

How Artist Toby Ziegler Stole Inspiration from Picasso's Plunder of the Louvre

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LONDON— Best known for his paintings and sculptures that combine the digital with the handmade, British artist Toby Ziegler will unveil a major new installation next week at 176, the former Methodist Chapel in North London that serves as collector Anita Zabłudowicz's project space. Ziegler's ensemble of sculptures and found objects will later be reinstalled in the large gallery that Zabłudowicz and her husband, Poju, are setting up on Sarvisalo, a Finnish island 90 minutes east of Helsinki. ARTINFO UK snuck into the church for a preview of the show and a chat with Ziegler.

You had the idea for this installation long before you were offered the show. What was the trigger that got things underway?

It's something that evolved over a long period of time. I wanted to juxtapose sculptures and found objects — things that work on a very formal level, and also have

some kind of poetic resonance. In Paul Celan's poems, words are frequently stuck together and appear on the page in a kind of structural way. I wanted the works in this show to function like that: to be these things that you constantly have to renegotiate. As you are moving around the space, you see different juxtapositions. It's a very exciting venue to have for this project because it works on so many levels. You constantly have to encounter the things from different vantage points.

And the sculptures themselves are inspired by stories or objects that you've come across.

I usually have an art historical or a sculptural motif that becomes a springboard for making a piece of work. Here, the head is based on the Iberian stone carving that Picasso stole from the Louvre when he was a young man. It was when he was making "Les Femmes d'Alger," and was starting to think about cubism. He reworked it and the head actually appears in a couple of paintings. I suppose I was interested in it as an object with layers of meaning: it had been carved for a certain reason, in a certain culture. It ended up in a museum, lost all these original narratives and then, through Picasso's appropriation of it, it became something else. Picasso had to take it back in the end. When I went looking for it, the Louvre had given it to another museum, so I got in touch with them and they, in turn, had lent it to someone else. It became this paper chase, but they couldn't locate it. I ended up making the sculpture from three little black and white photographs, the only record I could find of it. This really appeals to me: it was a thing that I had to re-imagine from degenerated images on a Google search. A lot of my works are based on an art historical object but it's usually something that I've only encountered secondhand. So the process of making them becomes about re-imagining them completely — turning them into a virtual model on the computer, trying to define them, reduce them to polygons, to a very inadequate description of their form, and make something quite different.

Is that what your title, "The Alienation of Objects," refers to? Your sculptures are somewhat alienated from their origins.

Yes. But it has also to do with the way we receive information nowadays, often in a very degraded form.

You make sculptures, but you also make paintings. How do the two media work together?

The paintings also appropriate found imagery — sometimes historical paintings, and sometimes photography. They are also very much about the process of finding something, of manipulating it on the computer and trying to drag it

out and back into something physical. There's a very mechanical part of the process, but there's also room for human fallibility to slip in.

There's a real tension in your work between the disembodied aspect of your preparatory digital models and the final pieces, which are much more chaotic, sometimes even romantic.

There is this awkwardness, definitely. In my paintings, there are often references to landscape and the sublime, and in the sculptures, there are references to classical sculpture. I've been through an enormous trajectory from leaving college and being completely disillusioned with making art, to starting to make things very methodically, which was quite against my nature.

Was it another way in?

It was another way back to being able to make a gesture, and a way back to being able to make intuitive decisions — to allow serendipitous things to happen.

The Zabłudowicz Collection is acquiring your whole installation; it will be reinstalled in Finland in 2012. You're going to produce a series of paintings to go with it?

This installation was tailored to, and inspired by, the space, so it will have to be reconfigured for Finland. I'm not sure if I want to juxtapose paintings and sculptures in that space yet. I've shown paintings and sculptures together a lot over the last few years, but it was only by removing the paintings that I felt able to introduce the found objects in the installations: the mechanical bull, the freight container, and the big helium balloon. I wanted to focus on that relationship between three-dimensional objects. For Finland, I am going to be working on some paintings but I'll have to wait and see. They might be something that exists separately.