

EAST CITY ART



Wade Carey Interviews Academy 2011 Artist Jonathan Monaghan

July 27, 2011



Copyright Jonathan Monaghan. Courtesy of the artist.

My third interview with a featured artist from Academy 2011 took place on July 16th 2011. I interviewed Maryland University MFA graduate Jonathan Monaghan via Skype video from his current studio in Vermont. We talked about his experiences pursuing a BFA as well as an MFA, his interest in myth and religion and his selection as a featured artist in Academy 2011 at Conner Contemporary Art. His selection in the Academy Show is "Dauphin 007." A Vimeo preview of the work can be seen [here](#). The 11th annual Academy group show of work from regional BFA and MFA students opened July 9th and runs through August 22. Conner Contemporary Art is located at 1358 Florida Avenue, NE. The transcript of this interview has been edited for concision and clarity.

Wade Carey (WC): Oddly enough, because we met, and I wasn't sure whether we were going to do the interview at the opening, I was in a mad rush and I had gone through older interviews that I have seen of your work and I also took a look at your website. I am sensitive that a website isn't a person's artistic oeuvre. It is just an indication, a glimpse. I did not think of it as really how to experience your art, needless to say. So, at the opening, I thought that I would just take my phone which has a webcam thing in it and just grab you and put you against a white wall and turn the webcam on and then just ask you a bunch of questions kind of like rapid fire for the amusing value that they might have. Let me start by sharing with you those eight questions. They were the questions that I was most intrigued to know what you thought about.

Jonathan Monaghan (JM): Okay, great.

WC: Do you work standing up or sitting down? How do you attempt to counteract the dehumanizing effects of that time when you are not walking through real space, that behavior inherent in long hours of digital modeling and countless other computer interface activities?

JM: Just recently, I built a standing desk for myself. It increases my productivity a lot. It gets me out of the virtual world a little bit more by forcing me to work fast and efficiently.

WC: Is it something that you think about? A lot of people think about work/life balance. I would think, in some cases, with an artist like you, that it would be virtual space/meat space balance.

JM: When I am not working on the computer, I try to enjoy and take in as much of the world around me as possible, as I think any other artist does. I travel a lot for my work. That is very important. I have spent a lot of time in Europe, really trying to eat up as much art, architecture, and culture as possible.

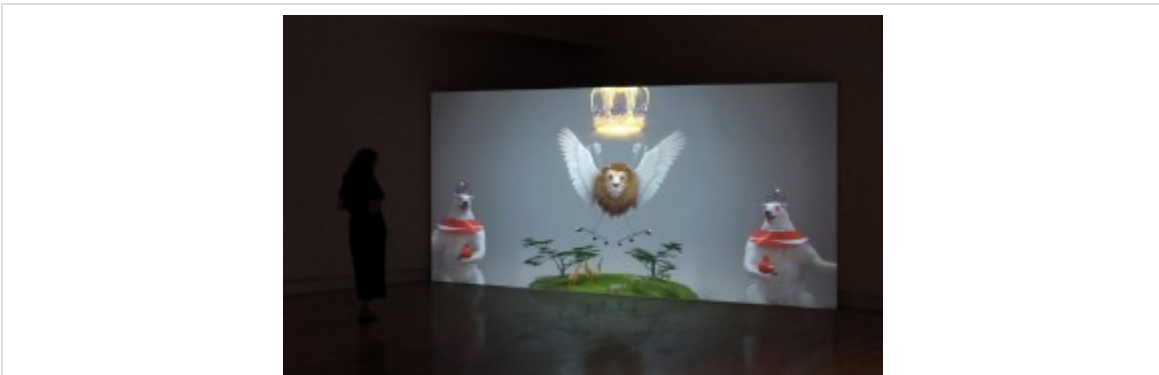
WC: How did you first hear about Conner Contemporary?

JM: When I first moved to Washington, everyone around me was going to openings. Conner definitely was one of the most prominent in D.C. They show some really great artists.

WC: How did you first meet Leigh and/or Jamie?

JM: I remember them coming around the studios at Maryland in previous years to look at MFA work. I came very much to appreciate their taste in art. I went to each of the Academy shows in the past two years, which always shows solid work.

WC: How did you learn that one of your pieces had been selected for this year's show?



(Installation) Jonathan Monaghan, Dauphin 007, 2011, computer animation. Copyright Jonathan Monaghan. Courtesy of the artist.

JM: They had attended the thesis show that I had up at the University of Maryland. They had checked out all of the candidates work, and then they asked me to show my film, I was very excited about that.

WC: Have you had contact from anyone as a result of the show? I suppose you have received lots of congratulations.

JM: The Academy show was great exposure. The opening was packed. The [\(e\)merge](#) panel discussion before the show was packed. Being a part of that is something that I am very grateful for.

WC: Are you in planning mode right now, for being able to go anywhere soon?

JM: Right now, I just drove up to Vermont. I am at a residency program here. There is a big mountain right outside my window. I am surrounded by a lot of farms. It is quite a change of pace from New York. I am here for about six weeks, at [Burlington City Arts Center's Seven Below Arts Initiative Artist-In-Residence Program](#). I will be living with two other artists in a really great barn, with studio space and everything. I will probably be developing a new animated film.

WC: What happens after you leave the fellowship?

JM: I probably will be going back to Brooklyn to work with a 3-D printing company.

WC: The same one that you've been working with already, the one that got a piece of yours on "The Colbert Report?"

JM: Yes, for the past month and a half I have been an artist in residence at MakerBot Industries.

WC: It was amazing. I remembered the piece from that episode when I saw it briefly on your website. The sculpture looked like something that definitely bore your traits.



Jonathan Monahan, As Seen On TV, 2011, 3-D modeled thermoplastic. Copyright Jonathan Monaghan. Courtesy of the artist.

JM: The same things that I make in my animations can be printed in plastic on a 3-D printer. That is what I have been exploring for the past month and a half.

WC: Do you have any favorite saints?

JM: Yes. Saint George. I like the imagery that you always see in medieval paintings about him.

WC: Because he is triumphant? At triumph over adversity, over Satan?

JM: He is always killing some kind of dragon monster. That could mean a lot of things once you get into the mythology. But for me, I simply enjoy the imagery and art associated with them. Some of my favorite paintings are the intense depictions of saints by the Spanish Baroque masters like Ribera and Zurbarán.

WC: In general, knowing the things that you have said in other interviews about your background, I wondered whether or not you could imagine laboring on a project figuring in the story of Saint Sebastian? Any Old Testament types, like Jeremiah?

JM: When dealing with these mythical figures, I look at all of them, from western culture, from eastern culture. I am trying to find the things that are universal about them. I try to pick out those major elements and reinterpret them in my work.

WC: Like Celtic legend, and others?

JM: Yes, everything. I have read about myths from all over the place. I pick out aspects that intrigue me and try to reinvent those in the digital world.

WC: Here is another prepared question. How did you learn about the Alibi Club and what claimed your interest enough in it to create a work of art using its edifice?



Jonathan Monaghan, Alibi, 2011, animation still. Copyright Jonathan Monaghan. Courtesy of the artist.

JM: In my work, I use imagery that relates to institutional power. Things like crowns, Gothic architecture, heraldry, coats of arms. I started re-imagining the very elite social clubs in New York, San Francisco and Washington, DC. The most powerful and influential people meet at these places. I was interested in the notion of secret power. I did research, looking up places all over the country. The Alibi Club was particularly interesting because it was in Washington, DC. I spent a lot of time developing my work there. It is a very nondescript building in the middle of a bunch of commercial offices. You don't realize what it is or what it is doing there but it seems a lot of important stuff goes on there. I wanted to bring that out and explore that notion of secret, elite power.

WC: You could not be more correct. We don't have a Skull and Bones in Washington but I think the Alibi Club comes close. You come up the escalator out of a Metro station downtown and there it is, like a little house that time forgot, amongst the bigger office buildings, all around it. When I saw it among some of your newer pieces, I was really taken with it.

JM: Then there is the Metropolitan Club in New York. It is the same idea. It is a very exclusive private club, mainly for powerful men. I used to walk by it a lot when I went to school in Manhattan. I was intrigued, not knowing what was going on in there. I would sneak looks through the windows and see ornate stuff inside. There are no signs, you don't know what it is but it has a lot of security. There is a certain feeling to all of that I am trying to explore in this work.

WC: I assume that it will eventually be an animation.

JM: Yes, I am definitely going to use that imagery in some kind of animated way. I have not figured it out yet but I am working on it here at the residency.

WC: Next question. Do you sing?

JM: No.

WC: Next question. Do you have any talent as an oral tradition story teller? Do you tell stories to young relatives, nieces, nephews and the like?

JM: No. I don't think I am very good at that which is why perhaps I like the 3-D animation. It allows me to plan things out a bit better.

WC: I guess that is why I was asking the questions. It seems to me that you are telling stories through the animations.

JM: I think animation is a medium that lends itself to the traditions of storytelling, but in a lot of ways, my work subverts that. I come up with animations that are non-narrative in a traditional sense. They are simply doing something different than what you would see typically in a Pixar movie, or something. In that sense, they have lineage to early surrealist film.

WC: Yes, I definitely can see that. My next question comes after having read the essay that you wrote on Marshall McLuhan's perspective in twenty-first century media. How, if at all, has your sense of a digital endgame changed since you wrote that essay?



(Detail) Jonathan Monaghan, Dauphin 007, 2011, graphic animation. Copyright Jonathan Monaghan. Courtesy of the artist.

JM: McLuhan pointed out that technology is not a neutral player in our lives. Technology shapes our perceptions of reality, history, identity. I think that in my work I deal with these distorted perceptions. I do that by referencing a range of subject matter, antiquated references to Western culture, eagles, coats of arms. I conflate them with elements from our more modern, commercial, plastic environment, such as the Target logo, medical devices. By doing that, I am trying to enter a dialog with these notions and I feel working with 3-D digital media is an appropriate avenue for doing that.

WC: You were well directed in your artistic inspirations from an early age, if I am correct. You might answer this next question simply or with more elucidation. Why did you pursue a Master of Fine Arts Degree?

JM: At a very early age, I got into 3-D modeling and video game design, so I went to college for it. The particular college I went to, the New York Institute of Technology, focused on computer graphics but they also taught you a lot about art history, painting, sculpture, contemporary art. I had a big draw into that but I was still planning to work for Pixar or make commercials or video games. But the work I was making never fit that. It was always a bit more extreme, a bit more bizarre. Something in me wanted to keep doing that. I found a venue for it within the context of contemporary art. I began looking at contemporary artists more. Particularly, the films of Matthew Barney were a big inspiration to me because he was able to create that hermetically sealed surreal world. It was something I felt I could do with my animation skills and so I began to pursue my graduate degree in studio art.

WC: How many schools were you interested in? Why did you choose the one you got in to?

JM: I got in to a bunch of really good schools, for instance, the School of Visual Arts in New York, Parsons. But I felt it would be good to get out of New York and try a school that gave you three years, and a nice studio. I wanted a place that would let you just figure it out on your own.

WC: Have you found any sources of particular inspiration or any individuals within the school, on the faculty, who gave you particular useful training?

JM: The University of Maryland attracts a lot of great sculpture students. I was partially interested in trying to bring my work out of the computer. I wanted to see if I could try to incorporate a sort of sculptural dialog with my animated work. I think that was something I was really able to explore at the University of Maryland.

WC: The Sculpture Department helped you. Apart from that, you were working pretty much on your own? Were there any critiques of particular value to you as you were coming up at the end of your first, second year, that kind of thing?

JM: I think all critiques are useful. I think any perspective on your work that is different from your own is very valuable, not only from teachers but from your peers. I got a lot of insight into my work at the University of Maryland. It certainly improved it and sent it in a direction that I am happy with.

WC: Can you give me a "for instance" that you remember?

JM: I think when you develop a large body of work and you work on projects that are time-intensive, and that take a while, insight and advice becomes more fluid. It is hard to pinpoint how the things you see or the things you hear change your working method but there is no doubt they absolutely affect it.

WC: No pivotal moments, but a line of influence that helped to curve and create nuance in the work that you finally produced?

JM: Absolutely, yes.

WC: You certainly would have been able to tap into political power here, as opposed to the power of commerce all around you in New York. In one of your interviews, I read that you described living in Washington, DC, as a very positive thing. You are from New York. I wonder, is that why you are back living in New York?

JM: I am back in New York because of the residency I did at MakerBot Industries, the 3-D printing company. Right now, I am in Vermont. I am not quite sure where I will end up next. That seems to be the way artists tend to work.

WC: You go where the opportunity to work exists and hope and hope that there will be another opportunity. The last place that I saw you to be represented by a gallery was at Hamiltonian. Is that correct?

JM: Hamiltonian has a great fellowship program where they take on five artists each year and give them gallery representation for two years. It is a wonderful program. My two years are up now and I am grateful for an amazing time there.

WC: So, now an opportunity is out there for a gallery, if there is one.

JM: Yes, that is the whole point of the Hamiltonian program. It acts as a stepping stone for young artists, helping them to gain traction for additional gallery representation somewhere. I think they have done a tremendous job with that. The opportunity to show your work, as a young artist, especially one still in school, is really insightful.

WC: Will you be coming to the (e)merge fair here in September?

JM: Yes, I very much look forward to checking it out.

WC: Are there any other art fairs, or anything else of that sort, that you are planning to do? Is it fair to say that it is not really your thing? Would you say that you engage in product-based art?

JM: There are lots of artists who deal with time-based media, video or performance, and there also are lots of people who want to support those artists. Galleries can create avenues for artists to sell something related to their work, even though we might not make a tangible thing.

WC: While you are in Vermont, are you going to be working exclusively on the Metropolitan Club animation, or are there other things that are popping up that we should know about?

JM: Moving into a new environment is going to influence what I work on. This particular program is very open. They just want you to grow as an artist. I have some ideas about the aforementioned Metropolitan Club animation, but I am also looking forward to coming up with something new and trying something I have never done before. We will see what happens and see how that works.

WC: Well, there are lots of mountain spirits there to help you with that.

JM: Yes, there are lots of mountains. Maybe I will go hiking.

WC: Maybe you will slay a snake, if not a dragon.

JM: Or a mosquito.

WC: Yes, that would be an interesting premise, a saga about mosquitoes. I am out of questions. I am very happy that we were able to talk using Skype. I would rather be there with you in Vermont. It looks beautiful, even via Skype.