

Sculpture as a Symphony

A Conversation with **John Henry**

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John Henry is a prominent sculptor with large-scale outdoor installations on five continents and work in many museums and private collections. His sculptures recall Constructivism, but while the Russians made visionary drawings and models, Henry has built more than 2,000 architectonic structures from long shafts and hollow plates of steel. His vocabulary is simple; his results are both powerful and subtle.

Through May 2009, Henry is having a huge retrospective: eight simultaneous exhibitions of his work in Florida art museums and public spaces. In each participating city—Boca Raton, Miami, Naples, Orlando, Sarasota, Tampa, and Tallahassee—he has installed a 50- to 80-foot-tall sculpture at a public site, while the local art museum hosts an exhibition that highlights some aspect of his work and career. Miami is hosting two exhibitions, one in the museum and one in the library. In all, Henry is exhibiting 160 sculptures.

Henry has a longstanding interest in the idea of works of art encompassing a large tract of land. The Florida exhibitions, which he calls "The Peninsula Project," bring his large-scale works together so they can talk to each other. "Each of my sculptures," he states, "is part of a continuous sentence... Each is an individual part of a greater whole. In many regards, my sculptures may be seen as all one work." He feels a strong affinity for Florida because he lived and worked in the state for 10 years. He calls the Florida peninsula "a unique geographic environment... that offer[s] the sunrise on the east coast and sunset on the west." In addition to the catalogue for

Opposite and above: *Meridian*, 2003.
Steel and paint, 22 x 25 x 15 ft.

"The Peninsula Project," a new book, *John Henry Sculpture*, includes David Finn's photographs of key sculptures all over the U.S. Henry is a former member and chairman of the ISC Board of Directors.

sculpture

Victor Cassidy: What's the most satisfying sculpture installation that you've ever done?

John Henry: The next one. There are several levels of satisfaction when you make sculpture and put it out in public. Some pieces are technical challenges, which are fulfilling when you make them work. There is the kind of satisfaction when you see a piece that is or, later on, becomes a pivotal piece—some sort of change in your work, and you see it for the first time at actual scale. And then, of course, there's the satisfaction of putting a piece up and seeing it evolve over time, becoming an accepted part of a community. All this is true for Tatlin's Sentinel, which was built in 2002 and first shown at Laumeier Sculpture Park.

VC: Tatlin's Sentinel was your "chapel" piece.

JH: It's the beginning of the cathedral series, but it's really an amalgam of several different series coming together. That piece weighs between 60 and 70 tons and is 101 feet high, so it was a technical feat to build. It stretched us and took us beyond what we'd done before.

VC: Where did you learn fabricating and organizational skills?

JH: My father was a building contractor—he developed land. I learned to run a bulldozer at 10 years old. I learned to operate farm machinery and a lot about logistics, how to make things work,

and, when a heavy machine gets stuck in the mud, how to get it out. I learned to weld with oxy-acetylene before I came to Chicago and didn't really learn electric welding until I was 18 or 19. By the time I got to Chicago in the mid-'60s, I was well-versed in all of those things, more so than my instructors at the Art Institute.

VC: Tell me about your influences—Franz Kline and Steve Urry, the Chicago sculptor.

JH: You don't see the Franz Kline influence when you look at a piece in its totality, but he's all over the place in the passages—the push-pull nature of how he painted, the foreground, after ground, middle ground of the spatial relationships. It's all right there. And it manifests itself in three dimensions in my work. When I was starting out in Chicago, Steve Urry taught me the spirit of what could happen, that there were no limits. Steve was a master fabricator and aluminum welder—pretty amazing in what he could do. We had a good time working together, in poverty. I was still in school, having to work at night and also work in the studio.

VC: What's the basis of your aesthetic?

JH: The basic elements of my sculptural vocabulary are all familiar. Everybody understands geometry—a straight line, a 90-degree sur-



Bridgeport, 1984. Aluminum and paint, 35 x 15 x 25 ft.

face, or an obtuse angle. But when the pieces are put together, assembled, something quite different happens. This very rigid kind of architecture becomes organic. There are no curves, but when you see some of my pieces, there are curves. There are big sweeps. All kinds of things start to happen. The sculptures seem to move.

VC: You've said that it's easy to get ideas, hard to make them into sculpture. How do you take that second step?

JK: I'm working all the time. I may not be there with a torch or a tool in my hand manipulating metal, but I probably put in five hours a day design time. Not necessarily design of the sculpture aesthetically, but figuring out the nuances of how a particular thing I want to do is going to work. I work it out, resolve it, and come back and say, "Wait a minute, it's better if I do it this way." That all takes place in the head. Once in a while, I'll get up in the middle of the night and make a quick sketch. The next morning, I'll remember it, go back to it, and make some sort of drawing. I don't really make drawings of sculptures. I'll make drawings of parts or gestural drawings of the kind of feel that I want. Those are notes. The intention is to remind myself, to make a graphic representation of some thinking process. Everything's in my head,

and there are far more ideas coming up all the time than I could possibly make in 10 lifetimes.

VC: You work from aluminum models then?

JK: Yes. They're all machined. I have a 2,000-square-foot shop with lathes and milling machines. Two machinists work there full time. I use models to see how sculptures will look from different angles. The models are really studies because I rarely pick one up and say, "OK we're going to go build this 70 feet high." That just doesn't happen. One of the biggest problems sculptors have when they give their work to fabricators is that they're always surprised when they see the end product. It doesn't look like their model. That's because the human eye, the human brain, does not focus in on objects at that scale. Architects know this, and they use devices to help the scale of buildings relate. A Mies van der Rohe lobby can be 40 feet high—and he makes the door 11 or 12 feet high, not because it's needed to move things in and out, but because it helps people relate to the lobby and then to the height of the building. It's all about transition in the brain, how you relate to things. It's the same with sculpture. So I use what I call studies. And they change. I may go through three different studies before I make something that I feel is going to work. Even with the large piece, the dimensions will change.



Big Alex, 1995. Steel and paint, 33 x 65 x 38 ft.

VC: How do you get distance from a piece as you're making it?

JH: I've always functioned in a strange way with physical distance. It's hard for me to sit down next to a problem in my head. I'm not a Zen kind of person. I can't divorce myself from something that's sitting right beside me. I travel a lot on business and get away from the work physically. When I return, I see it in a fresh way. I may bring back visual things that I've seen on the trip that plug into what I'm doing.

VC: What if a piece is not working?

JH: Once in a while, I'll start off in a new direction with a new piece. Something stops, something doesn't happen, and I don't know where to go with it. So that piece gets set aside, and I start again. The next piece will just go right on, no problem, and the incomplete sculpture is still sitting there. One piece sat in the corner of the studio for three years. One day my assistant said, "John, that's a good start." I looked at it with fresh eyes, and boom, it all came together. We built that piece, and we've gone on to build several more as a result.

VC: Is there a dialogue between you and the piece as you work on it?

JH: Very definitely. The dialogue never stops. The way I build sculpture, the way I see sculpture—it's like a symphony. There are passages, particular movements within the symphony, but it's all related. In one sense of the word—and I'm really coming to this stronger than ever before—everything's all one piece. I finish a particular paragraph and that paragraph works very well and it's an entity onto itself, but it's very much a part of a greater whole. You take that paragraph, set it over here—it's like writing poetry, you know. There are passages in poetry that stand alone extremely well, but they are part of a bigger thing. My personality in the work becomes apparent if you see a group of pieces over a period of time. Then the symphony starts to happen, and the music is made evident. It's like going to the piano and lily playing two or three notes—kind of nice, but the sense is not there. When you start to see the work as a whole, there is a personality. It's a flow: it has its high points, it has its low points, and you see it more as a totality. And, in my opinion, there's definitely a personality. Other people have seen that as well.

VC: What's the role of color in your work?

JH: I've never really been concerned with color that much. Since I quit painting, I've never been a colorist. I use color as a contrast element, and I change the color on pieces. If I put a piece in the woods, it can't be black. If it goes by white sand, I might change it back to black. Color is something to allow people to see the piece. It relates to the eye. The shape relates—it's a different brain function. The formal elements of a piece don't have too much to do with color. They have to do with light and the way that the light articulates shape. Color reflects light, it's just another tool.



Star Painter, 2005. Steel and paint, 70.2 x 17.0 x 31 ft.

VC: Is there more mass in your sculpture now?

JH: A whole lot more. Some of the pieces I'm working on right now have more and more mass in them, which is interesting, because for years I went in the other direction. *Illinois Landscape #5* (1976), at Governor's State University south of Chicago, has no mass at all. There's a lot of negative space, negative mass, in that piece.

VC: What makes your work more effective in an urban setting than in the open countryside? You've said that Mark di Suvero's sculptures look magnificent at Storm King and Kenneth Snelson's work benefits from being seen in a large unobstructed space.

Quark, 2003 (unfinished). Steel, 70 x 34 x 33 ft.



JH: My work is closer to Snelson's in that regard than to di Suvero's. di Suvero's work has a lot of complexity in it that's lyrical, that references things, and when you complicate that with the urban environment, you walk an aesthetic tightrope of which Mark is a master. Some of my sculptures work well in the landscape. I felt very comfortable with Tatlin's Sentinel in the middle of a field at Laumeier Sculpture Park. It towered above the trees and created a whole different world in and of itself. And that was marvelous. Tatlin's Sentinel was sold recently, and it's going to downtown Dallas. It will take on a whole different light there, relating to the architecture and the height of those buildings.

VC: You're good at scaling and proportioning your sculptures. Do you have a special way of approaching the problem or is it all instinctive, intuitive?

JH: A fair amount is intuitive. I'm always reminded of kindergarten when little Johnny draws a picture and the teacher says, "Why did you draw it that way? Why did you draw the smoke drifting in that direction? Why did you do what you did?" And nine times out of 10, the answer is, "Because it looked right." It's not a sophisticated enough answer for everybody, but incredibly it's the correct answer. We spend an awful lot of time complicating the hell out of everything. People make money because they're able to complicate things and can draw high salaries for being an "expert." I opt for simplicity. Things that require too much explanation probably aren't worth it. I've done it for a long time, played with ratio and proportion, and found the center of gravity of something so I could pick it up with a crane and put it on a truck. Starting to understand the dynamics of something gives you an intelligence that is pretty hard to accumulate in any other way. If you give me a complex piece of structure, part of a bridge or something, and you say, "Hook that up so we can lift it and put it on a truck," I can put those slings right where they need to be to lift that structure straight up without it toppling or flipping. It's something that maybe happens over a period of time, maybe there's some intuition there. I don't know, but some people have it, some people don't.

Victor Cassidy is a writer living in Chicago.

Meridian, 2003.
Steel and paint, 22 x 25 x 15 ft.