

**Project Gallery**

# **Matthew Ronay**

**Pérez  
Art  
Museum  
Miami**

English

# When Two Are In One

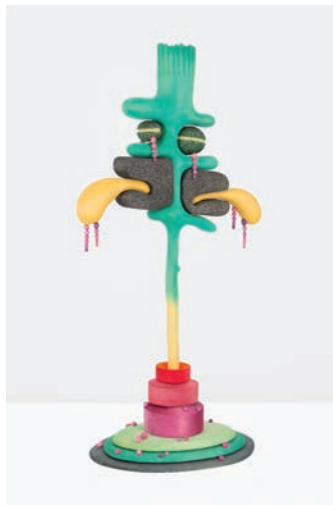
Multiplicity abounds in Matthew Ronay's work, which offers varied and binary ways of understanding and articulating sculpture. Dichotomy is at the center of his project *When Two Are In One*, a body of 11 sculptures commissioned in 2015 by Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) for its lobby-adjacent Project Gallery. Loosely arranged by descending height, the works form a processional atop a low plinth in the center of the gallery. The forms suggest reproduction and twinning as their subject, employing formal strategies of symmetry, reflection, and doubling—from penetration to conception, from mitosis to embryonic coexistence.

The installation's title evokes the underpinning of the project and is manifest in the composition of single works, which appear as unevenly mirrored halves, and in sets of paired sculptures—sister works that offer variations on a theme. This doubling is well evidenced in *Janus* and *Night Janus Purple*, which take their titles from the Roman mythological figure Janus, who, with his two faces, can look forward and backward simultaneously. Stationed at the end of the line of sculptures like flanking sentries, they are strange totemic forms. *Night Janus Purple*, in its warm violet and pink hues, is organic and bulging, topped by a stack of small horizontal pieces and a reddish egg, while *Janus* is narrow and has a broad, clashing palette. Both works have tongue-like protuberances adorned with dangling beads. Asymmetrical versions of each other, the works signal the formal and conceptual cornerstone of the project.

Ronay's forms give us the sense that we can view both their exteriors and their interiors. The works' rich surfaces allow our eyes to trace their textures, moving along ridges, protuberances, and edges, but the nooks, holes, and orifices suggest deep space—we can imagine ourselves entering and traveling inside them. The push and pull we experience between these exterior surfaces and immersive interiors is

articulated by Ronay through form—the carving and digging of the textures and shapes of the works—and through the application of pigment. In *Red Imperishable* and *Yellow Imperishable*, the deep indigo and blue velvets of the concave spaces are rimmed with hot yellow and neon pink. The rich contrast of these intense tones, coupled with the luminous, almost transparent dyes applied elsewhere, accentuate the way in which color is used as a physical device, reinforcing the architecture of the objects.

Ronay is acutely aware of how viewers experience these works, and is attuned to their provocative and generous details, their autonomous forms, and their presence in a larger installation. While they may be considered individually, the stacking of the sculptures in front of one another—denying a “frontal” perspective—forces us to consider them from obtuse angles and in conversation with one another.<sup>1</sup> Their open holes and disparate silhouettes compel us to read them through one another as we walk around the plinth, each work transforming and giving way to the next. The overall forms



2



3

<sup>1</sup> This refusal to offer an unencumbered view of each sculpture in the round, or a clear frontal perspective, is a purposeful strategy of the artist in the context of an exhibition. However, aware of how his work primarily circulates—as digital images—Ronay creates precisely considered photographs of each work and his installations. So vivid and potent as objects experienced in real life, the forms and colors of Ronay's sculptures can seem perfectly designed for the flatness of photographs.

also engender multiple ways of looking: they reference at once architecture, the body, and biology. It is possible to imagine we are observing maquettes of massive extraterrestrial structures, organs displayed for study, or looking through a microscope at microbes and cells.

The body and sexuality have long been themes present in the artist's practice, even as his work remains resolutely abstract. Alongside artists such as Nairy Baghramian, Martha Friedman, Sarah Lucas, and Rodney McMillian, Ronay deals in the visceral—transforming sculptural materials into suggestions of soft and pliant tissue, carving out the orifices and pores of anatomy, and shaping the drips and fluids of the body. *Divided Egg Green Burrowing* appears like two cells subdividing or twinned embryos connected by a thin conduit—a strange scientific model of sorts. *Penetration Regression* is perhaps the most explicit among these works in its references to the sexual body with its bulbous stacked organ-like orbs and phallic cutaway being entered by two curving forms. The duality of penetrating and being penetrated speaks to the hermaphroditic qualities that run through the entire installation.

During the time Ronay was in graduate school at Yale University in the late 1990s and shortly thereafter, he produced largely figurative works. These were often surreal vignettes that depicted distorted everyday objects or graphic amalgamations of body parts and domestic items. Made from painted MDF (medium-density fiberboard), these objects belied any sense of labor or material veracity. This jocular and perverse work put him in conversation with contemporary sculptors such as Matt Johnson and Jason Meadows, who brought language, boyish humor, and physical punning to bear on their work. But growing wary of the literal and ironic ways in which his work was being read, Ronay abruptly broke with this mode in 2007, following a major exhibition and publication.<sup>2</sup>

Ronay stripped his work of its absurdist and highly rendered figurative gestures, and instead began to use a diversity of materials, such as metals, fabric, leather, and natural woods, which in turn gave rise to a muted, almost monochromatic palette of blacks, whites, grays, and browns. This change in process and materials allowed the artist—and the viewer—access to the labor and craft of his production, making visible what had previously been obscured. Ronay's content also shifted away from linguistically based representation, narrative, and politics, and toward an embrace of performance, spirituality, and the functionality of material culture produced in traditional contexts around the world. His work took on a self-consciously primitive affect that referenced mythology and ritual artifacts, as well as iconographic and folk forms. This shift extended beyond art making; it was a reflection of the pursuit of broader ontological and spiritual questions that were currently at the center of Ronay's life.

At this time, Ronay began to look outside the canon of modern and contemporary Western art history and ideology, turning his attention toward the production of tribal groups in South

America, Africa, and Oceania, alongside the folk and pre-avant-garde art of Europe and the United States. He was interested in how these varied modes of visual production express culture, religion, the self, and the everyday, and in how they suggest the transcendent, mystical qualities of our bodies and the world we inhabit. During this period, Ronay produced discrete sculptures, performances, and wall-based works that are imbued with the meditative, labor-intensive processes he was undertaking in the studio—objects that carry a spiritual or fetishistic charge into the gallery space. This body of work can be thought of as culminating in the immersive installation *Between the Worlds*, which was first shown at Artpace, San Antonio, in 2010: a dark, tented space filled with a forest of black and white totemic sculptures—a vivid, supernatural other world the viewer could enter.

Following this exhibition, Ronay continued to explore the possibilities of choreographed space, whether through a density of sculptural objects, the pairing of floor- and wall-based works, or processional staging. Two 2014 exhibitions explored these strategies to great effect. At Kunstverein Lingen Kunsthalle, Germany, in 2014, Ronay brought together two installations. One, originally commissioned by La Conserva in Murcia, Spain, in 2011, comprised 12 dark, naturalistic works grouped in a symmetrical formation, and the other, originally made for the Lyon Biennial in 2013, assembled multiple brightly colored freestanding objects lined up atop a single ground in



4

front of a massive decorative wall work—an earlier example of the parading formation at play in *When Two Are In One*. This installation coupled the palette and formal concerns of Ronay's previous works with what would become a new body of work, distinguished by its color, scale, and choreography. Ronay's disavowal of color eventually gave way to its reintroduction through dyed leather and he soon came to embrace it again. Color is now arguably the definitive characteristic of his work, and despite his colorblindness (or because of it), he masterfully combines hues from across the spectrum to create works that seem to vibrate and hum.

<sup>2</sup> *Progeny*, the smallest work in *When Two Are In One*, offers the signal of a reconciliation with some of the artist's earlier figurative works. Its green serpentine fingers with indigo fingernails and crowning pink dot marked with radiating lines, which make it appear like an anus or puckered lips, seem to suggest that representation may comfortably return to Ronay's practice.



5

Later in 2014, Ronay created a spectacular exhibition at Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, in which he once more grouped objects in a linear formation leading to a suite of works arranged symmetrically on the wall. This exhibition reverberated with color and intensified the ritualistic tones found in his earlier bodies of work, its altar-like composition bringing the artist's conversation with ceremonial objects and spiritual practice to the fore. While the sculptures that comprised this installation maintained their autonomy, legible as singular objects, their choreography, delineated ground, and human scale forced the viewer to navigate them as one might a devotional space. The exhibition seemed to offer an encounter with future relics of an alien tribe, exquisite sculptures that expressed the many reasons why humans produce three-dimensional objects—to worship, to commemorate, to imagine, to use, to channel, and to look.

*When Two Are In One* offers an evolution of this exploration of ritual objects and architecture in Ronay's practice, placing the form of the altar in direct conversation with modes of display associated with modernist sculpture—a white base for a cluster of sculptures. This exchange, across a range of art histories, is Ronay's knowing extension of the modernist impulse to look to so-called primitive art for inspiration. He engages these appropriations and adapts both the traditional works and the modernist objects they inspired, reviving, revising, and remixing this dialogue between Western and non-Western forms and functions. The white base is both a pedestal and an altar at once—two in one.

While articulating the lessons of form and autonomy that emerged from modernist, conceptual, and minimalist practices, Ronay also employs unruly colors, organic forms, intimate scales, figuration, spirituality, folk traditions, psychedelia, and mythology. Perhaps it is this coupling of seemingly incompatible

forms and ideas—its voracious and promiscuous conversation with art histories from around the world and across temporalities—that distinguishes his work from dominant trends in contemporary art and lends it an insistent timelessness. Attuned to the legacies of modernism, the open possibilities of the contemporary, and the potency of the otherworldly, Ronay's works feel primeval and futuristic, intuitive and labored, private and social, like something both familiar and like something we have never seen.

### Diana Nawi | Associate Curator

#### Biography

Matthew Ronay was born in 1976 in Louisville, Kentucky, and lives and works in New York. He received his MFA from Yale University in 2000 and his BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1998. The artist has exhibited extensively at institutions worldwide, including Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London; Kunstverein Lingen Kunsthalle, Germany; Artpace, San Antonio; Serpentine Gallery, London; SculptureCenter, Long Island City; Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; and Locust Projects, Miami; among others. His work was included in the 2013 Lyon Biennial and the 2004 Whitney Biennial.

All images courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

- Cover *Probe*, 2015 (detail). Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, and gouache, 35 x 26 x 14 inches Andrea and José Olympio Pereira Collection
- 2 *Janus*, 2015. Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, and gouache, 52 x 25 x 18 inches
- 3 *Night Janus Purple*, 2015. Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, and gouache 54 x 24 x 13 inches
- 4 *Between the Worlds*, 2010. Installation view: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 2011
- 5 *Organ/Organelle*, 2014. Installation view: Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, 2014

**Project Gallery: Matthew Ronay**  
**March 10, 2016–January 15, 2017**

Matthew Ronay  
b. 1976, Louisville, Kentucky; lives in New York

All works courtesy the artist; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Marc Foxx, Los Angeles; and Nils Stærk, Copenhagen, unless otherwise noted.

*Cairn Column Wand*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, dye, flocking, and shellac-based primer, 43 x 10 x 10 inches

*Divided Egg Green Burrowing*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, shellac-based primer, and gouache, 29 x 16 x 15 inches

*Double Orbing Fields*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, flocking, and shellac-based primer, 28 x 24 x 13 inches

*Humming Tubes*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, and gouache, 32 x 7 x 31 inches

*Janus*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, and gouache, 52 x 25 x 18 inches

*Night Janus Purple*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, and gouache, 54 x 24 x 13 inches

*Penetration Regression*, 2015  
Basswood, dye, and steel, 31 x 36 x 8 inches

*Probe*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, and gouache, 35 x 26 x 14 inches. Andrea and José Olympio Pereira Collection

*Progeny*, 2015  
Basswood, plastic, steel, dye, flocking, shellac-based primer, and gouache, 12 x 29 x 15 inches

*Red Imperishable*, 2015  
Basswood, dye, and gouache, 12 x 15 x 7 inches

*Yellow Imperishable*, 2015  
Basswood, dye, and gouache, 12 x 15 x 7 inches

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