The Less Content, The Better

A Conversation with

Charles Long

Pet Sounds, 2012. Powder-coated aluminum, fiberglass, and electronics, approx. 4500 sq. ft. View of work at Madison Square Park, NY.

JAMES EWING. COURTESY MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Pet Sounds, 2012. Powder-coated aluminum, fiberglass, and electronics, detail view.

Charles Long lovingly stroked *Pet Sounds*, the music-making, pastel-colored shapes that he created for Madison Square Park, as guests at an opening night dinner awaited his arrival. His "kid" side was showing, but the artist who spoke to me a week earlier was fully adult, neatly classifying, comparing, and justifying the three stages of his career with psychoanalytic rigor: the youth filled with investigative enthusiasm, the "dark night of the soul" in his Los Angeles River pieces, and his present desire to achieve "primary experience" and "presence" in *Pet Sounds*. Complementing this outdoor work, Long's recent indoor work, shown at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery and at the Frieze Art Fair, uses resins on frames to create ethereal and inventive abstractions that seem without antecedent.

Long's career includes solo and group exhibitions at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery since the 1990s, important group exhibitions at the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, and participation in the 1997 and 2008 Whitney Biennials. He has received the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Award of Merit Medal for Sculpture, and his work appears in many important collections, including the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Fogg Art Museum, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Walker Art Center. Later this year, Long will participate in the Nasher Sculpture Center's 10th anniversary exhibition and programs.

Jan Garden Castro: *How did you pick the Beach Boys' album* Pet Sounds *(1966) as inspiration for your project?*
Charles Long: *Pet Sounds* was the first pop record to use the Electro-Theremin, an instrument played by proximity to the human body. In the Madison Square Park sculpture, the handrails turn into forms that are programmed to produce different vibrations and sounds when people pet the various parts.

For me, Brian Wilson's work is not just a pop music creation. He did everything out of a longing to connect with people. When he started working on *Pet Sounds*, there were song titles like "In My Childhood," which later became "I Know There's an Answer," and "And Then There Will Be World Peace," which became "Let's Go Away for a While." The work is experimental, introspective, and yet euphorically optimistic. When he conceived it, he told his wife, "I'm going to make the greatest rock album ever." He had been studying metaphysics and experimenting with LSD, which may account for the sense of self-examination, followed by the dissolving of the self and yearning for collective unity. Wilson said that he wanted to unify the LP as a whole, which is what makes it one of the first concept albums. He wanted to make a pop teen symphony filled with all kinds of magical sounds—dog whistles, which are inaudible to human ears, bicycle horns, Hawaiian instruments, and, of course, the Electro-Theremin. When I was a teen, I thought it was just surf music, which Hendrix, my then-hero, derided. Many years later, artist Kenny Goldsmith turned me on to it and then I got it—I understood it as art.

JGC: *How was* Pet Sounds *fabricated?*
CL: I made six-inch-high models out of clay and sent them to a fabricator in Brooklyn, where they were enlarged using a CNC machine into six-foot blobs. Just below their skin is a web of conductive mesh with leads that go to micro-controllers called arduinos; they interpret the signals and note their location. That information is sent to a mini-computer, which stores the sounds that I created, and these sounds are then relayed back to the skin, where a magnetic device turns the entire surface of the sculpture into a speaker—so, the vibrations are both felt and heard.

JAMES EWING, COURTESY MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY





Left: *3 To 1 In Groovy Green*, 1995. Lacquer on plastic, sound equipment, table, and sofa, 28 x 54 x 22 in. Right: *Bubble Gum Station*, 1995. Modeling clay, sound equipment, and furniture, 91 x 60 in. diameter.

The pink blob is a nod to *Bubble Gum Station*, part of "The Amorphous Body Study Center," my 1995 project with the band Stereolab. In that piece, you put on headphones to become physically attached, so there would be a communal experience with the sound, and as a consequence, it created a physically tethered group of bodies and sculpture. The gum was a metaphor. It's an amorphous body in your body that you shape with your mouth—an oral thing that you stick under the desk, a hidden vandalism and a repression reaction to the institutionalism of the actual body. But when gum is put on the top of the table, it is art. In the history of my work, there are other interactions with the body, such as the work I did with Merce Cunningham.
JGC: *In a February 2012* Bomb *interview, you talked about the three stages of your artistic career. Could we discuss the middle stage? Your river pieces attracted many viewers at the 2008 Whitney Biennial. What made this a "dark" period for you?*
CL: I took a break from the art world, left New York, and was living in Frogtown, a unique corner of Los Angeles, where the river burst up through the concrete encasement. The work made in the river and from scavenged detritus was part of a deliberate metaphysical journey of madness and clarity. For instance, one work made in the riverbed is called *Agnes Martin Kippenberger*. These artists were two kinds of models for me—one socially withdrawn and austere, looking at the ideal; the other a droll alcoholic having a great time skewering the serious art world. Each artist's work has a lot of life in it.

After five years on the L.A. River, I had become aware of long, elegant stains running down the sloped concrete embankments; they looked like Giacometti figures but were created by great blue herons. Having digested invasive Asian carp, the birds pooped in ways that looked like figures or animals, even the birds themselves. It was a time when Bush II had gone back for Iraq II. In my outrage, I turned the studio into a call center for Moveon.org. My river had lost its enchantment. It was the end of the city's digestive tract, where everything shitty went in. I traced the silhouettes of the bird poop figures; then, using garbage from the river mixed with papier-mâché and plaster, I shaped the forms of the bird excrements. The project culminated in my installation for the 2008 Whitney Biennial. At that point, it had become too toxic for me, and so had the river.
JGC: *Was that when you moved to Mount Baldy?*
CL: Yes. It's east of L.A. My house is up on a rock in the treetops. The beauty of it made me want to return to abstraction. Whenever I considered a reference to nature, it took away from my primary experience of nature but also from my art. I was impressed with the trees that Roxy Paine had made for Madison Square Park and how well they worked in the context. But I wanted abstract things that would be their own experiences, though with a similar connection to the park. Having said that, the blobs in the park do refer to my blobs of the '90s.

It's kind of hilarious that what I had hoped to burn into the public mind with the birdshit pieces, I've completely undone with the blobs. I like to think of my birdshit pieces as "inside" the blob—as though inside every Botero sculpture there's a Giacometti trying to get out. I move back and forth from the Buddhist idea of the hungry ghost that can't be fulfilled through any





Above: *Dancing on the Cutting Edge*, 2007. Installation from "Merce Cunningham: Dancing on the Cutting Edge, Part 2," MoCA, Miami. Left: *Agnes Martin Kippenberger*, 2005. Steel, concrete, and debris, 61 x 51 x 49 in.

kind of consumption—that's how I saw the birdshit pieces, as the undead—and these candy-colored forms that are like ripe fruit on a twisting vine. They're succulent, sensuous, and as you pet them, they respond to your presence. It's something you share with people in the park. The "bubble gum" blob is on top of the picnic table. The repressed thing (that was) under the table is now allowed on top of the table. Just as we are all animal forms underneath our clothing, these creatures in the park are essentially naked, so there is a sexual sensuousness to petting and eliciting a response.

JGC: *Did you undergo psychoanalysis or psychotherapy to help you gain insight into who you are and what you're doing?*

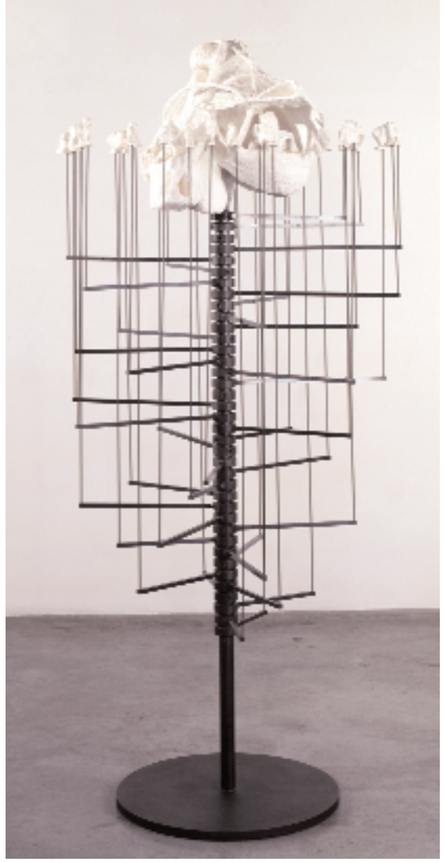
CL: I never underwent psychoanalysis, but, yes, gobs of therapy. Therapy helped me and has been a continual source of creative exploration. Coming in touch with your feelings is most of what goes on in therapy. I also think that being alone to make your own work is special in an age when so much creative production is collective. Getting in touch with your feelings is something you can work through in the silence of your studio. After difficult days in the studio, de Kooning would say, "I'm a terrible artist." Then he would reflect, "So, I'm a bad artist." You can look at people like Philip Guston and Agnes Martin, as well as Lucas Samaras—their neuroses fueled their work. Or take Brian Wilson. There's something beautiful about how an artist can expose the self in private, and then it goes public. The backstory is not important. Ironically, we are creating tons of backstory in this interview. I love stories, but the artwork has to go out there, and viewers have to discover their own experience undirected. That's why abstraction is so powerful for me: the less content, the better.

It took me three years to finalize my Madison Square Park project, and a lot of that time was spent hanging out in the park, observing and considering the challenges of public art and how abstraction works in that context. When I came to my final decision, I wanted to do what the park was already doing—leading visitors into its space. It's abstract, but not esoteric.

JGC: *Let's talk about your recent gallery show, "Minimal Surfaces_Ocean of Hours." Unlike the blobs, these pieces are spare, made of non-toxic epoxy skins stretched across metal frames. One work contains hidden drawings and written messages. What were you trying to achieve with these untitled works?*

CL: In this project, my research went hand in hand with materials and ideas. I had searched for non-toxic epoxy for a long time because I wanted to get back into making biomorphic forms. I abandoned the work of the '90s because I wanted to get away from toxic materials and molds—the garbage that's produced in that method is incredible; direct sculpting has less impact. I was

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Left: *A Slave Chemist*, 2004. Steel, plaster, and papier-mâché, 68 x 32 x 32 in. Right: *Untitled*, 2012. Steel, reinforced ecopoxy, and pigmented gel coat, 99 x 58 x 28.5 in.

RIGHT: JEAN VONG / BOTH: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NY

thinking through the problem of skins, rather than mass, defining a fluid form, after exhibiting work in 2009 that was essentially painted steel frames without skins. I used a material called ecopoxy to span the areas within the frameworks. I could see that many abstract sculptors, including Lee Bontecou and Antoine Pevsner, had worked with what mathematicians call minimal surfaces. The primary example of a minimal surface would be a flat plane of some sort, but it can be any perimeter described by a skin, which has the least amount of surface area.

JGC: *In addition to putting repression—the pink blob—on the table, do you see other connections between your early and current work?*

CL: What connects my work from the '90s until now is the notion of the continuum: something moving from one form into another, flow. The blob is the illusion of autonomy within the flow. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, "Every object presupposes the continuity of a flow; every flow, the fragmentation of the object." They're bound by necessity; the dynamic is present in every natural and conceptual system. Einstein was unable to reconcile whether light is a wave or a particle. There's something mysterious about it. In our interior lives, if you look at the unconscious and how dreams are formed, we move from one object to another, and it's in the liminal space between them that something interesting happens. In the park project, the rail distends into mass as it flows; the viewer connects physically to it; and the rail extends the architectural features of the park.

JGC: *You once said that you wanted to stop using the word "abstraction" and substitute "presence" instead. Today, you've used "abstraction" fairly freely.*

CL: I took the notion of abstraction too literally. I've moved back to the position that what I mean by "abstraction" is that it's non-figurative, non-representational, and, improbably, non-narrative. I'm interested in creating something that relates to the human form on an intimate level.

By keeping expression and reference down, if possible, I'm hoping that experience and presence remain. For me, experience, which I understand in the context of Ralph Waldo Emerson, is all we really have. It is not just phenomenological; it goes hand in hand with the poetic, the conceptual, and the rational. The more one considers the complexity of the idea of experience, the more one dissolves his or her sense of control. Experience breaks down the ego because it acknowledges its "other" and reveals its incompleteness. In some ways, it's related to meditation—getting out of the complexity of the brain and seeing the multiplicity of things that are happening here and now.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer based in Brooklyn.