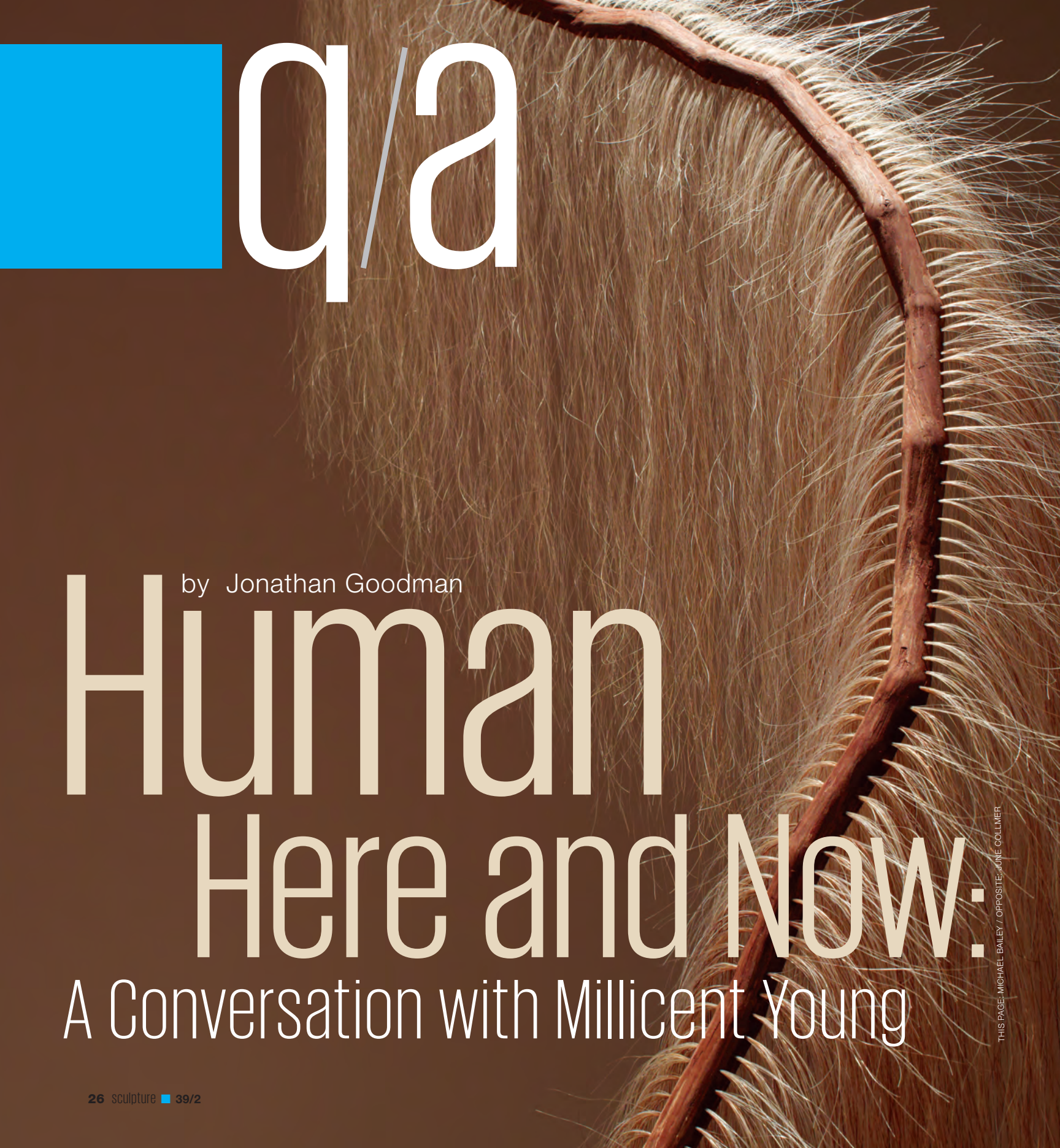
q/a

by Jonathan Goodman

Human Here and Now:

A Conversation with Millicent Young



THIS PAGE: MICHAEL BAILEY / OPPOSITE: JUNE COLLMER

FROM OPPOSITE:
***Vehicle with Single Ascending Proboscis* (detail), 2011.**
Hickory, grapevine, cedar, rosewood, and horsehair, 120 x 60 x 72 in.

Millicent Young in the studio.

millicent young

***murmuration iii,* 2015.**
Horsehair and nails,
108 x 46 x 53 in.

Millicent Young uses poor materials—horsehair, in particular—to create lyrical abstractions that resemble ancient artifacts or inspired attempts at joining the timeless elements of nature to a contemporary point of view. Educated at Wesleyan University and the University of Virginia, with an MFA from James Madison University, she has always followed her own path. Young lives and works in Kingston, a small city in upstate New York, where she fixed up a house to serve as home and studio. Though she maintains an active exhibition schedule—her recent shows include "Cantos for the Anthropocene" at Les Yeux du Monde in Virginia (2018) and "When There Were Birds (part i)" and "(part ii)" at 11 Jane Street Art Center in Saugerties, New York (2019)—it is fair to see her as working outside the mainstream not only because of where she has been living, but also because her personality, character, and vision tend toward idiosyncracy and privacy—qualities that set her work apart in its originality and unspoken motivation.

Jonathan Goodman: Where were you born, and where did you grow up?
Millicent Young: I was born in New York City and lived in the same Upper West Side apartment until I left in 1976. I was shaped by that place just as I was by others—places as intensely rural, wild, and foreign as the city was gritty, human, and familiar. I went to the Dalton School on scholarship for my entire childhood. It was an amazing education—rigorous, self-guided, and questioning. The arts were as important as anything else in the curriculum. Studio art and poetry became my concentration. I was a latchkey kid and, in that way, off the leash—my parents were professors in the social sciences (my father was also a pianist). I rode my bicycle all over Manhattan. The hours after school before I had to be home were magical; I spent them wandering through museums and churches, exploring neighborhoods and Central Park.

JG: When did you know you wanted to become an artist? Did art school help or hinder you?
MY: I didn't have a moment of deciding to become an artist, but I know the many times I refused not to be one. More than anything, art chose me. I learned from

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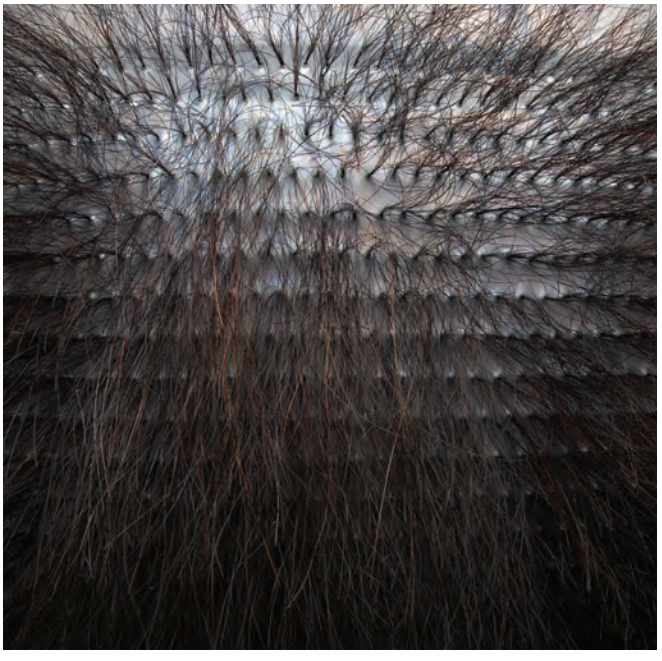
canto 40: Aleph,
2018.
Lead, horsehair, and steel bolts, 30 x 30 x 5 in.



canto 33,
2018.
Lead, horsehair, and steel bolts, 30 x 30 x 7 in.

observation and experimentation. I always made things. It was solace. It was where I worked out an understanding of the world, which seemed full of contradiction. The direct line from my imagination to form was never broken until I became an art student in college.

I decided to get my MFA in 1994, 10 years after I finished college. By that time, I had been living in Virginia and teaching art for seven years, and I received a full teaching fellowship at James Madison University. But my view of art school remained dim. One positive memory stands out: I quit taking notes in an art history class taught by the legendary John Paoletti at Wesleyan University, and I experienced the full sensory download of the huge images flashing in pairs on the screen and the rush of knowing that I was part of this amazing strand of what it is to be human.

JG: How did you make a living after leaving school?
MY: I dropped out of college after two years and spent the next five wandering and living improvisationally. A long strand of experiences from that time have become pearls in my memory. But at the time, my life felt rough and soul-making, filled with beauty and danger. Those years were looped with tangents and shiny things, and getting on wrong trains. When I finally finished college in the mid-'80s, it was a huge triumph against what I felt were insurmountable odds, and instead of attending graduation, I went to Istanbul on a one-way ticket. For the next three months, I traveled alone on another vision quest, where the seeds of my next discontent germinated. I returned home, with dread, to enter a top-tier graduate program in psychology, only to drop out at the end of the year.

JG: You taught art on a college level for some time. How do you feel about teaching today?
MY: I was an art instructor from 1988 to 2003 at various institutions in Virginia, at secondary and college levels. I loved being in the classroom among unjaded minds. Teaching is an alchemical process. It removes the dross. I had the great fortune to teach my passion and to be paid for it. I was never a true part of the academy; adjuncts are expendable. When I lost my last teaching position, I returned to gardening and landscape design work. I love that work. I used to say, mischievously, to

***transitory ii* (detail), 2016.**
Lead, thread, copper wire, and ink, 116 x 72 x 72 in.

> **“I didn’t have a moment of deciding to become an artist,** but I know the many times I refused not to be one.”

MICHAEL BAILEY

millicent young

shake up assumptions, that I first learned to garden on my windowsill in Manhattan, which is mostly true.

JG: Why did you become a sculptor? What is your process?

MY: I rarely struggle with the creative process and move fluidly among several practices that don't look like "studio work," including writing and reading. Daily walks in nature are an essential ritual. Connections and combinations occur that seem otherwise inaccessible except through dreams or in the experience of awe.

In the studio, I usually go directly from concept to material. Sometimes I will sketch an idea with the roughest marks, letting it remain as something barely glimpsed. I find that if I draw it too much, I kill something in it. But a different drawing cycle happens when ideas and semi-conscious material have built up in my imagination. I work on gessoed paper in a variety of media, drawing what I can't see in order to learn what it is. Two-dimensional process is free of the rigors of three-dimensional construction.

JG: What do you think is the role of women in sculpture today? Is there such a thing as feminist sculpture?

MY: Coming of age when I did, I was very aware of artists and writers who identified themselves as feminists. I stand with them now as a woman in a field that remains astonishingly patriarchal. I think that paradigm is crumbling though, under the weight of its own egotism. The machismo we too often see in sculpture from the canon is utterly vapid. Women have always made sculpture, strong sculpture. What the anima—I prefer that word because it is freighted in a different way—has long been making and saying is being heard and seen in part because the old structures are collapsing, and especially because the work is essential and vital. That's what is getting recognized.

JG: Who are some of the influences, both historical and contemporary, in your life? Do you connect with the generation of women sculptors such as Jackie Winsor and Mary Miss?

MY: The potency of artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Eva Hesse, Judy Pfaff, Ann Hamilton, Martin Puryear, Laurie Anderson, Bill Viola, Anselm Kiefer, and Wolfgang Laib has marked me. I've also been influenced by the writers Marie Howe, Jane Hirshfield, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, and Susan Sontag, as well as choreographers like Martha Graham, Eiko and Koma, Ohad Naharin, and Pina Bausch. Their ways of working helped me to articulate myself. None of them shy away from the simultaneity of danger, beauty, and fragility, or from the fact that vulnerability and power, monumentality and intimacy are parts of a greater whole. Their work is sensual, material, and complex. Even when it is brutal in content—or perhaps especially when it is—there is an embedded generosity that gives the chance for human failure to be faced. Yet they all work with abstraction, and this is very important to me. Because my own work is rooted in what it is to be human, here and now, on this spinning blue sphere, I still turn to them as kin.

JG: You work with natural materials, horsehair in particular. What has made you so interested in these materials, and why do you continue to use them?

MY: I've worked with many different materials over the past 25 years: clay, glass, architectural steel, wood, vines, wax, fabric, fur, lead, and hair. Some of them are culled from nature, some are found as cast-offs from lumber mills or the wreckage of buildings and fence

FROM OPPOSITE:
***(un)furl,* 2014.**
Grapevine and horsehair, 85 x 82 x 50 in.

***Vehicle with Clay Foot,* 2011.**
Hickory, grapevine, twine, horsehair, and adobe, 39 x 106 x 42 in.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE: MICHAEL BAILEY

millicent young

OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST / THIS PAGE: PETE MAUNEY

OPPOSITE:
***When There Were Birds*, 2019.**
Grape vine and horsehair, 10 elements, up to 138 x 96 x 72 in. each.

THIS PAGE:
***Bobbin with Prayer Beads,* 2005.**
Wood, steel, clay, and fur rope, 102 x 120 x 96 in.

parts. I love all of them for their materiality, for the processes of working with them, for the elusiveness of their stories. They are both substance and symbol. I have been working with horsehair for the past 12 years, and I have not reached the end with it. Two of the most evocative things about hair is how it gathers and refracts light and how it moves in the air.

JG: Why have you rejected realism? Is abstraction still a more open field?

MY: Realism concerns itself too much with illusion in spite of its claims. Arguably, it has failed us. I am concerned with what we are not seeing—what is happening in real time, what we haven't embodied in our awareness. Abstraction emerged because our usual language no longer comprehended our discoveries and actions, their trajectories and collateral damage. It grew as we became unfamiliar, even incomprehensible, to ourselves as the center lost its hold and an untethering commenced. Abstraction, in its most challenging and restless impulse, articulates what is at the edge of what we know. It seeks to meet what we have no words for, no image for—at least as yet. But, in art, abstraction is of the senses; it shakes the imagination. It's a koan.

JG: What have been your most enjoyable projects in recent years?

MY: "Forms for a New Mythology," a 2016 solo show at Sweet Briar College in Virginia, was pivotal. The pieces came after a year of grief so great I was unable to work in the studio. When I could approach material again, washi paper, ink, and red pigment became *Slow Violence* and *An Unfinished Story*. Plaster, steel, and ash became *Ghosts* and *In This Dream*. Long, free strands of horsehair became *murmuration iii* and *Luminous Room*. In the hair works, I was seeking essence. How much structure could I remove and have the work remain? In my life, death and other, even larger forms of loss had profoundly altered me. *Remembering Awe*, a project that began as a video documentation of the exhibition became a collaborative film with a choreographer/performer, a cinematographer, and an art critic.

***If I Speak...*, 1998.**
Clay, steel, mirror, and text, 82 x 91 x 10 in.

JG: You live and work in Kingston, but you are planning on moving to the surrounding countryside to build a new home and a studio. What is the art scene like upstate, and how do you feel about contemporary art generally?

MY: In 1998, I built a studio/residence on my parents' land in Virginia. In 2017, several years after their deaths, I moved to Kingston, near enough to New York City, but still affordable. Looking back, I see the incredible rightness of working in the quietude of that Piedmont landscape rather than in an art world whose hub was committed to increasingly commodity-driven trends. My solution to rural remoteness was to travel to cultural centers. I exhibited actively and selectively and internationally. I developed my network—a different task in the days before everything became digital. I worked hard to earn a wage, to care for my family and the land, and to grow, relentlessly, as an artist. I made tough choices. But my artistic voice was indisputably my own, and I grew a strong body of work.

Kingston got my attention in 2003 with the Sculpture Biennial curated by Judy Pfaff, who combined high-caliber artists—Sol LeWitt, Gillian Jagger, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, among others—with "unknowns," including a class of local seventh-grade students, to produce an exhibition that was brilliant, spiraling upward like Pfaff's own work.

JG: What do you want to do with your work in the coming years?

MY: I'm working toward several collaborative projects, including a stage installation for a new work by a Paris-based choreographer/dancer/filmmaker. I'm also working with poet Jane Hirshfield on a project around the intersection of poems and my *Cantos for the Anthropocene* works. I am going deeper with the luminous rooms, developing forms and exploring possibilities. I anticipate bringing them into multimedia iterations, with light and movement, and into performative contexts, with choreography and sound.

I cannot imagine a more fruitful, crucial time to be working as an artist. My work is a witness to life now: the Anthropocene, the Sixth Great Extinction. My work is about loss and persistence and the numinosity of both. To witness is to change the field in which something is occurring. To witness death, to witness beauty, is to become changed by them. To be changed is to create change.

OPPOSITE: PETE MAUNEY