

I address motion, potential, and transformation with the cube sculptures I make. These concepts stem from both my intuition and my involvement with running. I draw on my track and cross-country experiences as sensibilities for addressing single and group cube units moving through space.

The character I attribute to the cubes and my personal involvement with them place this series of work in dialogue with Minimalism. Minimalism frequently reveals the conspicuous appearance of the cube. The cube's solid and simple geometry make it an ideal icon because it can be readily precisely created with industrially manufactured materials and minimal operating means. Shapes, like the cube, when shown in serial groups, were intended to show a simple, universal order. Minimalists like Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, and Sol LeWitt chose to perform permutations and variations on simple geometric forms rather than elaborating those forms with transformative actions or irregular improvisations.

The contemporary post-modernist artist Martin Puryear describes Minimalism as having “cultivated a distance, a sense of anonymity, so that you didn't get involved with any kind of signature or personal touch”¹. Puryear is more interested in the “personal touch” that Minimalism left out; I also want to preserve the role of the artist's hand. Aided by his skilled craftsmanship, Puryear sees his challenge to be “discovering what is going to

¹ John Elderfield, *Martin Puryear* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 77.

give the work validity on its own, in terms of some connection to a personal source”². I likewise wanted my work to be personally meaningful to the point that my investment and craft would express and reveal a universal connection between viewer and object.

Puryear’s comments helped me solidify my own ideas towards my similarly anti-minimalist work. The cube is a way of “reducing things to some real core, a concrete kind of core”³. My use of applied rules is another way of simplifying otherwise endless options to create a unified whole. Minimalism’s use of rules and restrictions aimed at a similar goal, simplification, but to the end of also de-humanizing the piece. By creating work that requires my touching it, I satisfy my need for physicality and connection with the piece. The hands-on and mental attention I pay the sculptures contributes to their implicit liveliness.

Sol LeWitt is the most versatile of my influences, because I am inspired by his concepts, yet am working against his Minimalist work. LeWitt frequently created systems, or rules, for the process of creation that were conceptualized preliminarily. Thus the result “could not be foreseen”⁴. I also made rules during my process as a way to unify the work but maintain the sense of exploration and creativity by determining the process and not the

² John Elderfield, *Martin Puryear* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 77.

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Jeremy Lewison, article on “Sol LeWitt,” *Grove Art Online*. Oxford University Press, <http://www.groveart.com> (accessed on April 1, 2008).

final image. I am not emulating LeWitt because, by painting over the aluminum and wood he frequently used, he simultaneously erased the evidence of human agency and the character of the base material. I prefer to put more necessity on the personal agency in my work, thus maintaining my interest and evoking more interest for my work.

The sculpture that marks the beginning of my “living” cube series is *Pod Cube* (image 1). I covered each face of a cube with ripped canvas panels. Those rough edges overlap the cube’s faces enough to be joined together. By coating and adhering the canvas to the cube and to the other canvas with white gesso, I preserved the torn threads which formed stiff, raw edges (image 2).

I created this cube in response to visiting artist Chris Nelson’s self-described “pod-phase.” The spiky outer casing of chestnut seeds, which I associate with pods, inspired the organic effect I achieved with the canvas and gesso. The cube transformed into an organic form by taking on a new skin. Delighted by both the texture and the reactions to this unlikely variation on such a hard-edged geometric form, I opened my work up from a focused exploration of museum pedestals begun in the fall, to the possibilities performing meaningful elaborations on cubes.

The cube is a form that directly relates to pedestals since pedestals are often cuboid, yet it does not have the same implicit function. Jack Burnham qualifies that bases “tended to be strong geometric shapes with an

architectonic simplicity separating them from the organic activity above”⁵. It⁴
can then be considered that making a base with organic qualities, such as
applied gesso’d canvas to a pedestal, would decrease its strength as a
recognizable pedestal. My challenge in creating variations on the cube was to
provide them with enough organic context to prevent them from being
mistaken as bases for other more representational sculpture.

The next variation took the form of *Upward Densely* (image 3), a
heavy sculpture representing upward flight. I initially wanted to use canvas
and gesso for a billowing gathered cloth effect after my previous experiments
with those materials. I decided that an outer covering needed to respond to
the cube’s shape in order to structure its making and validate the process with
created meaning.

Since corners are fundamental to cubes, the canvas had to respond to
the corners. One night as I was falling asleep, I thought about a cube covered
with swirling, billowing material. It looked as though both true and apparent
winds were acting on it⁶. I decided then that motion was the force which
would interact with the material and the cube. Jack Burnham defines
sculpture as, “the result of a set of coherent metamorphic forces: the impetus
generated by the psychic and intellectual authority increasingly invested in

⁵ Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (New York, George Braziler, Inc., 1987) 20.

⁶ True wind is natural wind, apparent wind is wind felt from nature and movement.

science and technology”⁷. The rules I created, like requiring an implied interactive force, are created, like LeWitt’s, on a thoughtful basis. Unlike LeWitt, my rules are intended not to automate but rather to animate the cubes via that “metamorphic” power of transformative elaboration.

Mid-way through the gesso process, I made a watercolor drawing to help me resolve the cube’s relationship to motion. I realized I needed to suspend the cube as a remedy for arbitrarily choosing a side for it to be sliding forward on. Fishing line, both clear and strong, was the solution I chose to suspend my cube from the ceiling. Once installed, I lit *Upwards Densely* directly from above to emphasize the upward motion of the heavy mass. The lighting also created a visual drama and an environmental context in which the presented and represented traits could combine.

While making *Upward Densely*, I tried expressing motion with a smaller cube, this time covered in tissue paper (image 4). The tissue’s dimpled texture, translucency, and soft sensitivity to crinkling caught my attention. I used transparent mod-podge instead of opaque gesso so that I could preserve the translucency of the paper while still firmly securing the paper. Due to the delicate nature of the tissue, and by necessity of using a corner nose as an indication of direction, I suspended *Onward Through* the same as *Upwards Densely*.

⁷ Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (New York, George Braziler, Inc., 1987), 2.

Fishing-line served as a useful way for both allowing *Upwards Densely* and *Onward Through* to implicitly fly and to be independent of the connotations a typical pedestal implies. Unfortunately, fishing-line still functions as an obvious support which isolates the sculpture in a museum-bound context rather than in a shared environment. In that way, a more complete transformation of the cube is inhibited. In the next installation I worked to eliminate a need for even the near-transparent fishing-line.

As a finishing consideration for *Onward Through*, I lit the sculpture from behind to emphasize the dynamic silhouette of the tissue-haloed cube (image 5). A bulb in plain view would have detracted from the environment I wanted to create around the cube. Instead, I made a light panel by suspending a cloudy plastic sheet over two thin strips of wood held in arches bending away from the wall by tension.

After analyzing the effectiveness of the first two sculptures in representing motion, I decided to approach the depiction of motion with different associative indications. I associate traveling with quantities of animals or objects, not with individual units. Even when a lone person is traveling, he or she is moving at the same time as many other individuals, and is therefore still in a group. This group theory is best seen in *Traveling Throughway*, *Relating Edges*, and *Combing Without*.

I determined the size of the cuts for each cube of my installation, *Traveling Throughway* (image 6), as with the method I used for all newly-cut

cubes: by measuring the distance between my hands when I gestured what I imagined the cube should feel like. By measuring my gestures, the cubes already relate to my physicality before they are even fully made. Therefore the cubes have already been influenced by my personal sensibilities.

After making several whole cubes, I cut them at non-perpendicular angles and sanded all of the edges. Sanding each cube satisfied my need to touch each cube separately. I only sanded each edge to create the appearance of a seamless whole. That personal attention also constituted part of my anti-minimalist drive.

The larger *Traveling Thoroughway* cubes tap into the size associations of animals; each cube is smaller than a dog, but larger than a hedgehog. Similarly, the color of the masonite (image 7) is the rich, saturated natural brown of living animals existing in an outdoors habitat.

The cubes appear to tumble out of the floor and back into the wall. Each segment was carefully placed in relation to the surrounding segments to prevent the appearance of overlapping volumes. That placement was like a game following a set of rules, dictated by the forms themselves. A rule I enforced to make the association of tumbling stronger was that no cube could be entirely perpendicular or orthogonally level (image 8). They are actively passing through our space, from and into their own environment. Since my focus was on implicit motion, showing a beginning and a destination were not as important as showing the traveling.

By experimenting with wax, Plexiglas, and various papers to create a cube's skin, I discovered a way to apply beeswax and paraffin to the masonite of *Relating Edges* (image 9) which transforms the material into a mysterious landscape unto itself. The wax's plastic surface tension and irregular consistency reminds me of skin and worn rock simultaneously (image 10). I granted each cube individuality by creating irregularities in the process of building the wax up with countering brush strokes.

I placed the 4-inch cubes in *Relating Edges* on a masonite background in order to provide a context for the cubes to interact with. The back strip creates a specific environment, which differentiates the narrative of those cubes from *Traveling Throughway* or *Combing Without*.

For *Combing Without* (image 11), I built a raised-bed sand box for palm-sized cubes to play in. The sandbox is seven feet by two feet as also determined by gestural measurements. The sandbox is painted white to draw on the clean aesthetic and transcendent qualities of a Zen garden; the screws are left uncovered and the plastic liner is rough-cut to draw on the playful connotations of a children's sandbox.

I used the sand to create a contextual path for the blocks. The path reinforces the concept of traveling because traveling bodies either follow a path or, in moving, create a path. I dragged the blocks in the sand to create the trails I imagine them leaving if they actually moved. The sand subtly holds the wave-like marks of the cubes' movement down the length of the sandbox

where the cubes have been; the sand is smooth in front of the blocks to emphasize the tracks.

These cubes were assembled with all six planes glued and taped at the same time to ensure tighter corner joints. I refined this process as I worked through prototypes, finding better ways to make the cubes appear indivisible. The less visible seams create a more solid looking whole, and therefore imply a more self-contained completeness to the cube.

In trying to explain and express my own fascination with cubes, I am also trying to crystallize a more universal reason that cubes are appealing. The cubes in *Combing Without* are the most appealing because of their small size. This attribute relates to a “museum-cube” out of canvas, gesso, and wood I made last year. A museum cube is a set of eight cubes attached to one another with cloth or paper hinges. Each cube has part of a larger image on it; when the cubes are folded into different configurations, complete paintings and drawings are tiled into view. I realized that art with an interactive component felt more stimulating than my previous paintings and drawings. That interactive element relates to an intimacy also found in Froebel blocks.

Friedrich Froebel, a crystallographer and the developer of the kindergarten concept in which children are educated through play, developed a set of learning tools most commonly referred to as Froebel blocks. These toys were to serve as “stimulants to self-motivated learning: development

outward from within”⁸. His hands-on learning approach appeals to the “competence”⁹ that is innate. Since interacting with materials and making were evolved necessities for survival, learning manual skills and the formative stage, play, is satisfying and thus self-enforcing as desirable. At a younger age even, infants use their hands to attain mutuality with their mothers. For an object, like a cube, to be hand-sized especially, draws on those innate intimate sensibilities¹⁰.

Beyond the satisfying aspect of the cube’s physical qualities, I am attracted to the cube’s character. That character contains humor, strength, and most importantly, potential. The cube is such a simple and frequently appearing shape that the possibilities for elaboration are expansive. The alchemical history could be drawn on to create a mystical expression. The minimalist tradition could be drawn on to continue exploring universal truths. The crystalline, mathematical structure can be explored for the information it models for atomic structures. It can be looked at as a whole or as a composition of planes. It can be looked at as inert or animate. It can be drawn, rendered, modeled, built, and discussed with the relative ease which promotes creative variations.

⁸ Jeanne S. Rubin, “The Froebel-Wright Kindergarten Connection: A New-Perspective,” *The Journal of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 48, No. 1, (Mar., 1989), 25.

⁹ Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 98.

¹⁰ Ibid

The cube has become an iconic motif, but its frequency is also what permits its flexibility and therefore transformation into a character. Its familiarity is what grants it the power of parody and playfulness. The great potential of such a plain form lies in its loss of singular specific meaning, thus allowing the range of elaborations which can attribute different characteristics to it.

I relate to the cube as a figural mass; the cube, like the human body, is a compact non-aerodynamic structure. Although humans have no straight, hard edges, the essence of an athletic body can be drawn by imagining cuboids shapes transforming and moving together. My cubes do not represent a broken-down, abstracted human form – they are beings themselves reminiscent of a feeling I hold when running or lifting weights. That feeling can be best described as energetic weighty mass.

I met with a local artist, Daniel Kelm of Easthampton, to whom I showed one of my three-inch cubes. As I was describing my ideas about motion to him, he asked what was moving the cubes. His question forced me to consider my relationship with the cubes and therefore confront the life force I had been imagining. I determined both that I felt a personal connection to the cubes and that the cubes have a driving animism within them. It is perhaps that soul with which I am connecting.

Kelm also described to me his process for engaging his students on their own projects. He begins by asking them what story they are telling.

Thinking about a created work as a tool for telling a narrative initiates a series of question and answer dialogues for the creator. The answers from that script help guide the creative and material decisions. Dissanayake describes the human need for system and story as a method for providing the structure and meaning they need. That need makes people more willing to invest in exploring and creating narratives ¹¹, an idea that strengthens the stories I create around the cubes despite their actual inanimate state.

Having explored project development by materializing my ideas about motion, my work has become visually and conceptually stronger. Most significantly, I focused my creative process on a balance of materials exploration, I found and incorporated the rule structure I need, and I learned to notice re-occurring themes within my own work. I will continue to make efforts towards creating art which appeals cross-modally to myself and to an audience. In this way I hope to create necessary and meaningful narratives.

¹¹ Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) 79.