









# Nathan Henton

## On Carving, Energy Transfer and Ritournellising Shapes

*Left page: English artist Nathan Henton photographed by Jessica E McElligott (@jess.mce\_)*

**Hi Nathan, thank you for doing this interview with us. We like to start our conversations with a look into the past, to where it all began. Do you remember the first time you got in touch with visual art? And at what point in your life did sculpture enter your practice?**

Looking back I remember a lot of my early childhood being filled with creativity and art – like most children I wanted to draw and paint anytime that I wasn't climbing the furniture. Specifically, I remember painting my mom's address book in a lovely purplish pink nail varnish which she was not so pleased about. I also remember writing a series of short stories about a dog that went travelling in a hot air balloon. Once I went to highschool I thought I had to grow up, pursue academia but luckily I picked up a camera when I was around 14 or so, and kind of escaped into that hobby. My friends and I would make stupid YouTube videos, short film projects for school, and I would be the one with a camera in his hand all the time on every school trip and after school hang out – it was such an accessible pursuit and I could lose myself in it. Sculpture didn't come to me until years later during my uni exchange semester, and the love and passion for 3D form was further cemented with a trip to New York City in 2019 where I got to see works by Brancusi at the MoMA.

**You studied Fine Art at the Falmouth School of Art, where you graduated in 2021 with a BFA. Can you tell us a bit more about your decision to study art and about your experience at university?**

As I said, photography was the first creative pursuit that I got into and actually it was what I applied to Falmouth to

do and I studied it for 2 years before switching to Fine Art. Prior to going to uni I wasn't even really aware that going to study art was an option let alone photography. Flash forward to starting my studies, I'm absolutely obsessed with creativity. I couldn't believe all you had to do was the thing that you love. I needed that freedom of expression so desperately at that time. It was such a privilege.

**I also read that you went on an Erasmus Exchange in the Netherlands...**

That's right, I was lucky enough to be one of the final few students to go on an Erasmus Exchange before the UK left the EU and I studied for a semester at The Royal Academy of Art (KABK) in The Hague, Netherlands. This semester abroad in hindsight is the thing that cemented my ability to be a professional artist. The amount of work that was expected of us at the academy was intense in comparison to Falmouth, and the modules of the course were multidisciplinary – I could be studying socratic dialogues and Civil Society on a Monday and then completing my graphic design and film studies modules on a Friday with fine art photography and technical modules all mixed up in the middle.

During this time I took on an extra module where I started my first ever sculpture using the technique of direct carving – pioneered in the general consciousness of the UK through the sculptor Barbara Hepworth. Carving without any idea where you were going and the physical removal of material was a poignant experience for me. I returned from that Exchange gristled and lean after months of a steady diet of black coffee, very little food, extreme stress and





*Bowl #4, 2024*  
*Sweet Chestnut, 262 x 198 x 50 mm*

riding a bicycle everywhere. I was changed. Evolved compared to my peers in Falmouth. I attacked this next semester at Falmouth with a newfound chutzpah, exploring this expanded practice and through a work experience module assisting the artist Abigail Reynolds, I found, through discussion with her, that I was at a fork in the road. I couldn't let this not be explored. I changed to Fine Art.

Changing courses and going back to the beginning of second year brought out my obsessive nature and I got involved with casting sculptures, carving sculptures, learning about these different materials and the skills and tools of the trade. The course itself offered the space for that learning and approach to happen which I am thankful for, and it ultimately set the foundation of my sculptural practice. As they say, the rest is history.

I graduated in 2021 after my final year being messed around by the covid-19 pandemic. Not having a public degree show and no opportunity to show in London meant I had to just start making it on my own whilst maintaining a part-time job and living cheap. It has been a slow pro-

cess. How to be outside of university, how to fund your own practise, and to maintain a practise amongst the rest of life's requirements. Something the painter Maggi Hambling says which resonates deeply with me is "make your art your friend, something you can turn to when you're happy, sad or angry, no matter what, you can always come to it". I know whatever happens, whatever success I find, I will always make art.

**I'd like to take your artist statement as a starting point for our conversation about your work. You write: "I want to extend myself, expend myself, into the seemingly inanimate. I want to create haptic 'ritournellising' shapes and voids within space." Can you please expand on that and tell us more about your work?**

I wrote my artist statement to display the act of carving itself as an integral part of the sculptures - the intensity, the discipline and catharsis that I found through action. It was an active pursuit to make a sculpture, one that would push me. And I think I am investigating the idea that there is an energy transfer between the maker and the material and also pushing the point that nothing actually is inanimate or still, there is a vibration, there is a life force to everything. Maybe it's only through my interaction or the viewer's that this energy is revealed which is referenced in that second part of the statement where I talk about the haptic ritournellising nature of sculpture. Ritournellising is a kind of made-up word that is a reference to orchestras and the overwhelming sound that can be created by many instruments or chorus. Sculpture, and art, is a relational thing. You observe and see how it makes you feel or what it makes you think of. This strange shape could say something entirely different to each person. The process of making that sculpture might have beaten out some kind of past trauma or revelation, but then the work itself can just be something beautiful to look at.

***"In a world so full of turmoil and evil, maybe the simple act of creating something beautiful is political and a form of resistance."***

I also read that the focus of your practice is on the exploration of shape, form and void within space, as well as the haptic phenomenological viewing experience of sculpture...

If we look at one of my works, *Untitled (soft side, sharp side)*, we can start to explore the idea of shape, form and void and what that does to the viewing experience. Firstly let's look at the title itself, pieces are initially *Untitled* because all of these works first and foremost are something that can be accessed aesthetically just from a 3D relativity but after that fact there is also me, what I get from that piece or how I reference the sculpture or what it did for me in the making, or what it maybe looks like - this is what I put in the brackets. Works can look very beautiful and have no sculptural reference to what they are about for me personally as the maker. Sculptures have been about breakups, the death of my mother, spirituality or even animals and architecture. *Untitled (soft side, sharp side)*, hits the nail on the head where it has two sides to the sculpture and the viewer can see how those two sides differ in feeling.



*Untitled (soft side, sharp side)*, 2024  
Sweet Chestnut, 257 x 145 x 50 mm

***“Imagine running your hands over the curves or feeling the sharpness of an angle. I’m playing with that dichotomy.”***

There is a materiality to the work and then there is a conceptual side and all of that is brought together with the sculptures which mediate that experience and these different intrinsic values. This is all part of the phenomenological experience.

**You mainly work with wood – what do you treasure about this material and what types of wood do you mostly work with?**

I worked with wood initially because it was super accessible, something I could start carving straight away. Then I began to learn the different sides to it as a material. There are woods that hit back when you try to carve and there are others that accept the chisel very well, taking shape almost effortlessly. No two bits of wood are the same; a particular grain structure or splits within the wood can change where a sculpture is going. Generally speaking, I work most with Oak for a lot of my sculptures as it's clean and recognizable. I also make use of some locally felled timber such as Sweet Chestnut and Lime - a much more environmentally conscious source.

**One of our favourite questions is about the creative process—what does yours look like, how do you bring your ideas to life?**

The creative process takes many different approaches for me. Starting out with direct carving was a great learning point for improv and understanding shape, allowing ideas just to flow through you. Now I tend to sketch specific shapes that I'm inspired by or particular voids or even just a profile. There's a reliance on the initial steps of processing wood to provide the space for the idea to come, the inspiration can strike at the most random times and you just have to try and get it written down or sketched out before it disappears.

I definitely subscribe to the idea of *The Muse*, presented by Steven Pressfield. There is this creative force and when you create the space and you show up for the work, this creative force will make itself known to you or move through you and provide an idea.

***“If you don’t grab that idea, it will go to somebody else. Experiencing an idea is almost electric as you find a direction – a finish line.”***

Then actually making the work itself is repetitive and calm, a space for rumination, a full integration of mind, body and spirit, creating a transcendental flow state. Once the work’s complete you might be happy or might not but it has made space for the next project to commence.

**Creating your pieces must be a very physical activity and experience for you. Could you speak a bit about your fascination with sculpting and about how it makes you feel?**

The physicality of making, the graft, the hard work and monotonous repetition of shapes like the sun rays I create...it’s all par for the course. You do that work, embrace the process and sometimes you reach somewhere just for a minute that is all encompassing and transcendent. There’s plenty of times where I have been working, music blaring and between hits of the chisel, I am dancing, ecstatic in the present moment. Carving is such an interesting practice because you are literally creating space through the removal of material, out of destruction something appears which in its own right is a cut into space, inhabiting or filling a void that was once empty.

**Speaking about work, is there anything you’re currently working on that you’d like to share with us?**

Currently, I’m working on a new project called “after the fall” which is a working title, it could be changed to “after the crash”. I enjoy the reference to the religious story of the fall of Man and the opportunity to rise but there are

also the implications of the word “crash” which are interesting, time will tell. This project will be focusing on an experience I had back in February where I was unfortunately the victim of a hit and run accident which left me recovering for the next 2 months unable to carve and re-kindling my relationship with photography and the multidisciplinary nature of my practise.

I think this was a turning point in my practice that needed to happen and this time it happened through an intense traumatic experience where I was lucky to come away alive. Now there is only one thing to do, process it through my creativity just like I have with any other experience – like my sculpture series *The Black Water*, which was about my time fixing up and helping sail a hundred year old Luger called Ibis along the Cornish coastline and over to the Isles of Scilly. I hope this project brings together the multiple disciplines that I am interested in and is a break away from the obsessive practice of only sculpture that I’ve been locked into for the last few years.

I have also recently acquired some antique oak from the local Cathedral that I may use to make a small sculpture series, highlighting the found material quality of this Oak, leaving the classic dark stain that is everywhere within the



*Untitled (Archimandrite), 2023  
Lime, 1030 x 360 x 75 mm*

cathedral and any of the bolts attached or already carved shapes due to the classical church joinery, and seeing how that interacts with the abstract carved forms I create. I look forward to that project coming to fruition as it'll be a fun process of creating sculptures out of specifically dimensioned starting blocks originally created for furniture around a cathedral like the ends of pews and tables etc. instead of my standard cuboid starting blocks.

**You are based in Cornwall, UK, and I'd like to ask you about your life as an emerging artist there. What does a "typical" day look for you and what are some of the opportunities and challenges you face?**

A typical day for me, if I'm not working my part-time job (which funds my practice) then I am trying to wake up early, have maybe a little too much coffee and get in the workshop - on a good day this creativity can run for 4 to 6 hours. Currently, more often than not, I spend a few hours doing / seeking out applications to open calls, exhibitions, residencies and grants - which are wholly unsuccessful, such is the way of a struggling artist trying to break into the industry. Being based in Cornwall is integral to my way of being and my art practice but this does come with struggles like getting work shown or sold; however it's just an opportunity to apply even more of a DIY approach to getting your work out there. Maybe I'll do an exhibition in a laundrette or give sculptures away for free to local restaurants for peak tourist season.

**And as we're approaching the end of our conversation, let's wrap this up with five last questions. First, there is a lot of talk about "finding your own voice" in the art world, more so when you're getting started as an artist. Is that something that has been important to you?**

For me, I always found that my own voice came through very easily because I only ever did what is original to me, my projects throughout my time at university and post uni have always just come from a place of genuine intrigue. I never copied anybody to create an idea, I simply made what I thought of making and that organically has created my style / voice. It's not something I think about. I just want to make stuff. The process is everything.

**Second, what have you been interested in or inspired by lately?**

I have an ongoing interest in theology and philosophy, learning about humanity's history with religion and spirituality and all of these kinds of mystical concepts, hermetics and the kabbalah. I think this interest stems from my own spiritual journey through this world that seems so separated and dysfunctional, and sometimes without realising it my art practice is the answer I'm looking for and the way I subsequently interact with the world around me. Also, I have been really getting back into electronic music since the crash, something about the positive force found through the music has been so essential in this new chapter of life.

**Next, when you are the viewer and not the author of an artwork, what is it that you're looking for in a piece of art? Which works are the ones that draw you closer?**

Something with tangible feeling, an energy that has been fixed in place. Something that makes the unsaid, the unseen, viewable and experiential. I love anything that articulates what words can't quite grasp; like the cacophony of noise within songs by METZ or the scraping marks displayed on the 1942 sculpture "Large Tragic Head" by Jean Fautier. It doesn't draw me in, it makes me melt.

**If there was only one thing that people could take away from your work, what would you want that to be?**

Energy.

**And last one, please complete the following sentence:**

*I believe that art has the power to...*

...alchemise the seemingly inert or inconsequential.

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that idea, it will go  
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Experiencing an  
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– Nathan Henton



Up: *Untitled (Nascent)*, 2024, Lime, 220 x 140 x 50 mm (left) / *Untitled (Cirice)*, 2024, Oak, 205 x 110 x 45 mm (right)  
Down: *Untitled (ffb#2)*, 2024, Oak, 230 x 130 x 50 mm (left) / *Untitled (sun rays)*, 2024, Oak, 170 x 140 x 20 mm (right)