

Interview with Xavier Mascaro

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Unmade beds and dissected animals are some of the ways in which sculpture has – thanks to the Young British Artists – come to us in recent years. So we might think that metalwork-based sculpture is a thing of the past. With his forthcoming exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery, Spanish sculptor Xavier Mascaró is about to change that perception – and some others.

London Calling: What started your interest in metalwork?

Xavier Mascaró: Since my childhood I have always been fascinated by metalwork, from ancient sculptures and tools that I would see in museums to industrial machinery. I love how metal ages, how time leaves an imprint on it recording traces of blows, oxidation, etc.

LC: Do you have a favourite form of metalwork and, if so, what is it and what is its special attraction for you?

XM: I am specially attracted by the processes of metal casting. The fact that a molten metal is poured in a mould, and after this brief action – some sort of cataclysm takes place in a matter of seconds – there is a form where previously there was nothing, is very suggestive to me. Further, the fact that the cast piece needs to be unearthed from the mould is an appealing metaphor of the birth of a sculpture.

LC: What sort of artistic training have you had?

XM: I am self taught. When I decided that I wanted to become an artist – at the age of 13 – I started by doing etchings using acid in my bedroom, following the indications of a book that I had bought about the technique. Later I got my degree in Fine Arts at the University of Barcelona, but I never attended the courses (I went two weeks in the five-year duration of the programme) because I didn't like the atmosphere there. So I spent my time painting on my own.

Years later I decided to start to cast iron, so I went to an industrial foundry and watched them

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work. The process that I saw (especially the way moulds were used in industrial casting techniques) would not have worked for me, so I developed a different version of the process which I still use now.

Every time that I am attracted to a new material, I like to understand the way it has been used in the past and what its qualities are. Then I experiment with it, so that I find my own personal way of working with it.

LC: Do you do any other sort of artistic work?

XM: I draw and paint, although lately most of what I intend to create as paintings end up being 3D works...some sort of meal collage-reliefs on painted wooden panels.

I also use photography a lot, I use it make sketches and to think of future works, or just to capture something that I wish to remember. I have also worked on theatre sets. I designed two of them for the 'Centro Dramático Nacional' a few years ago and learned a lot from that experience.

LC: Do you think there may be a revival of interest in art with a demanding, technical side like metal-work?

XM: Yes. I think that for some years there has been a fascination with some new technologies, which is normal, it has always happened in art history in the past. When that happens the more traditional media might lose some of its attraction for the audience. But it is a temporary effect. It will always be possible to do something authentic and interesting with a piece of paper and a pencil.

The same thing happens with some traditional ways of producing forms in sculpture, such as pouring molten iron or bronze in a mould, or hammering a sheet of metal. I believe there is an intrinsic quality in a work that has been crafted through a process that enhances the natural properties of the elements it is made from. Through ages craftsmen were able to master materials in order to produce exceptional objects.

Every now and then at some point there is a need – I think that each one of us experiences it at an individual level – to forget all that legacy and start over from a new perspective, try new things, new techniques, new materials. But today I feel that the art scene is rich and plural enough so that every genuine form of expression eventually finds its way to the public independently from the media and technology used to produce it.

LC: Tell us more about the forthcoming Saatchi exhibition. What are the themes behind its content?

XM: Most of my works speak about the duality of presence and absence. It is something I believe that sculpture has the ability to express particularly well: you find yourself in front of an object, with a physical presence, created by someone who is not there, but you can still feel the author's presence in that object.

At the Saatchi Gallery I will be showing in one of the galleries a group of 26 iron and bronze boats, which I call 'Departure' (which is the general title of my exhibition). They represent the passing of time, always flowing, always leaving things behind, as some sort of metaphor of our lives.

In another gallery next to this one, there will be a group of showcases, containing aluminium masks, and five large iron heads, which are again an allusion to presence and absence. There will be also two sculptures which represent couples: one is a 'Sacred Couple', composed by a Shaman and a Goddess made in iron and aluminium, while the other one is a small embrace in glazed ceramic and iron. 'Couple' as a subject is something that in my mind refers to regeneration, passion, stability and strength.

In addition to this indoor installation – there will also be an outdoor installation: 'Guardians', consisting of five large figures – almost 10 feet tall – in iron, that had previously been exhibited at the Palais Royal in Paris, at the Paseo del Prado in Madrid and at the IVAM in Valencia.

LC: You travel a lot. How do you manage to fit your work in with this?

XM: Travelling is part of my way of life and work. Many of my new ideas come while I move from one place to another. I get to know other cultures and their art, but I also get inspired by many tiny details, things such as the different ways in which drying clothes are hanged, electrical wires are attached to poles, fences or balconies are made, etc, etc, in different places around the world.

Through the years I have developed the habit of being well organized. When it comes to casing sculptures, for instance, there is usually a long process that I need to follow from the first sketches that I make until a finished work. It might take up to a year, so I usually work in several pieces at the same time, some of which I might have started months (or years) ago and others that I am just starting to imagine. In fact, I make many of the drafts and small-scale models while I travel.

LC: How did you become involved with the Saatchi Gallery?

XM: I have been following the exhibitions programme at the Saatchi Gallery for several years, I find it very interesting. When I am in London, it's one of the places I would never miss, since it offers an overview of contemporary art from different perspectives, showing emerging artists from all parts of the world. There are several interesting artists whose work I have discovered through shows at the gallery.

Some months ago I was offered the possibility to exhibit at the Saatchi and I thought it would be the best opportunity I could imagine for my first UK solo show. I have always wanted to see my work in such an interesting context.

LC: The English have a reputation for a being a bit suspicious of art and 'artiness'. How do you think that we will react to your work?

XM: I believe the English audience to be a very sophisticated one, with a permanent access to one of the world's best cultural offerings. I am confident that my work will be understood, and that the public will feel some kind of connection with it.

LC: Finally, what do you like about London's cultural scene?

XM: As I see it, there is not just one cultural scene in London, but several. In addition to some of the best museums in the world – such as the British Museum, the National Gallery or the Tate Modern – constantly offering excellent exhibitions, there are plenty other smaller institutions and many galleries with a wide range of interests. All these combined makes London's cultural life an amazing mixture, vibrant and diverse.

'Departures' – The Xavier Mascaro exhibition runs from 3 September – 5 October. For further information, including ticket sales, [please click here](#).