kind of end-of-the world communist/capitalist story. That got shown at the Modern. Then the public commissions came. There is always the same problem with work of this sort: you can't get a commission until you've done a commission. That's the Catch-22. We won't give you the money because you've never handled money like this. We don't know if you will go to Mexico or what.

IG: Since this commissioned work has become so popular, do you ever feel locked into a style that's proved successful as you continue to work on other projects? Do you ever wish you could go someplace else with it or try something new?

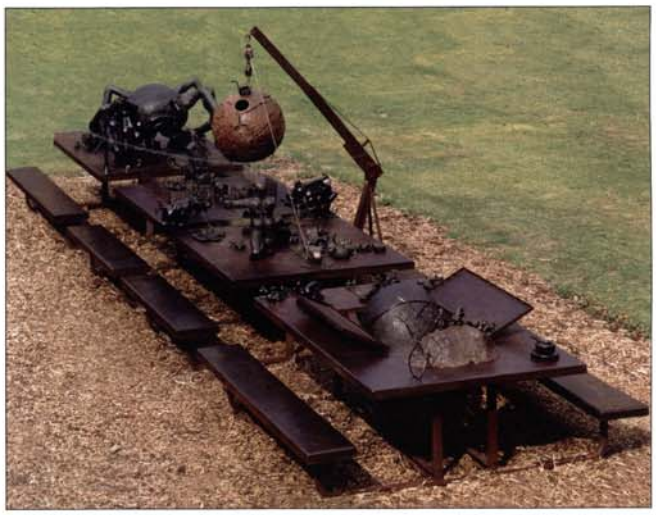
TO: I suppose. There must be some part of me that feels that way, but it's small. [*Laughs*] I try to get a little legroom, a little elbow room, within this niche. I'd say I dropped back to a very geometric style for some of the work, returning to Malevich or a Russian Constructivist kind of thing. For me this was a fresh area to go. Those commissions allow me to do crazy things; those who select me don't always know my work, and they don't expect exactly what they've seen before.

IG: Really?

TO: They may not be as educated as the art world is.

IG: I take it there is usually a literal message in what your sculptures are saying. I notice an irony sometimes—very innocent looking figures doing some very...

TO: Bad things. [*Laughs*]



Clockwise from upper left
[illegible] courtesy of Tom Otterness and Metropolitan Gallery

***Life Underground*, 2004. [Detail] Bronze, multiple figures and dimensions. Commissioned by Arts for Transit, Metropolitan Transit Authority, located at the 14th Street Subway Station on the A/C/E/L lines.**
photo: D. Jesse Dee

***Time & Money*, 2000. Bronze multiple figures and dimensions. Commissioned by Forest City Ratner for the Hilton Hotel at Times Square.**

***Untitled*, 2004 bronze. Various figures and dimensions. Commissioned by the Beelden aan Zee, Scheveningen.**

***Life Underground*, 2004. [Detail] Bronze, multiple figures and dimensions. Commissioned by Arts for Transit, Metropolitan Transit Authority, located at the 14th Street Subway Station on the A/C/E/L lines.**
photo: D. Jesse Dee

IG: Yes, which is nice. I mean not nice, but a very interesting approach. Does your work have a literal message?

TO: I don't know if you can sum it up verbally. An image can exist on a cusp: you're certain it means something, but you're not sure exactly what. You could have contradictory readings of the same work. I think that's part of it. I don't think it's necessarily propaganda or really delivers a specific message. I guess at best it delivers a dilemma to people in the public sphere. The work is pointed enough, has a dilemma starkly described, which maybe provokes conversation between strangers out in public—about sex, class, money, race, all these fundamental things. I think the Fourteenth Street subway project does that, or the one in Battery Park.

IG: I know a lot of other people have been struck by the alligator going after the rich man, with a moneybag for a head, under the manhole cover.

TO: And what is the message? [*Laughs*]

IG: Then there is no message. There is a sense of danger about the piece, which is palpable when you see it on the subway platform.

TO: It might just happen. [*Both laugh*]

IG: You've come in with this desire to grab the viewer in a metaphorical sense with these images.

TO: Sure, or grab my own attention here in the studio. Like you said, some work does and some work doesn't. But when I get a lead onto something, it is sort of a thrill for me, too.

IG: Do you have any thoughts about where art education has gone? Are artists today well-trained?

TO: [*Long pause*] Yeah, I think we are still turning out good artists, so that has to be the answer to whether education is working. It seems to me that when we were growing up, there was broader public art education. Now, it seems art is regarded like recess. You know, all that stuff has been largely thrown away.

I taught for a summer at Skowhegan, about ten years ago. It was fascinating to see what's happening and what a younger generation is bringing in. I'm convinced it's changed a lot even since then.

IG: Do you think there is greater emphasis on theory and less on hands-on work in the university?

TO: There's definitely a polarization in the art world, a swing toward conceptual work and toward a hands-off approach to making art. I think about it a lot. What does it mean? What part of the meaning is your hand on it? And what part of the meaning is the construction of the image and directing someone else's hand? I find it fascinating to think about those two things. Our school out at Colab—at least let's say Kiki Smith, John Ahearn, Robin Winters—had a much more handmade approach, as do I. Jenny Holzer might be more hands-off and more conceptual. In my personal development, I can see that separation as a really important step. For me, the conceptual discipline was a missing element when I was at the league. You really didn't think of the larger picture. What point does your training serve? What concept does it support? But it goes through cycles. I'm sure it will come back to hands again, but it's not bad to have it at this other pole for a while where people, even those in classical study, really have to think about the larger concept. What's the image I'm building? What's its place inside this larger conversation that is happening between modern artists? What's on the cultural edge? On the other hand, it is very pleasurable to focus on the small end of it. And I love doing that work and not thinking. I love sitting here and purifying the forms, hours spent that way. And it is a kind of meditation.

IG: I think of artistic creation in very romantic terms: the artist consorts with his creations. You can't get a more magical experience than that. I've always said that the difference between a professional and a student is that the student needs the instructor to tell them what to do, and the professional needs the work to tell him what to do. While I understand the necessity of using the labor of others to complete, say, a big commission, I still have a difficult time accepting that the end product wouldn't somehow look as though it has gone through a machine.

TO: I think the lineage you want to see from the beginning to the present is there, but is hard to see when it's really contemporary work. Warhol and Koons are probably the line we are talking about, right? Heading toward Murakami. Maybe the line is artists whose work is hands-off but who still produce objects. I'm sure in the beginning Warhols looked terribly cold. They may still look that way to some, but he had all that training. Hale used to say that Warhol was the best draftsman who ever came through his class. And I think that light hand that looked so mechanical, that traced photographs, evinces all that training. It is not an outline anybody could do. It is really masterful.

IG: They are very skilled.

TO: But at the time it seemed like, "Oh, this is just done by machines." Even if he didn't draw on it, he was doing the silkscreens. He's making choices in that work, and the choices are based on previous knowledge. In the same way you asked how my work with Hale affected my work with Stamos, I think it did, but in a subliminal way. Then, you get to someone like Koons, whose early work on projects I've seen because we worked in the same foundry. When he did the bronze life-raft, I remember him getting four life-rafts, blowing them up, and spending hours down there staring, getting on his hands, looking at each one, choosing which of those four it was going to be. This isn't the public part of how he makes work. Koons is very demanding—even I'm not as demanding as he is. You can ask the finishers on the floor at the foundry what he demands out of the form; it is very precise, you know. Nothing, no flaw is going to get through there. And it's in stainless. All those demands. Even though he doesn't have his hands on it—he's got his mind on it all the time.

IG: So he's there overseeing the process very closely.

TO: And making aesthetic choices that we, right now, don't see. We say, "Oh, that's a machine." The public may think that Koons is so far from it that he doesn't even look at it. He's chosen something. It's off the shelf, and there it is. I don't think that is really how he works. Even if he doesn't have his hands on it, he still has a very solid conception of what he wants in his head. I think that is one of the biggest values I got out of Hale's class: that you could conceptualize form in your head and turn it like a computer model.

IG: Mass conceptions.

TO: Yes, and you can then begin with conceptualizing a pure form in your head, and then you make art out of it. Michelangelo wouldn't always draw from life. He had an idealized human prototype in his mind that he could manipulate the same way we

control 3-d animation. Drawing is a really good way to hone that skill. Then you take that and go to a computer, and the work you make in a computer is going to be of a different caliber than someone who just goes straight to the computer.

IG: That's just what I am talking about. Artists seem to be encouraged to go right to the computer. This is problematic for art because artists often lack the technical skills, like mass conceptions, that would make the computer a really effective tool—one in service of some larger conceptual end. We have a number of instructors who, when the student says, "I want to do this," respond, "Stop wanting anything. Don't want. Wanting is going to kill you. See. Learn how to see. Understand color, light, form, composition." I feel that this comprises the crucial foundation for an artist to go anywhere. As you said, from understanding drawing, you can go to the computer and just make that computer do a lot more for you than if you don't have the background. This is missing from most educational institutions these days.

I went to the CAA conference in Boston last February and introduced myself to someone who was teaching at a big college in the South. And he responded, "Oh, you're still teaching art. Great." I was taken aback by his candor, but not shocked by his sentiment. There are so many students with MFAs who do not know how to draw.

TO: But there are different lineages. What you're describing is one lineage. Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith—that is another lineage. That, too, is very hands-on. Kiki's strength in drawing isn't her classical rendering, but it's still profound drawing.

IG: It is there, and that's the point. I think we agree. It is present in the work. Can you discuss the process of creating public sculpture from the time the commissioners say, "I want to do this."? What is your process?

TO: It is the surprise place where my drawing skill comes to the forefront. A lot of the sculpture competitions I win—and they are usually open competitions—I win based on drawings. Even if they are simple, kind of cartoon-like drawings, I still think you have to really draw to do this. Not everybody can. I also work with computer animators and renderers. But really I think people are more impressed with these nutty hand-sketches than a completely realized computer rendering of the commission. It is sort of John Henry versus the steam engine. And for the moment, I feel like John Henry is winning, you know, for me. [*Laughs*]

IG: That just tells me we're much more compelled by what we can do ourselves, with our hands. We know what to expect from a computer. We never know what to expect from one's creative process. So, what happens once you win a competition?

TO: Well, it goes to a proposal drawing. And then usually there will be some haggling about what is acceptable and what isn't. That is part of the public process I've gotten to like. And then we settle on a design, and I start with smaller scale models in clay. Maybe one-third scale. I might even go to a small architectural model and work out a design in that. And once I get up to one-third scale in clay, I'll mold that and go through all those steps. These days we are enlarging in the computer. It's a big tool that I use a lot now. We'd scan that, say, small-scale work, and we get that digitally in the computer. Then it is enlarged in form up to full scale. And I cover that with clay, and then I hand work it again. It isn't a Xerox machine. You still need your two eyes on it, and your eyes are seeing that initial form differently than they are seeing this larger form. It is the detailing and the cuts and the kind of pressure of flesh against flesh—all those things. And just my pleasure in making it, you know.

IG: You got to have fun. [*Both laugh*]

TO: That is what I do in the middle of the night. I get guys who come to work for me and they think, "Oh well, it's my first day on the job, let me do some sculpture." And I think, "No way. I've worked thirty years to get here. You think you're going to take that from me?"

IG: Do you go from there directly to making the rubber mold?

TO: Well, we'll go then another step usually. I'll try to do the original in water-based clay, go from that water-based clay to a waste mold to plaster, chase the plaster—that is like the mouse you saw in the other room—now it is plaster. My guys will help me there and refine those forms—thank you. I've got almost 20 people full time; I get a lot of help just for the labor. But then I'll pick it up. At that stage I'm acting more like Jeff Koons might, you know: you go in to mark and adjust areas. Sometimes I get my hand back in tune with it. But the forms are pretty much there. They just need the lumpy bumpies taken out, to shore up the bigger forms.

IG: What foundry do you use?

TO: I use them all: Tallix, Polich, Walla Walla Foundry in Washington State, A.R.T. Research, and Modern Art Foundry in Queens. I'll still bid in Italy if it is practical. I'm looking at China and Thailand.

IG: Who are your artistic heroes?

TO: How do you go at that question?

IG: I don't know. Start with Bernini.

TO: Any sculptor has to...Well, I go to Michelangelo.

IG: Who do you drop everything to go see?

TO: Richard Serra is one. Kiki Smith is another. Louise Bourgeois, Robert Smithson, Murakami. There are so many, I just can't think. I try to keep my tastes in what I admire as artwork very broad, if I can. I used to work at the Natural History Museum. For five years I was a night watchman there, and then spent one year in the Anthropology Department. I love that stuff. It is so great. You get Mayan and Aztec, and then traveling to Asia—all those influences. And the Greeks. You realize the Greeks were influencing the Buddha sculptures in India and the Far East. There is a sort of universal sense of form that you can boil down from all that stuff. At the beginning I was at that level, and more recently I've tried to spread out what it is I look at and what I admire.

IG: Are you more or less sanguine on the art world? Do you think it is in a good place right now?

TO: I think it is pretty good. But I'm not in there at the bottom level. I find out about people now by going to a gallery. That's where I see younger artists. I used to think when they'd show up in a gallery, "Oh, I've known about that for years, or I know them. I know that movement." Now, I don't. I find out about it like the rest of us, when it makes it to galleries or museums.

IG: So you think we are moving in a positive direction.

TO: Yeah, I think there is a lot of stuff I really like. I just saw work on Rivington Street from a collective, or a single guy with some other artists out of Berlin. They are sort of Pop, kind of New Pop. He was doing a kind of party art. I think there is good stuff happening out there that seems fresh to me.