

# ALISON JACQUES GALLERY

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## PRESS RELEASE

**MATT JOHNSON**

**22 NOVEMBER – 21 DECEMBER 2013**

**PRIVATE VIEW: THURSDAY 21 NOVEMBER 6 – 8 pm**

*"It has consequences. If it wasn't there, we wouldn't be here."*

*-Peter Higgs, Nobel Prize-winning Physicist, on the Higgs boson particle*

Matt Johnson's second solo show at Alison Jacques Gallery is alive with plays on materials and fusions of physical and subject matter, but its overriding premise is decidedly simple: Time. Whether working with recycled old-growth redwood, carving million-year-old granite, or casting bronze to resemble fresh Styrofoam, this body of works is imbued with a curious combination of excavating the new while reanimating the ancient.

Johnson's sculptures have always been marked by a restless nature, one that exhibits an ongoing struggle to bridge a conversation between the present and the past. This is evident through his use of references to canonical classical sculpture where traditional sculptural materials and those in their natural form are sifted through a contemporary lens. Not only does his work point to the origins of what it means to make a sculpture in the 21st Century – to put one rock on top of another, to approach an understanding of human knowledge by pointing to metaphors between meaning and material – but there persists in it a questioning of what one may learn from a collective history of research, trial and error, poetry and imagination.

In the main gallery space Johnson has created a sixteen-foot long, almost ten-foot tall model of an Apatosaurus dinosaur in sections of salvaged old-growth Californian redwood, which, crucially to the artist, is one of the contemporary subspecies of trees that coexisted with dinosaurs. The figure looms down at you but, however dramatic its large frame, it is unthreatening: a scaling up of the kind of children's flatpack puzzle one finds in museum gift shops and enlarged to the approximate scale of a baby dinosaur.

In the adjacent room the artist's battered old yellow bicycle appears to have sunken into a rock. This ostensibly impossible embedding represents a material infusion – a warping of metal and ancient Arizona granite that through some time-accelerated osmosis have taken on each other's positions in space and time. Granite appears elsewhere in the show, in the form of a 16-inch carved nose that appears to be the missing relic of a colossal figure. Johnson carved the nose from a granite stone leaving the backside raw and uncarved, implying this feature was broken off. Lichen appears to have taken growth on the raw stone, suggesting this was no recent severing.

Johnson's invested research in sculpture of the past finds its latest incarnations in re-workings of *Lion Attacking a Horse* from the Capitoline Museums, Rome, and an 18th Century sculpture of a python wrestling with a bull by celebrated French 'animalier' Antoine-Louis Barye. These are re-carvings not exact copies, borne of Johnson's respect and admiration for the originals. They are depictive of the constant fight with which living organisms, including humans, struggle to survive – a battle against time in which the end is inevitable. He chose to carve these noble beasts in Styrofoam but their final realisations are in fact cast in bronze, re-presenting that most elevated sculptural metal as a ubiquitous material of the present. The seeming contradictions between bronze and foam bring to light a counterintuitive lesson in longevity; in that the foam's unfortunate inability to degrade, potentially remaining for millions of years, means it merely breaks down into tiny white dots that litter the oceans and are consumed at great cost by actual wildlife.

That sense of vulnerability and fragility is most evinced in this exhibition by sculptures Johnson has apparently created from crumpled balls of paper that could've been sourced from any waste-paper bin. They are more than casual three-dimensional doodles though: one a rigorously modernist composition, the other a simple arch. But, while that most fundamental of constructions has for millennia epitomized physical stability, in this instance it seems to be teetering on the brink of toppling at the slightest nudge, as fleeting as the discarded ideas it was constructed from. Knowing that Johnson's 'paper' is in fact meticulously rendered from painted brass, adds another layer of contradiction, which only heightens this feeling of temporality.

*33 Piece Kumiki* is a large minimal interlocking wooden sculpture created without glue or nails. Kumiki, the Japanese word for 'to join wood together', is also commonly known as a small wooden toy for children and originates from 17<sup>th</sup> Century Japan. On first inspection its symmetrical form looks to be made of stacked square blocks but is the result of 33 pieces of precise carpentry and interlocking joinery, which Johnson has significantly re-scaled. The puzzle's architectural elegance and resulting armature of symmetry allows the form to increase in size and complexity with the addition of more pieces to a potential scale of infinity.

Matt Johnson was born in New York in 1978, and lives and works in Los Angeles. He trained in the New York Studio Program, NY, Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD, and the University of California Los Angeles, CA. He has exhibited widely in such international venues as the Hydra Workshop, Hydra, Greece (2011), The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2009 and 2005); The Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2007); and Astrup Fearnley, Oslo, Norway (2005; touring venues included Bard College, New York, NY; Serpentine Gallery, London, UK; Reykjavik Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland; and Songzhuan Art Center, Beijing, China). Recent solo exhibitions have included 303 Gallery, New York (2012) and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (2011).

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