

studio international



Jay Heikes: 'I've always loved the reminder that the natural world has the upper hand'

By: Allie Biswas
June 16, 2017

The Minneapolis-based artist discusses his experimental approach to materials, the significance of music within his practice, and the role of transcendence in contemporary life.

Jay Heikes has created a body of work over the past decade that includes sculptures, drawings, wall reliefs and installations. For his fifth solo exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, the artist has created an exhibition that is dominated by a sinewy floor-based installation, which evolved from drawings within Heikes's Music for Minor Planets series. The composition consists of three lithe metal and wire sculptures, placed at a distance from one another, each measuring 10 feet in height and width, and 15 feet in length.



As well as making a visual reference to sheet music, the copper-formed cluster suggests the long-standing importance of music to Heikes. Surrounding these sparsely elegant structures are multiple “planets” – an analogous group of cast bronze spheres that resemble the orbital system. Transcendence, functioning as escape, is alluded to in these works, and the show’s title, *Keep Out*, is perhaps as much of a wish to refrain from the turbulence of present-day living as it is an acknowledgement of the current political climate in the United States and elsewhere.



Heikes (b1975 Princeton, New Jersey) received a BFA from the University of Michigan and an MFA from Yale University, soon after which he was included in the 2006 Whitney Biennale. Recent solo exhibitions include those at the Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2012), the Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis (2015), the Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam (2015) and the Federica Schiavo Gallery, Milan (2016).



Allie Biswas: I wanted to start with your use of materials. You have turned to an extensive range of materials throughout your practice that includes both the natural and the industrial, and you often combine multiple materials to create one work. Have you come to rely on certain things over time? Are you drawn to texture? To colour? To functionality?



Jay Heikes: I'm drawn to texture in my work the most. I remember a vision I had as a child that has always stayed with me. I would close my eyes and see an enormous white space that would be quickly filled up by black soot, like a swarm of flies that were vigorously being sketched, almost an animated blackout. I don't see it as much any more, but it's the basis of everything I understand as graphic, probably my first conception of an abstracted fear of some sort. Although possibly I'm analysing it too much and it was just the phenomena of light playing on my retinas as my eyelids covered them. As for colour, I'm drawn to a full spectrum of pale tones, specifically in the way that sunlight fades advertisements in store windows.

I've always loved the reminder that the natural world has the upper hand. There's a certain level of futility in moving matter around and trying to keep it fresh. Entropy was my entrance into all of this and now I'm at peace

with the chaos of constantly combining materials that are not preferred hybrids. I want to understand the core of caustic relationships better, so I have to try putting things together that sometimes fall apart and reject each other. I hate saying my studio is like a lab, but really I'm an amateur in a room seeing what materials will do when I ask them to do something they are not meant to do.



AB: You touch on this type of disconnection between the materials – things that aren't really supposed to interact with one another. And yet, while there are moments when it might feel as though each work is operating in a different way in terms of form, you are very good at creating cohesion. There is a collusion between the works.

JH: I don't want to lose you by talking about vibes or affect, but there is an undeniable fever that comes from certain sequences. David Lynch's entire body of work comes to mind, as do the existential plays of Sartre. Even Frank Ocean's album Blonde took me there. It has to do with architecture, but mostly sequence. You walk into a space, by way of the entrance or through the back door, and you experience a set of signs and signifiers that lead you down an unknown path. For me, the desired path is not a familiarly clever one, but more welcoming in its soft alienation. In that alienation is where I hope cohesion is possible, and an impossible proposal that seems plausible suddenly appears. It smacks you when it happens and taunts the part of your psyche that keeps you from entertaining the things that you think aren't worth doing but then feel immediately revelatory.



AB: Looking at your previous exhibitions, in relation to your current show at Marianne Boesky, the structure of each show is often a balance between sculptural works that are situated directly on the ground, and drawings or paintings that are positioned on the wall. Is this a relationship that you have actively tried to develop through each series of work? Or is it more about the exhibiting process – how to arrange the work in the space on its completion – rather than the making process?

JH: This is a question I wrestle with every time I go into a show. Am I on the inside or the outside as an author and a viewer? With *Keep Out*, I want to be on the inside with the viewer, as if we are in a landscape that defies certain rules. The copper and wax sculptures, along with the material orbs on the floor, are meant to convey the flow and weight of thoughts, when they become fully realised and no longer need their arterial framework, finally finding an autonomous state. Most exhibitions get you closer to what the artist is thinking, but with this show I really want you to be inside my head. It's a very direct approach in which I rely on a constellation of objects to get an audience to locate themselves within a thought, setting up a kind of stage set. I would argue that this process makes the work come alive and we start thinking less about products and more about storytelling. The paintings, which are not really paintings at all, but stand-ins for boarded up windows, convey the feeling of being inside a space and looking out through the cracks of something opaque, like plywood, to see the stormy weather off in the distance or a setting sun.

AB: This notion of feeling as though you are looking outwards through a work reminds me of *Outside World* from your 2010 exhibition *Inanimate Life* at Marianne Boesky. The way that you describe the paintings in *Keep Out* refers to this feeling of the transcendental as well as the idea of escape. Also, from another angle, your motivations do not appear to be insular – you are always looking outside yourself.



JH: Transcendence is related to escape but we can never escape our bodies. Only in death are we led to believe that escape is possible. But what if this could happen in life? In meditation, in sex, in so many moments (now in virtual reality) transcendence is a tease. This is why music has always been so profound for me. The ears become a point of entry, in the way that eyes act in art. If we are to believe in the transcendent properties inherent in both, then at what point do we notice the shapes involved and start to see the invisible things and hear the inaudible? Many of these conclusions veer dangerously close to a road of mental instability. Eugen Gabritschevsky, an artist who was so in tune with nature that he painted the surrounding landscape as if he could peer into another dimension, spent almost the last 50 years of his life committed in an institution in Munich. This is the line. If it doesn't hold, reality is forsaken and transcendence might look dangerously different from the romantic visions I associate with overcoming limitations. It is my hope that I can cross this line without losing my mind. This all sounds so dark and dire, I know, but really I just want to stretch an abstract language by any means that doesn't prove too burdensome for the people around me.

AB: You mention the personal significance of music, and this relates directing to your ongoing series of drawings *Music for Minor Planets*, which you have developed for this exhibition through a group of pencil and ink works. But you have also transformed these compositions into a large-scale installation that occupies the central space of the gallery. What was your process for thinking about how to expand, or alter, the medium in this way – to take a drawing to its next stage?

JH: I have to admit that it was not a natural evolution to take the drawings, which I had been doing for more than three years at that point, into a more sculptural realm. There were a lot of stops and starts. At one point I was fashioning a tool to make them into large scale wall drawings but then a close friend Conny Purtill, an artist that I really trust, challenged me to bring them into three dimensions. I immediately thought about the wire I had been working with and how bending it by hand was so close to the way the lines of the drawings looked. It was as if the drawings were renderings of a loose, metal weave that was slowly breaking apart and losing its structure. That's when the copper wire really took over because of the way I could shape it. The softness of it is so satisfying to work with and its natural suspension in air allows me to climb it through space like a vine reaching for an unknown, invisible piece of architecture. When the fixed rectangle of the drawings was shed, it really started to feel limitless, like these things were organically growing in ways I couldn't totally control. Sound played such an important role in the initial drawings and I carried that over into the sculptures to try and mimic the way music seeps into every dimension. Now I have forms looking like cactus trunks and rainbows, a curve measures tempo while a mass of stubby pegs echoes plucked notes or the movement of a mechanical player piano. At the end of installing, I thought I had lost control of them but now I'm realizing it's just a starting point for what is possible. Like when a musician finds their sound, I really have the feeling that I'm finding my groove suddenly.



AB: Similarly, your development of the Zs series shows an interest in steel wire, which is new within this context. If these works are understood as exploring states of introspection and self-reflection, in relation to dream-like states, could the inclusion of this piercing, cold material be seen as relating to the overall concerns of the show, which are stated as reflecting on the current political climate? Unlike previous Z works, these have an aggressive or confrontational air about them.

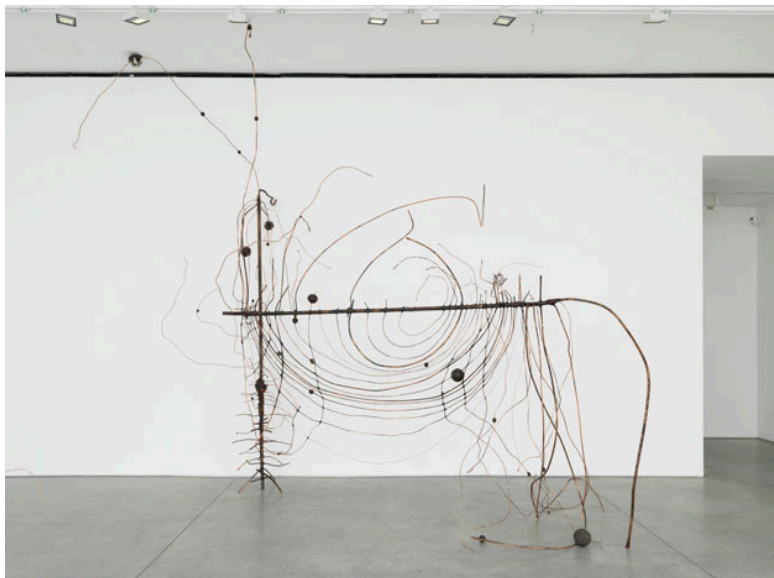
JH: I use a number of different materials for the wire in the Zs, like steel, aluminium, copper, and so on. When I first started making the series, I was thinking about the unconscious and dreaming. The wire Zs were worms that could pierce this wall of consciousness and crawl in and out of time. But not just consciousness, they could also pierce the materials in the paintings in a way that would force them to respond. So, in the first few that were made with pigmented mortar and burlap, the mortar would squeeze back through the burlap in a gridded goo shape, which I associated with the stuff that dreams are made of. As time went on, the hard nights' sleep of the mortar made way for a soft pillow and I inserted foam below the surface to give the feeling that the Zs were comfortably resting on the surface; a cynical language dancing sleepily across the surface of the foam or canvas or burlap.

But as soon as the US election happened, I suddenly woke up from this dream state, realising I was on autopilot for the last few years of Barack Obama's presidency. I bring all of the stress of the outside world into the studio with me on a daily basis, some days more than others, but now I feel the days are less dreamy, more nightmarish and hard edged. While I think every artist is political in some way, I prefer to classify politics in an outside world category and not be so topical in my work. There is what is in your sphere, like your body, and what is outside your sphere, like culture, and in the past I have had no interest in trying to bring the outside world too close: instead, I am peeking out of the window and reporting back in abstract ways. Maybe this is a luxury of disengagement. There are times when I am so alone, virtually hiding in the studio, often aimless, but I find my way back in there because, ultimately, making art is a weird kind of addiction and when it works to reconfigure your perceptions, it feels less lonely to be alive.



AB: I think these points relate closely to the subject of alchemy, which has been at the centre of much of your work. Your exhibition Walkabout, at Marianne Boesky in 2013, particularly grounded this interest. Although, in Keep Out, the notion of magic or transformation seems to revolve more around tangibility – the planetary system, the reality of an orbit – rather than illusion or fantasy. Could you explain how you are trying to examine these themes (of evolution, of change, of magic) in this current body of work?

JH: You are so good at recognising this subtle shift. Magic for me has always been about a hopeful prayer to bypass the undeniable human perception of being trapped in reality. Like in cave painting, there is the hope for an imagined future through a bountiful hunt. As if to say, if we paint it, a successful future is inevitable. The power of positive thinking and a host of other thoughts are entertained but not quantifiable through science. But right now we are witnessing the failure of magical thinking and the limits of metaphorically turning lead into gold from both directions because magical thinking is now being used for a convenient denial.



This is a reversal in the association I've always had with magic as being a force of wonder that imagines a brighter future through the collective unconscious. So maybe this is why I see alchemy playing less of a role in my current work because I sense this is not a time for magical thinking. We are being forced to open our eyes and not look away when things get uncomfortable, to engage with all of the shit of humanity. And perhaps the truest evolution is happening right in front us, with a transformation in the acceptance of a collected truth.

I find this the most jarring aspect of our current situation because I've often approached these questions from a comedic perspective, thinking that deep down there are a collection of mystic truths mankind would be incapable of reshaping. But what happens when everyone believes in a different magical conclusion? Does the orbit of our existence change? Are we destined for a future society of magical heretics? Or just micro-communities of like-minded individuals that will tell romanticised stories about a time when there were no walls? Will I still be in the studio trying to make salt and slag do something they have never done before? Or will I be pressing a button, telling a machine to make a work for me that is both poetic and new? Maybe I will be doing exactly the same thing I'm doing now, wondering if anything ever really changes.

AB: And what about creating something with other artists? There have been many examples, specifically earlier in your career, where you have included others in your practice – working on prints with Michael Stickrod; curating the group show *Consequences* [at the Fondazione Giuliani in Rome in 2015]. What do you achieve from collaboration, and do you think that this will become important again in the future?

JH: Organising *Consequences* (and I would never call myself a curator) was a desperate attempt to restructure the process I was falling into. I'm always catching myself asleep at the wheel, metaphorically speaking, so I'm looking for some smelling salts to revive a passion that got me here in the first place. Collaboration is a rude awakening by way of a window into the lives and habits of others, which I can associate with the experience of being in a band. You are standing in a room with three to four other people practising, trying to impose your authorship, or just fit in, and some days the sonic garden wilts, while other days you watch it grow. During those days of growth, there is a humble feeling that is like no other. Like we are all together. We are the Beatles. I think about this all the time and maybe it goes back to your question about collectivity, revealing how I need to dip in and out of collaborating to feel for ever young. To be honest, if I desired a state of pure autonomy, I would probably forsake art all together. Because the deeper you dig, the more you find a circuit board of appropriation that is full of breakers for all of us to feed off of. Live wires just dying to be held.