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JOE SHEEHAN: interview with Santiago Garcia Navarro

SGN: In what way is the ancestral practice of stone carving related, in some of your works, to a critique of contemporary consumerism?

JS: I worked for a long time in tourist shops carving trinkets from jade, so people could have a piece of New Zealand to take back to their country. (The culture of carving in NZ is very strong due to an amazing jade carving art form developed by the Maori). After a while, I realized that this commercial setting was a huge limiting factor if I wanted to make work that told new stories. I saw that there was a problem because while this material is loaded with cultural and political significance, tourism held it in a sort of romantic historical time warp. I saw then that there was huge power in working with this load, to redistribute it so that carving could have more potency and relevance as an art form again.

Also, there is a beautiful irony in telling modern stories with ancient technology. Commercial dominance has introduced problems with globalization and diminishing resources. The scarcity of jade has increased vastly in the last 10 years. These changes interested me and inspired me to make works like *Non-rechargeable* and *Everybody's keys*. They are a critique of our national self-image as super clean and green. Often this is our first foot forward when we market ourselves overseas (*Lord of the Rings*? Middle Earth never looked so good!). The truth being that we are often as bad as everybody else in the world for consumption and impact on our natural environment.

SGN: In *Daily bread* and *Spending Time*, the supposed titles of the songs are, in fact, patchy sentences of something like a personal diary. But, in the end, we don't hear anything. What kind of "music" do we listen to in these "songs"?

JS: Yeah, my diary entries play the part of a record's track titles and liner notes. Track titles act as pointers to the meanings of the songs and my titles do the same thing. These are recordings of my mind during an attempt at stillness basically. I have made different approaches to this task and in *Daily bread* for example I set a simple framework of 45 record as form, 3mm drill as tool and covering the whole surface as a goal. There was then this process of letting go. I had no expectations of what it was going to look like and every time I realised my mind had wandered from the job I made a note of what it was I had been thinking about. In the end I had this list of distractions and events that occurred during the making which points you towards this struggle with staying in the moment.

The jade disc itself was completely transformed by this process. It went from dense and black to light and translucent, from hard to fragile. The pattern from the drilling made a sort of restless, shifting visual effect that I also liked. These pieces are a reflection of what was going on in my mind and body; they are soul records.

SGN: For Maori people, craft, art and design are not conceived separately, but experienced as integral to life. Does this Maori vision resound in some way in your work?

JS: The balance of craft, art and design that you see in ancient Maori artifacts is different to the balance of ideas and skill you see in good contemporary artworks, I think. I heard the difference described recently as "contemporary art talks *about* the universe where ancient Maori art talks *to* the universe". As much as this is a fairly broad generalization, I guess it's also true for me because my work is informed by European contemporary art practice as much as it is by Maori tradition. I have always seen good art practice as a balance of head, heart and hands. This is how I try to operate when I make work.