

Confronting The Monumental

The American sculptor Jonathan Prince is a man who has embraced a number of professional personalities: each has, over the past decade, played a significant part in his success as a sculptor. His myriad experiences feed into his powerful monumental sculptures affording them a singular energy.

By Dorothy Joiner

Growing up on Long Island, near New York City, Jonathan Prince was privileged to meet famous artists and to experience the best of contemporary art. When he was a child, his father took him to the studio in Hastings-on-Hudson of Cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, who was then working on the clay sculpture for the bronze bust of John F. Kennedy, now in Washington's Kennedy Center. A kindly man, Lipchitz let the little boy add daubs of clay to the head and generously discussed with him his own collection of Pre-Columbian art. "His influence on me has never diminished," Prince says, calling the experience "the ultimate show-and-tell game." Later at a museum opening, Prince met Isamu Noguchi, who, in a magical moment, signed a postcard for him. He subsequently made frequent trips to the artist's home and outdoor museum in Long Island City.¹

Prince also strolled often in the Donald M. Kendall Gardens at the Pepsico Headquarters near his home in Westchester. Commissioned in the belief that art stimulates creativity in business, the gardens were designed in the relaxed English manner by Russell Page and include Richard Erdman's *Passage* (1985), the largest sculpture ever made from a single 100-ton block of travertine. The



Jonathan Prince, *Torus 340*, 2011, oxidized and stainless steel, 156 x 144 x 96 inches. Installation at 590 Madison Avenue Sculpture Garden, New York, September 15, 2011 – January 15, 2012. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

gardens also display, among others, works by Henry Moore, Auguste Rodin, Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet, and Claes Oldenburg. These felicitous encounters began what Prince calls his “long-lasting love affair with art.” Although he never had a class in sculpture, he studied photography and graphic art in school and was always, he remembers, making something: in clay, plaster, cast stone, or bonded bronze. Despite his passion for art, however, Prince initially chose his father’s profession—maxillofacial prosthodontics—and also had laudable success in a number of other endeavors before deciding almost a decade ago that making sculpture was what he really wanted to do.

First studying dentistry at Columbia University, Prince graduated at the top of his class and spent three years of post-doctoral studies at the University of Southern California. Relishing the “art” of his job, he worked in the laboratories of Beverly Hills dentists making prostheses for the mouth. He had “fun,” he says, replacing “body parts,” producing, in fact, miniature sculptures. He developed new techniques for fabricating prosthetics and lectured on aesthetic dentistry in the United States, Europe, and Japan, publishing widely about his work and becoming internationally known in the field. But when he realized that as a practicing dentist he would have to leave the lab work—the “art”—to others, he quickly grew restless, deciding to become a filmmaker, having been bitten by the cinema “bug” while living in Los Angeles.

Together with John Pepper, son of sculptress Beverly Pepper, Prince produced a feature-length adaptation of Albert Camus’ novel, *La Peste* (1947). After a year raising money, he and Pepper oversaw the



Jonathan Prince, Five Piece Sphere, 2009, Indian granite, 20 x 33.5 x 4 inches w/o base.

filming in Buenos Aires. Although it starred William Hurt, Raul Julia, and Robert Duvall and featured music by Vangelis, who also wrote the score for *Chariots of Fire*, the movie had limited critical acclaim—four stars in *Entertainment Weekly*—but disappointing commercial success. It was, Prince quips, “A three-hour funeral dirge.” The length alone precluded acceptance by audiences in the United States, for whom it was inexpertly recut to fit the two-hour limit preferred by American taste. Prince credits the venture as a “learning experience.”

He then turned to digital media, which, he says, “lies at the intersection of science and art,” serving as president of Dimensional Media Associates for four years. Specializing in optical display technologies, the company employed 60

people and was largely funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the National Science Foundation. It specialized in 3-D simulators for use during surgery. This work led to the *HoloGlobe* project of the late 1990s, a three-dimensional holographic visualization of dynamic changes in the earth’s atmosphere, geosphere, biosphere, and hydrosphere. Narrated by James Earl Jones, the film was shown at the Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Al Gore (then Vice President) introduced *HoloGlobe* to the public and relied in part on the project for his lectures on climate change. And in his next venture, Prince continued to earn plaudits. He founded and managed Sorceron, an Internet media and animation company that employed over 100 people. A highlight was the Emmy his company won for set design.



Jonathan Prince, Ellipsis, 2007, African granite, 67 x 82 x 60 inches (dimensions variable).

In 2001, Prince determined once again to “reinvent” himself, this time as a sculptor. This decision was, he affirms, the one most needing courage. Not only does an aspiring sculptor relinquish the relative stability of a salaried job for the aleatory existence of an artist, but he must also wrestle with what Prince calls the “600-pound gorilla.” That “gorilla,” he explains, is the almost crushing weight of tradition: the influence of all the great artists whose work he knew so well and loved—Brancusi, Hepworth, and Arp, to mention only three. Finding his own style meant a soul-searching struggle with that legacy.

Choosing first a slab of white marble, Prince carved an abstract work from a maquette made when he was 20. Although the piece, he admits, is

“derivative”—reminiscent of Poncet and Hepworth—it represents nonetheless an important step in his development and now occupies an honored space in his living room. But carving soft stones such as marble and alabaster was far too easy for him: like “carving butter.” He soon began to work with granite and basalt, whose obdurate textures require diamond blades and demand a less free form, more precise architectural plan. He moved to the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts, where he converted adjacent barns into 23,000 square feet of studio and living spaces. He now employs four assistants and operates cranes able to lift up to 30,000 pounds, powerful enough for his monumental sculptures. It is into these massive works that he pours not only a prodigious energy but also the manifold lessons garnered from his varied experiences.

Recalling the famous dictum over the Platonic academy in Ancient Athens—a degree in geometry required here—Prince gravitates toward the formal purity underlying Modernism. At the same time, however, he often manipulates form to reveal successive layers of archetypal meaning. Split into the complementary halves of an ovoid, *Ellipsis* (2007) embodies not only that which is left out—the space between the halves—as suggested by the title, but also, because of its shape, an egg. Prince’s division of the ovoid thus gives visual expression to the archetypal devolution from unity to duality. Bearing almost universal associations with creation and its progressive differentiation, the egg is, in the words of Jean Chevalier, “a primeval reality containing within itself the germs of a multiplicity of beings.” It is, he continues, “duality potentially contained within unity.”² And from its etymology in



Jonathan Prince, Marrow, 2008, African granite, 110 x 48 x 23 inches.

the Greek, moreover, the title “ellipsis” suggests even further the notion of a regression, “to fall short.”

In another work, *Five-Piece Sphere* (2009), Prince divides a granite sphere into sections, setting each at a slightly skewed angle from the other. It would seem at first that he has undercut the inherent meaning of the sphere as an expression of perfection and totality. Yet an understanding of the number five reveals that Prince

has confirmed rather than denied these associations. A Mayan emblem of perfection, five is in the words of Jean Chevalier “a center of harmony and balance.”³ This meaning comes from the fact that it is the sum of two and three, the first even and odd numbers, and comes at the center of the first nine numbers.

Prince also manipulates form to express ideas from contemporary science. In *Light Box* (2007), for example, regularized circular perforations reduce the perfect granite cube by four-fifths of its original weight. Here Prince illustrates the notion that atomic matter is less mass—only 20%—than space or dark energy—80%. The title is also meaningful. A jocular pun, the word “light” refers both to weight and to illumination, whereas the term “box” offers a respectful nod to sculptor Donald Judd. A second work reflecting Prince’s fascination with forms in nature, *Red* (2009) is a biconcave disk, replicating in granite a red blood cell. Also a pun, the title refers not only to the color of blood but, at the same time, pays homage to Anish Kapoor, whose work reveals a decided bias for the color red.

Other works, such as *Eclipse* (2008), undercut formal integrity with ragged surfaces reminiscent of Michelangelo and Rodin. Here Prince draws upon his experience with optics, inscribing a highly polished spherical “mirror” into the upper portion of an upright rectangle of raw granite. On one side the mirror is concave, creating reflections that move in directions opposite and upside down to that of the viewer; but on the obverse, flat side, reflections are right side up, consonant with the observer’s perspective. The artist thus creates an aesthetic meditation on the fundamental interaction of opposites in nature.



Jonathan Prince, Red, 2007, African granite, 66 x 64 x 16 inches.



Jonathan Prince, Light Box, 2007 African granite, 34 x 32 x 32 inches.

Like a fragmentary fallen column, *Broken Cylinder* (2008) shows one jagged surface offset on the other by a dazzlingly polished “fish-eye lens,” reflecting ambient reality. Especially dramatic, *Marrow* (2008) stands upright like a column, retaining on one side the rough horizontal striations made by the African quarry when the original block was cut from the earth. The other side, however, is deeply indented and polished to a light-spilling sheen, a kind of optical tube. Invited to walk closer, the observer experiences a vertiginous indecision as to the depth of the cavity.

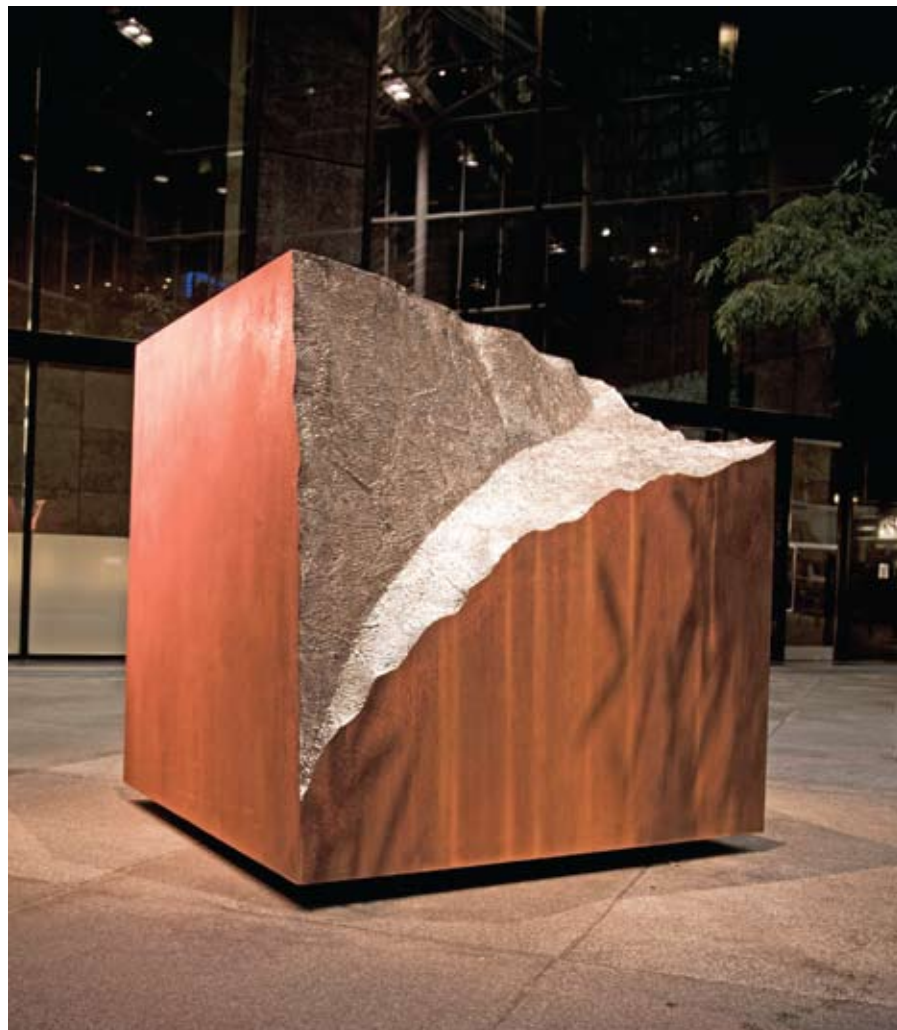
Inspired by the Chinese tradition that tends to treasure rather than to discard what is broken, often binding together fragments with golden thread, Prince adapts this practice to granite. Like an oversize bowl with jagged edges, *Fragment I* (2009) is nestled slightly off center, as if protectively, on metal supports, with gold leaf exalting its splintered edges. A more rounded container, *Fragment II* (2009) displays both gold and palladium leaf covering its broken contours. Choosing a form with more particularized, historical references Prince presents a wide-bellied



Jonathan Prince, *Fragment III (Caldera)*, 2010, Zimbabwe granite and gold leaf, 27 x 27 x 27 inches w/o base.

container—reminiscent of an Anasazi pot for *Fragment III (Caldera)* (2010)—but, as before, he covers the splintered edges with gold, transmuting the raw into treasure. A

more modern tubular shape like that of a test tube, *Fragment IV (Elixir)* (2010) is held upright on three legs, with gold coating the broken edges. However pedestrian the form—a laboratory instrument—the artist transfigures the work not only with gold but also through the title as well. Associated with immortality, the term “elixir” suggests the assurance of a transcendent state of consciousness.⁴



Jonathan Prince, *Vestigial Block II*, 2011, oxidized and stainless steel, 76 x 72 x 72 inches. Installation at 590 Madison Avenue Sculpture Garden, New York, September 15, 2011 – January 15, 2012.

During the past several years, Prince has worked in steel, translating his bias for geometry and its interaction with natural processes into what is for him a more contemporary medium. Sharing the shadows of tall, willowy bamboos, four works from his latest series were shown recently in the lofty atrium of the IBM building on Madison Avenue in New York City. Each a classic form—a torus, a totem, a cube, and a flattened sphere—the works all display a deep amber patina, the result of having been weathered outside. And simultaneously marring the integrity of the forms yet enhancing their appeal, deep, irregular fractures “tear” through the steel, giving rise to the series’ title, *Torn Steel*.

Like an oversize donut set upright and nibbled by a latter-day Polyphemus, *Torus 340* (2011) shows a gap in its annular circuit, leaving craggy edges overlaid with a silvery covering effected by mig and tig welds. Although it would seem that this interruption to its energized shape—a smaller circle rotating around a larger one—would suspend the torus’ inherent dynamism, the contrary is true. Lending a kind of visual magnetism to the gap, the jagged ends only reinforce the work’s kinetic appeal. *Vestigial Block* (2011), a six-foot cube, is similarly “gouged” by

irregular diagonal triangles, creating declivities, much like slopes on the earth's surface. Here as well the "gouging" serves only to complement the work's meaning. The earth-like "wounds" underscore the cube's inherent associations with the earth and with stability.

A third work, *Totem* (2011) is ripped from above as though struck by lightning, a force also consonant with its symbolic meaning. An expression of ancestor worship and kinship with supernatural powers, the totem—similar in shape to the Indian *lingam*—is a columnar manifestation of masculine potency, symbolically analogous to a lightning bolt—the preferred weapon of Zeus—fertilizing the earth. *Disc Fragment* (2011), a flattened sphere, recalling the winged discus of Antiquity, indicative of transmutation, is similarly "torn" by silvery patches resembling leaf patterns. These patterns replicating nature conjure up cycles of death and rebirth, which, as with the other works, complements

the symbolic meaning of the form.

The *Torn Steel* series marries form to nature in yet another way: what Prince calls "gravitational patinas." He begins the process with chemicals but finishes the rich sienna surfaces outside, allowing wind and rain to create particular patterns condign to each form. The curves of the torus, for instance, effect swirling motifs, whereas the patterns on the disc are more variegated, and the cube reveals varying vertical striations.

The artist is concerned, moreover, that the silvery patches covering the "tears" in the metal be truly random. To this end he has each of his assistants contribute to the "non-patterning." Since each individual doodles in their own fashion, Prince says, employing the work of four gives a greater range of markings.

It is not hard to find precedents in history for Prince's interest in both science and art. Leonardo, of course, was adept at both. The Renaissance polymath seemed, however, to favor science and engineering over painting. In a famous letter to the

Duke of Milan, Leonardo vaunts his skills as a military engineer but scarcely mentions his ability as a painter. Prince, on the other hand, has given up lucrative careers in dentistry, film, and technology, placing his remarkable scientific background at the service of making sculpture. Δ

Notes:

1. I am indebted to the artist who granted me several extended interviews both in person and by phone from October, 2011 to January, 2012. All biographical information and quotes derive from these interviews.
2. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 385.
3. Chevalier, 385.
4. Chevalier, 349.

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Jonathan Prince, *Disc Fragment*, 2011, oxidized and stainless steel, 120 x 96 x 60 inches. Installation at 590 Madison Avenue Sculpture Garden, New York, September 15, 2011 – January 15, 2012.