



"One of the most ingenious and intelligent figures of a generation of artists who have dominated the international contemporary art scene for over 20 years."—Susan May, *The Independent*

"There are a lot of artists who have rediscovered the figure in sculpture in the last decade. Not one of them seems to me to deal with the human presence with such playfulness, historical knowledge and wit as Juan Muñoz."—Adrian Searle, *The Guardian*

Muñoz, who died unexpectedly in August 2001, is known internationally for his enigmatic sculptural installations, often populated by strangely haunting, almost-human figures. *Juan Muñoz* is the most comprehensive study

# Juan Muñoz

interviewed by Paul Schimmel  
from the book *Juan Muñoz*

Juan Muñoz spoke with Paul Schimmel on September 18, 2000.

**Paul Schimmel:** When did you become interested in art?

**Juan Muñoz:** When I was about fourteen, my father hired a private teacher for my brother and myself named Santiago Amón. He taught Latin at our school and, as it happened, he was also the art critic for *El País*, the Spanish daily newspaper, and *Nueva Forma*, an important art journal.

**PS:** Who were the artists who were your teacher's passion?

**JM:** The Dutch Neoplasticists—artists such as Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg. I came to admire Mondrian's deep belief in and passion for art. I was in awe of it.

**PS:** Was going to museums a part of your life?

**JM:** No. In fact, I didn't want to be an artist. My brother was a very skillful draftsman, and he took painting classes at home. But he gave it up.

**PS:** You ran away from home when you were seventeen and went to London. Had you finished high school?

**JM:** Yes. I was going to study architecture at university in Madrid. I did it for about two months and then gave it up. Spain at that time, about 1970, under Franco, had a very repressive culture.

**PS:** How long did you stay in London?

**JM:** About five years.

**PS:** When you were there, did you go to the museums and galleries?

of the artist's work available. It accompanies the first major survey exhibition of his work to tour the United States.

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### Exhibition dates

[Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden](#)

18 October 2001-13 January 2002

[Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles](#)

21 April-28 July 2002

[The Art Institute of Chicago](#)

14 September-8 December 2002

[Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston](#)

24 January-30 March 2003

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**JM:** Not much in the first few years, and only on Sundays because I worked during the week. But the training I had received at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—both in school and privately from Amón—was immense. I was incredibly lucky to receive that knowledge at that time in my life.

**PS:** Did you go to school in London?

**JM:** Later. I spent a year in Stockholm, where I had very left-leaning friends. I was very close to left-wing politics at the time. Afterwards, I came back to London and received a British Council scholarship to study printmaking. I later got a Fulbright to study printmaking at Pratt Institute in New York.

**PS:** Your first show wasn't until 1984, was it?

**JM:** Yes.

**PS:** So you weren't on the fast track.

**JM:** I was very slow. I spent one year in New York, and I made one drawing.

**PS:** Between 1975 and 1980, did you know that you were an artist?

**JM:** Yes, but I could not convince myself that what I did was of any importance. When I started making the architectural maquettes, I began to realize there might be something that belongs to me.

**PS:** I was looking at your work from 1984 to 1986. The trajectory is laid out right there. There are certain kinds of relations to architecture, there is the use of the figure, there is the willingness to deceive the viewer. Something must have been building up until 1984, because you have a complete repertoire within the next two years.

**JM:** As I said, I spent one whole year in New York, and I made one drawing. I would walk through the streets scanning every image. I would go endlessly to shows and libraries. But I just didn't see work that I could relate to. From the age of seventeen to twenty-seven, I traveled a lot and produced very little. Much later, in 1982 or '83, when I returned to Spain, I stopped traveling

and finally set up a studio. That's when I started making objects.

**PS:** Of the generation of sculptors who are now in their mid-forties, you seem to have been the first, before Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Kiki Smith, Stephan Balkenhol, or Thomas Schütte, to work with the figure. Between 1985 and 1990, there was a shift toward the figure. When you first made figurative work in 1984, what precedents were you looking at?

**JM:** I was looking at the world, trying to feel the reverberation of images outside of me that I could establish a connection with. I think that every artist goes through a time of flipping through the pages of the newspaper, hoping that an image will resonate. There was one event that was very important to me in this respect. After I moved back to Spain, there was this man near my house who sold garden sculpture. I didn't consider him a sculptor. I liked this contradiction because I was a sculptor who couldn't make a sculpture, and this man, whom I didn't consider a sculptor, considered himself a sculptor, and he produced a lot. He made cement lions and other statues for gardens. I bought a couple of things from him and cut and destroyed parts of his work to manufacture a work of my own.

**PS:** That work was also conceptually driven. You took some work of his, cut it off, removed it from its original context, and relocated it to a new one.

**JM:** I had studied art history, and this man knew nothing of art history. He just made these things in cement for the garden. But nevertheless, he had a conviction, and I loved that. I was very jealous of his capacity to assume that he was a sculptor when, in fact, I was spending years trying to make sculpture and couldn't figure out how to do it. So I took part of his language and destroyed it in order to formulate my own language. Soon thereafter I began to concentrate on the balcony sculptures.

**PS:** The balconies are absolutely full-grown, mature works. They presume a figurative element, and they manipulate architecture in a very theatrical way. They activate space by transforming its scale. By putting a balcony on the wall, you changed its scale. All of a sudden, the room becomes the sculpture. That has a precedent in Minimalism and Conceptual art.

**JM:** I don't think I was aware of what was happening; I just knew that I had the need to start constructing figures. People

were very reluctant to accept figurative sculpture at that time, which was very strange because painting and photography were nearly always figurative.

**PS:** To do figurative work, you had to go against the tide.

**JM:** My figures—the dwarves, ventriloquist's dummies—were, from the beginning, always conceptually oriented. I use architecture to give a "theatrical" frame of reference to the figure. I think we use the word "theatrical" to describe something that doesn't necessarily deal with theater itself. I don't remember having gone to the theater more than ten times in my life.

**PS:** In this regard, I think of your willingness to call the objects you make statues instead of sculptures and to embrace the notion of spectacle and effect.


**JM:** I remember being called a storyteller in the early 1990s, and therefore being accused of not really being an artist. But there's nothing wrong with being a storyteller.

**PS:** Many of your works are in fact experienced like stories in which the spectator is choreographed in a very manipulative way. You're very clear about drawing them in, moving them around the spaces along a prescribed plan. I see that as part of your sculpture.

**JM:** I am basically against interactive approaches to modern art. The idea of touching art seems to me completely wrong. For me, a good sleight-of-hand trick requires that you have the spectator in front of you. He cannot be behind you because he will see the trick. I do want the spectators to move in a certain direction, but that's so that the trick will be effective and so that the spectator can see the wonder of it and not get involved with the mechanisms.

**PS:** Don't you see, Juan, that this can drive the more classically-oriented modernist crazy? That you could call a sculpture a trick I find fascinating in itself. The radicalism of how you can embrace theater on one hand, figuration on the other. A sleight of hand is a very beautiful thing, but should a sculpture be a sleight of hand?

**JM:** I think that a great painting is also a great fabrication. What you're looking at is an illusion. Beginning in the Renaissance, the



great masters invented something that did not exist in a space. And I think that marks the big change from Giotto to us. This is our great tradition: the creation of space in painting. Historically, sculpture has suffered tremendously because it has not activated space in the way that painting has. It's only with modernism, and with artists such as Robert Smithson and Richard Serra, that sculpture finds its central voice, because space is activated. The idea of going around and around in circles, as in Smithson's Spiral Jetty, so that you might not be so sure where you are at any one time, is a wonderful trick. It's like a labyrinth, but one without walls. From that moment, sculpture became central to modern art. The difference between these artists and myself is illustrated by Frank Stella's famous remark, "What you see is what you see." For me, what you see is not what it seems to be.

**PS:** From Jannis Kounellis you learned about the column.

**JM:** From Kounellis I learned that the repertoire should be extremely open—that you should not exclude anything to create the illusion. Kounellis is very theatrical. I also share with him this sense of being embedded in history.

**PS:** You did a piece about card tricks. This seemed like a very autobiographical work. It's as if you were confirming that you embrace sleight of hand.

**JM:** A collector once told me that I was a trickster. And I felt that there was nothing wrong with being a trickster. In a way, that's great.

**PS:** But being a trickster has such negative connotations, which you work apart. Your card tricks and your sleights of hand—this is your language, the edginess that counters the beauty of your work.

**JM:** For years I used to carry a switchblade in my pocket wherever I went. I'd have my hand in my pocket and I would be touching this knife. It was about an inner violence that I always had inside. I eventually stopped carrying this knife because I realized that it was getting a little neurotic, and I shifted to a deck of cards. I don't know if I'm answering your question.

**PS:** You are. That certain kind of violence that you describe is a subject that you keep coming back to. It's a muted violence.

Figures who can't walk, see, or speak.

**JM:** I grew up in an environment no more violent than that of my friends. But I realized later that violence was coming into the work. The violence has to do with my memory and with my fascination. People who have experienced violence are activated by violence.

**PS:** In some ways, the violence balances the beauty of your work, your wonderful way of touching things. Dealing with rather tough subjects in a very beautiful way somehow makes the work tougher.

**JM:** Yes. I had great difficulty convincing myself, for example, that I could make the ballerina. I was frightened by making such a romantic figure. But I felt like there was this inherent violence in the piece. The ballerina was muted and bound, forever moving and forever going nowhere.

**PS:** These are all uncanny figures. They cannot do what they're supposed to do.

**JM:** They tell you that they wish they could do more than they do. I don't think that my figures are so mute. I think that they are trying to articulate things.

**PS:** You create a very twisted beauty. This has a long tradition in Spanish painting—Diego Velázquez's dwarves, Francisco de Goya's hollowed-out eyes.

**JM:** I try to make the work engaging for the spectator. And then unconsciously, but more interestingly, I try to make you aware that something is really wrong. When I started making the smiling Chinese statues, I had two assistants who told me that they didn't like to be left alone at night in the studio with all these figures.

**PS:** I want to ask you about installation art, because from the beginning your sculpture has always existed within an environment. Its ideal setting seems to be architectural. You were going to study architecture.

**JM:** That's true. I still try to read about architecture whenever possible.

**PS:** When I first met you, you had figured out how to control the environment in which your sculptures would be viewed by conceiving them as part of an architectural space.

**JM:** The architecture behaves as a backdrop to the figures. For example, I learned from Carl Andre that the floor was important in the activation of space. But I make optical floors because they help me to magnify the inner tension of the figure. They create a psychological space for the figure that permeates the spectator's perception.

**PS:** These floors are very psychologically disorienting.

**JM:** They are make-believe. With the optical floors, you feel that your eye is fooling you. They construct a *mise-en-scène* that tells you that you shouldn't trust your eye, that calls into question the act of looking, that makes you uncertain of what you see—and who you are.

**PS:** That's the real honesty of the work. You say that you are playing a trick.

**JM:** And I'm explaining the trick. The explanation has as much wonder as the trick itself.

**PS:** ["A Place Called Abroad,"](#) your 1996 exhibition at Dia in an industrial warehouse in New York, was by far the most complex and theatrical series of installations you've ever made.

**JM:** For Dia, I was invited to develop the floor plans for my installation. I decided to incorporate but also to cut through the architecture of the preceding exhibition, which had been devoted to Dan Flavin. The emphasis on complete freedom in modern art—the idea that you can do whatever you want—I find very boring. I like the idea of doing something for a given problem—like an architect. To pick up on something you were saying about the Dia project, presenting the devices of the trick is part of the artwork itself.

**PS:** That's the theatrical aspect of your work, and it's very interesting. The notion of the architecture as a prop. The manipulation of light in a very theatrical, *chiaroscuro* way.

**JM:** I'm trying to open sculpture to a larger frame of reference by including optical illusions. It seems necessary to me in order



to reject the obsession with the physical object. For example, I know that I can make a sculpture that appears to weigh one ton out of ten pounds of Polyester resin.

**PS:** That's right. But that's a gutsy thing to say in an era still dominated by that type of sculpture. Sculpture forged in the belly of the beast. None of these tricks with light and space. That's not "manly" sculpture.

**JM:** Probably not. I'm very suspicious of those who try to prove their "manliness." As they say in Spain, the barking dog is the one that doesn't bite. I'm always suspicious of this outspoken physicality.

**PS:** But every time you push your work in the direction of illusionism, you run the risk of being criticized as a prop man. That has been one of the hallmarks of this generation of artists that includes you, Gober, Ray—artists who take on the monumental heroism that Serra still represents.

**JM:** What is important is that each generation learns from the previous one. But what you learn might not be what you have been taught to learn.

**PS:** You take their spiritual reverence toward space and turn it on its end by turning it into a set.

**JM:** Yes. I was never interested in the physical form and the formal problems of sculpture as such. For example, I'm much more interested in what Donald Judd did at Marfa than in his sculpture. His final and most important creation was not rectangular sculptures placed in the middle of a museum. It was this gigantic environmental display. In the same way, what you learn from a Smithsonian is how to use mirrors and how a spiral jetty can become a neo-Romantic presentation of landscape.

**PS:** In Spiral Jetty and at Marfa, the viewer is manipulated as a performer within a larger set.

**JM:** That's exactly right. That's what I learned from them. American Minimalism was my perfect inspiration—an epistemological obstacle that I needed to grow strong.

**PS:** The artist I keep thinking about in relationship to theater and



also to the idea of the trickster is Yves Klein.

**JM:** He was a wonderful artist.

**PS:** He was very manipulative of the notion of theater. He wasn't so much a sculptor as a painter.

**JM:** We've been talking about figurative presence. The feel of the way Klein imprints the woman's body into the canvas is wonderful, although Rauschenberg achieved similar results earlier. I still find Willem de Kooning's *Women* more poignant. Nonetheless, the physical outcome of Klein's performance is still brilliant.

**PS:** You've also always had a strong interest in both words and sounds.

**JM:** Yes, but I shifted. For years I used to write, though I have written very little in the last four or five years. I have written only one thing—"A Standard Introduction to Lectures." It's about the difference between the moment of writing and the moment of knowing that you will hear yourself speaking these words that you are writing now.

**PS:** We were talking earlier about the difference between a statue and a sculpture. You have said that you want to make an autonomous statue.

**JM:** I have always liked the dichotomy established in what has been considered one of the first modern sculptures, *Balzac*, by Auguste Rodin. There is one cast installed permanently outdoors in Paris, and most people pass right by it without paying any attention. It inhabits this place of transition—the street. I find this anonymity of the figure fascinating.

**PS:** We have a certain reverence for sculptures that we don't have for statues.

**JM:** As I told you earlier, when I started making sculpture in Spain after all the years of traveling, I used the works of a man who made garden statues and considered himself a sculptor. I think this is an interesting dichotomy.

**PS:** As a sculptor, you seem to be consistently concerned with the boundaries of your own medium to the degree that you're

trying to bring a kind of installation environment to the traditions of sculpture and statuary. You're constantly bumping up against the limitations of being a sculptor.

**JM:** I would like to retain the illusionistic elements of painting and photography for my sculpture.

**PS:** Regarding the notion of illusionism, you've mentioned on several occasions the Baroque architect Francesco Borromini.

**JM:** I think he was the great master of the Baroque in that he was very aware of the intellectual implications of drawing a straight line. He was a master of deception. There was this sense of dislocation in his architecture that I admire. My floors also owe a debt to Italian Baroque architecture.

**PS:** Looking and framing are consistent interests of yours, whether it's the framing of a floor, a window, or a door. When I walked through the Dia project, I kept thinking of Giorgio de Chirico—his emphasis on freezing time, which is a theme you've dealt with in your sculpture.

**JM:** In de Chirico, the statue plays the role of frozen time—the indifference to time of those statues of public figures, generals, poets, and so on, in the middle of the square. He is an artist that it will be necessary to return to again and again. The way he can compress time and space and make it uncanny. He's unique in the history of modern art.

**PS:** Did the Surrealist movement have a place in your early training?

**JM:** No. I was always much more interested in and emotionally drawn to de Chirico. In my education, I remember that Naum Gabo was absolutely important. I would go to the Tate almost every weekend when I was in London and look at Constructed Head, his large sculpture. But, like de Chirico, I never felt very comfortable with the Surrealists. What the Surrealists brought about is the collision of two unfriendly objects in the hope that a dialectical crash would produce a new image. For me this seemed very unproductive. I never felt any real interest in Salvador Dalí or Joan Miró, and they're both Spaniards. But de Chirico was about the suspension of the moment of looking, about an indifference to reality that the Surrealists didn't have. De Chirico was more interested in this solitary moment. He

freezes and crystallizes a moment in time and space.

**PS:** You say that you have not been interested in Dalí or Miró. You are a Spanish artist, but, in some ways, you have no historical allegiance to Spain.

**JM:** I was born in Spain, and I live there, but I don't feel any historical allegiance. Any artist of my generation in America has a whole history to trace back over the last forty years. I don't have that history, but instead a European history that is broken down. I therefore feel that displacement has always been my condition, my only state of being. I have always felt outside of the mainstream. But this has given me a lot of freedom to create my own language. When I came back to the very isolated landscape of Spain in 1982, when nothing was happening there, I was able to construct my own images in solitude. And to relate back to the international art world.

**PS:** Your work is built on a foundation of your manipulation of Minimalism and on your interest in figuration, which, as you pointed out, was reemerging in painting in the 1970s and '80s, but was nowhere to be found in sculpture. Does that make you a postmodernist?

**JM:** I don't think so. Postmodernism has always existed as a critique of modernism, and I have no critique. I am perfectly embedded in the same history that the modernist artists are. I can go back to Edvard Munch, just as I can to Jasper Johns. And, like Johns, I can travel from the clock to the bed and back again.

**PS:** You identify with the bastard modernism that connects de Chirico with Alberto Giacometti.

**JM:** As many other artists have always been, I have been sidetracked along the central journey.

**PS:** When you say that Judd's work, at least as it's realized in its most perfect form at Marfa, is theater, isn't that a heretical remark? A postmodernist approach to his classic modernism?

**JM:** Judd saw in an artist like Kazimir Malevich a formal problem—squares and other geometric shapes but never any symbolic value. He took from Malevich only what he was interested in. The black square had a symbolic value, but Judd did not want to look at it. I can take from Judd what I want and

what I need, in the way he did with Malevich. I was more interested in the presentational devices of his work at Marfa than in the formal problem.

**PS:** You may see something in Judd's work that he would deny, but it's still there and informs your work.

**JM:** You don't reject the generations before you. You use them to your own advantage.

**PS:** Many of your figures tend towards the exotic—dwarves, aliens, puppets, ballerinas, actors, Chinese figures. As the spectator, we are looking at the Other. We do not see ourselves.

**JM:** My characters sometimes behave as a mirror that cannot reflect. They are there to tell you something about your looking, but they cannot, because they don't let you see yourself.

**PS:** You are dealing with types, but not in a clinical and scientific way. Somehow your types are characters but they're not human.

**JM:** Maybe without realizing it, I used the word "character." But then if I did so, it was more in the Pirandello sense—you know, the famous play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. My characters are more in search of an author.

**PS:** You talk a lot about Pirandello.

**JM:** He had this wonderful thin, long, narrow face. But I don't go to the theater. Maybe we should be using the word "effect" instead of "theatricality."

**PS:** Your interest in exoticism is what unites all these different characters together. We are unable to relate to them on a personal basis. They become like props. They stand in for the figure, but you don't read them emotionally. You do not connect to them on an intimate basis.

**JM:** They don't try to coexist in the same space as the spectator. They are smaller than real figures. There is something about their appearance that makes them different, and this difference in effect excludes the spectator from the room they are occupying.



**PS:** The spectator becomes like a prop.

**JM:** At one moment this is the means of reversal that has taken place. The spectator becomes very much like the object to be looked at, and perhaps the viewer has become the one who is on view.

