

## Mark Hagen

### In conversation with Jan Tumlir

**Jan Tumlir:** I know that you've always had an interest in science.

**Mark Hagen:** My interest is always tied to the astonishment and the cognitive dissonance that can come from prosaic facts. I'm not attached to any specific genre. I'm attracted to anything that serves to decentralize humanity in some way or that continues the process of taking us out from the center of the universe.

**JT:** This can be followed through a number of different disciplines. Archaeology, geology, or whatever it is you're dealing with now is obviously not the only way. Could you relate this interest to something you've made here?

**MH:** Regarding the arrowhead piece (*Success in Every Direction*, 2007), a tangential interest of mine is Neanderthal culture. This piece was in part inspired by a display of Neanderthal stone tools I saw at the Louvre.

**JT:** When you're drawing information from various disciplines outside of art, do you feel a compulsion to bring them back into the fold of art?

**MH:** It's always a matter of trying to walk that line of wanting to disseminate information as art but also wanting to wed that with object making.

**JT:** Are you responding to any particular traditions or conventions in art? It's clear what you're responding to in science, but in art is this something you're actively thinking about?

**MH:** These subjects are enfolded into the work as metaphors for various issues and problems concerning the making, display, and consumption of art. With the arrowhead pieces, there are some obvious associations—for example, Michael Heizer comes up, just because of those stone tool replicas that he was making in the late eighties. I learned this hundred-thousand-year-old process of stone working to make these pieces, and then I take them and make them perform.

**JT:** Do you see the final product as relating to the legacy of *Light and Space* primarily?

**MH:** Not necessarily. There's definitely a certain opticality to it; that's what I was talking about as making the pieces perform. This arrangement is more inspired by folk displays of spear points and arrowheads that I've seen done in this sort of configuration, which usually get tarted up with whatever: cowboy paraphernalia, other types of artifacts, motifs that speak to where one is, let's say, in America. So this one is a stripped-down, optically amped-up version.

**JT:** Is the whole process of learning how to make the arrowheads part of the work? When we're looking at the finished product, do you want us to think about who made these things?

**MH:** Before anyone asks if learning this archaic craft is some sort of anachronistic do-it-yourself survivalist or artistic reskilling parody, I'd like the viewer to contemplate the works strictly as objects or to enter the piece through the play on the words "subtractive sculpture," which describe not only the process but the actual function of these things, their original purpose in taking life to preserve it. This play is embedded in the form and

how they're created: it's an accumulation of the same circular excisions, by virtue of the way obsidian breaks.

**JT:** And this goes for each individual arrowhead as well as the overall display? The way you've composed these dark stone shapes radiating outward against a pristine white ground gives the work a convulsive, vibrating effect. This effect can obviously stand on its own, but you're also endowing it with an allegorical significance. The idea of subtraction relates to sculpture and hence to fine art, but it also relates this larger idea of time that you're talking about.

**MH:** In contemplating stone tools, their deep historical origins, you have to wonder at what point did this process of making diverge into the two camps of sculpture and weaponry. The fact that obsidian to this day can be found in state-of-the-art surgical tools is highly suggestive. It's used in certain types of surgery where the tissues are really delicate because it has the ability to make incisions less damaging to the cells. The obsidian blade is sharper than steel when viewed under a microscope. Inherently the material has these great ironies to it, being at once old and new, crude and refined, and I wanted the process to reflect that.

**JT:** There's always a sort of radical potential in thinking about objects in terms of their origins. In relation to the existing discourse of art, more specifically modernism and the connoisseurship that comes with that, this notion of an archaeology of art is always destabilizing in some way. It locates interest elsewhere: not in how good the thing is or how valuable it is, but in how much it can tell us about the context that it comes from.

**MH:** Inferring the immaterial from the material.

**JT:** With the arrowhead piece, for example, you understand that it has to do with the deep historical past, and when that's matched up with these paintings that relate to artifacts of some sort also but that have no necessary relation to the past... How would you describe the relationship between these two?

**MH:** They are both involved with artifacts and relics. In the paintings these are simple found pieces of paper, but they contain a literary content that, again, performs for me in a certain way and that, in performing, falls within the same guidelines as the arrowheads. Sometimes these documents can point to the seemingly arbitrary nature of belief or categorical thinking. Sometimes they put up an alternative belief system, and sometimes they fail miserably in doing so because of their inherent fallacies of logic, their internal contradictions.

**JT:** As artifacts or relics, they constitute a little piece of a civilization. You're choosing the odd, dissident pieces, but you're not interested only in that reading. There's something about presenting this information in this context that suggests that it is part of human thought as well and that it is no more abnormal than some of our mainstream religions, for instance.



*Success in Every Direction*  
(detail), 2007  
Volcanic glass on panel  
68 x 48 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

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2007  
Volcanic glass on panel  
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Photograph by Joshua White



