



5 Minutes with Isaac Cordal

Gary Shove



Isaac Cordal has been creating his cement figures since 2001 and placing these interventions on the streets of London since 2007. His sculptures take the form of little people sculpted from concrete in 'real' situations. Cordal manages to capture a lot of emotion in his vignettes, in spite of their lack of detail or colour. He's sympathetic toward his little people and we can all empathise with their situations, their leisure time, their waiting for buses and even their more tragic moments such as accidental death, suicide or family funerals. His sculptures can be found in gutters, on top of buildings, on top of bus shelters; in many unusual and unlikely places in the capital. These concrete sculptures are like little magical gifts to the public that only a few lucky people will see and love, but so many more will have missed. Left to fend for themselves throughout London, what really makes these pieces magical is their placement, bringing new meaning to the abandoned corners of our urban environment.

Yes, the little scenes in Concrete Eclipses are somewhat poignant but they do not invite you to weep passively for lost worlds you never knew. They are there to provide a one handed clap to shake you from your reveries and plug you back in to the world.

How do you feel right now?

To be honest I feel a little bit sick today.

The requisite, unavoidable first question: how did you get into art?

My primary creativity comes from drawing. Also in my teens the music was very important to me. I even played guitar in a death metal band in the nineties.

Why art?

My interest in art started as a child. My mom was a ceramist and I spent lots of hours working in her workshop.

What are you currently obsessed with?

I'm not an obsessive guy but I can say that I am worried about surviving. Surviving doing what I like!

How does your past career influence your work?

I studied in a stone carving school for five years. After that I went to the university. I think that I was influenced by both craft techniques and the old ways of representing the human figure. As a student I carved religious sculptures to preserve a culture related with stone crafts.

I've been influenced by people who love what they do. I think passion is very important in anything you do.

How would you say your art has progressed over the years?

I think it has been getting smaller over the years.

Name one artist you can't get enough of and explain why.

The first name that comes into my head is John Fante. He was a writer. He described life in an incredible way. I like his sense of humour and sarcasm.

How much thought goes into your work? Is it spontaneous or considered?

There is a very rational part when I model the sculptures. I choose subjects that I am interested in highlighting and their relation to our social behavior.



There is another part that is more spontaneous in my work which is related to the urban space. Generally, the street becomes a stage with multiple possibilities. I often find places that work perfectly with the pieces even though I'd never considered the situation. When I look for a place to put the sculptures I can get carried away in the drift.

How would you define "street art?" And how do you view it's connection with 'graffiti'.

Street art is a name used to describe works placed on the streets. In general, I've found lots of people don't like the term. Personally, I'm not worried about it. My stepfather is a clown and he works on the street doing shows. You could say that he makes art on the street too.

I think street art is a broad term that has now been used to describe murals, graffiti, installations, all related to urban culture. Graffiti is the natural successor to bas-relief and the paintings of ancient Greece and Egypt. For me, the first graffiti was a hand used as a stencil in a cave. Street art is a new term to describe old habits into the common space.

What's the story with Cement Eclipses?

Cement Eclipses is a critique of our behavior as a social mass, it refers to a collective inertia that leads us to think that our small actions cannot change the course of history. I believe that every small act can contribute to a change. Many small changes can bring back social attitudes that manipulate the global inertia and turn it into something more positive. Cement Eclipses ultimately has a poetic background in which tiny figures become survivors in the urban environment.

Why work on the streets?

I'm fascinated in working in public spaces because it offers the viewer the element of surprise plus the street gives a completely different perspective than a museum. The public space is a wonderful free "décor". I think that we should be able to participate in the decoration. It acts as a silent witness to the passage of time and to the identity of the people who inhabit it. The street offers amazing spaces that are very difficult to extract for display in a gallery. They are unique and a commonplace in which the citizen becomes a spectator very easily. I believe that urban art enriches city streets.

Describe your process.

I work a bit disorderly. Sometimes I put sculptures in my backpack and then, walking in the streets, I find situations that work well and that I had not imagined before. Other times, I find places that could have potential and I create a sculpture specific for that particular location. Many of the scenes I have represented are suggested by the city. Sometimes I see a place that makes me think of a composition or viceversa. I usually draw and make notes. After modeling the pieces I make silicone molds to reproduce the sculptures. I have made so many sculptures from the first molds that they have begun to reproduce figures with errors. For me, this is already part of the process.

The last great piece of work you saw was what, by whom and how did it make you feel?

I wouldn't want to focus on anything in particular but I liked Maurizio Cattelan's "middle finger" marble monument displayed in Milan, in front of the Italian stock exchange building. I felt that the new Medici had been wrong with their order.

Is street-art a social activity?

I think so. Street artists are participants in the community. There are some traditions in which people decorate the streets with flowers and all the neighborhood work to make it happen. Like them, lots of people work everyday to keep the streets alive, not just with publicity, CCTV cameras, etc. All this art that we see on the streets are the hallmarks of each place and the people who inhabit it. I cannot imagine the city without them.

In a world without limits you would create...

Buildings that can be eaten.

How fucked are we on a scale of one to ten? What can we do about it?

Around a 4. We should no longer repeat an academic year but use the next century to fix things.



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