

Simple Simply Isn't

A Conversation with **Peter Shelton**





uheader, 1995–2009. Mixed media, 78 x 28.5 x 28 in.

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BY MARLENA DOKTORCZYK-DONOHUE

Everything about Peter Shelton (pristine studio, stunning preparatory drawings, conversation sprinkled with Latin terms) suggests a combination of obsessive technician and daring poet willing to risk it all for an idea. (A case in point, his controversial 2009 commission for the Los Angeles Police Department [LAPD] headquarters.) In his studio, massive shapes in various stages of completion envelop and dwarf the visitor; even unfinished, their physical impact is immediate and kinesthetic. Dramatic, dynamic activation of the viewer's body and ambient space marks a clear focus that began with Shelton's earliest ruminations about the boundaries of architecture. He is less willing to pin down meaning.



Whether realistic fabrications from a consummate draftsman (“thingsgetwet”) or abstract blobs (*clouds-andclunkers*), Shelton's works perform hard-to-articulate spatial, perceptual, and emotive actions upon us. Though this is hardly new, Shelton's knack is to yoke proprioception directly to eccentric content—meaning and allusion are experiential not rhetorical. In his work, we don't contemplate the precarious balance between appendage and gravity—we feel the weird profundity of this simple fact and its existential implications for all earthbound life and endeavor.

Jean Arp-ish pods that can look simian, pipes that resemble a small colon, or realistic bronze boots that make us acutely aware of a *corpus in absentia*—Shelton never illustrates the body, never overtly references its endeavors, fears, or psychological dimensions. Instead, his works enliven an awareness of certain actions and properties: fast, slow, approach, retreat, growth, contraction, mass, void, inside, outside, visible, occluded. He considers these physical states to be the essence of quotidian experience, full of emotive, existential punch; he also claims no interest in literally addressing them. What he seems to be after is the creation of visual conditions/objects in which perception and allusion happen at once.

After undergraduate studies in medieval literature, anthropology, theater, and pre-med biology, Shelton retreated to the woods to “be still,” to do simple things with his hands (he mastered industrial welding) and forget all that he'd learned. He eventually got an MFA from UCLA, taught at major universities, absorbed Mondrian and Nauman, Turrell, and Merleau-Ponty, and came up with a life and art practice full of feisty mistrust for all unexamined standards. Shelton's creations hover between animal and mineral, full abstraction and vague representation, invoking machines and juicy viscera, logic and madness while firing synapses in both the left and right sides of the brain.

redourobos, 2004–05. Mixed media, 70 x 50 x 42 in.

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Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue: *What were some of your early influences?*

Peter Shelton: The general mosh pit of the 1960s and '70s — Dick Barnes, psychedelia, mysticism, Buddhism, anti-war stuff.

MDD: *How have you managed to make such varied work from fairly basic shapes?*

PS: I don't think the lexicon or the results are simple or basic. I get a huge diversity within shapes, across works, and in the feelings generated. The whole concept of what I do gets dislodged when you consider the work in total. For 10 years, I was doing largely interactive environmental work. I thought of shapes as proto-architectures, as large organisms with an almost alimentary professional. My kind of figuration snuck in through this architectural approach and my pre-med studies.

MDD: *I meant apparently simple, not conceptually simple.*

PS: A lot of my early work started off nominally geometric, but even then, I would sneak in references to the body without showing a body, which was a kind of subversive connection. Desire, memory, humor, and menace are powerful psychic qualities that I don't avoid, but I wanted any narrative to be understood as much in the body as in the mind.

MDD: *Would you concede that you create zany correlates of the body that maneuver between the abstract and the figurative?*

PS: This whole figurative versus abstract stuff comes from faulty thinking after World War II, suggesting that Modernism was fundamentally a battle between representation and abstraction. I don't see it as one leading to the other or exceeding the other. It comes down to achieving some core expression, and the "hows" of getting there follow from that.

MDD: *Do you mean that idea trumps process?*

PS: Nothing is that simple. I mean that it's inaccurate to see my work as growing linearly from abstract to real or simple to complex, or the reverse. Unlike many of my formalist predecessors, I

don't work linearly, evolving from project and situation to the next project and situation — ideas continue to circulate. *Sixtyslippers* came 15 years after its ideas first showed up in *majorjointshangersandsquat*; and *majorjointshangersandsquat* is a several powers-of-ten telescoped view outward from the incredibly focused and realistic detail of "thingsgetwet."

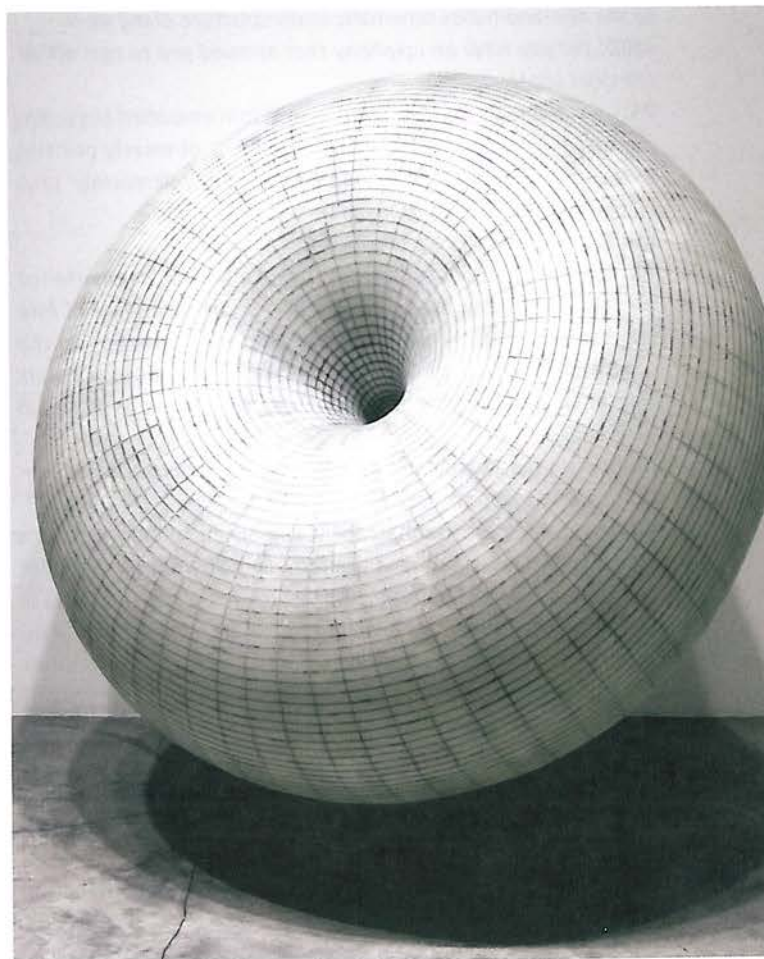
MDD: *By "powers of ten" do you mean that you start from the minutia of an idea or a close-in scale and then years later look at the same idea or object in expanded conceptual and physical dimensions?*

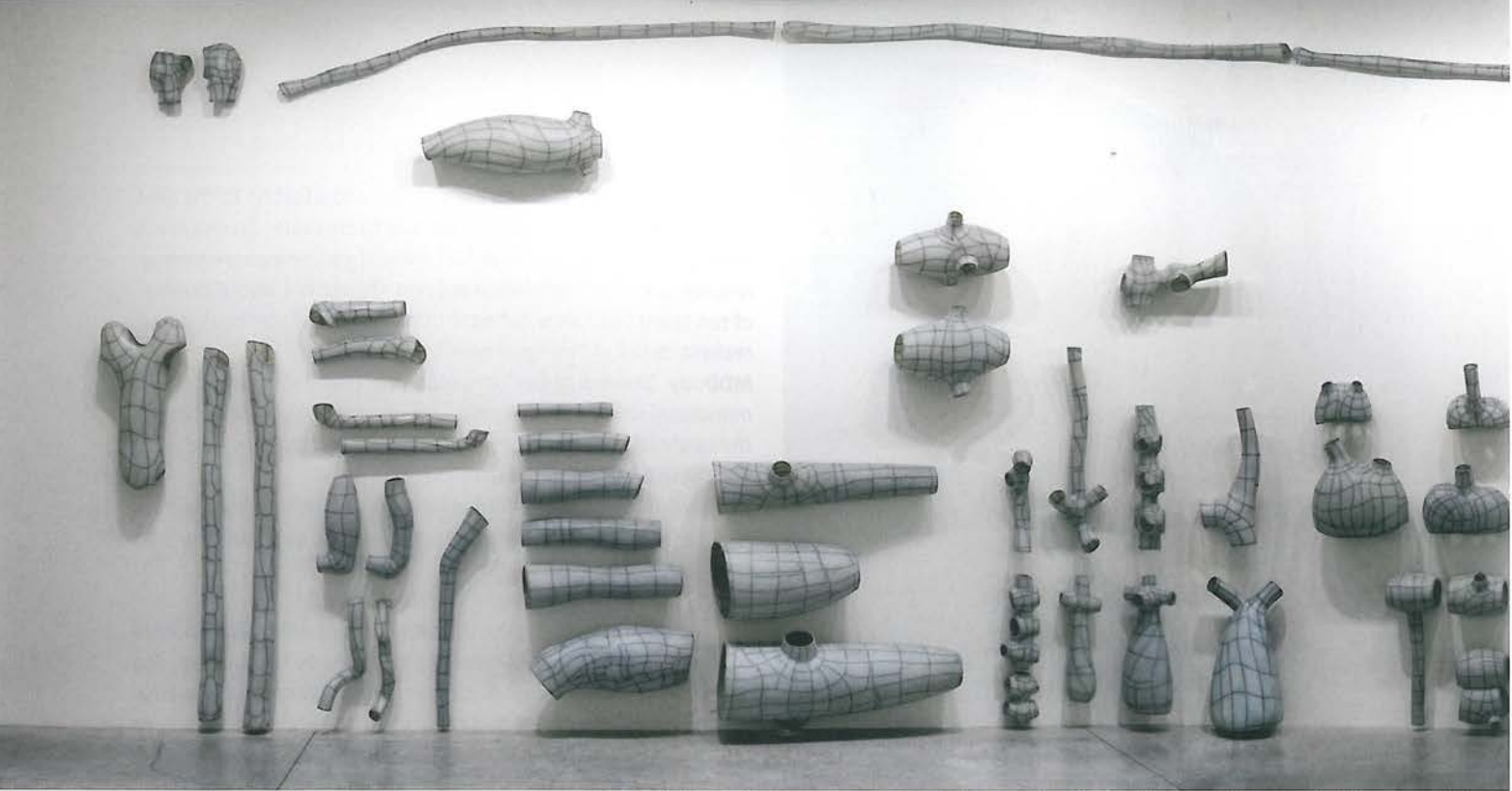
PS: It never goes in any predictable arc. I think that comes from my pre-med studies, from a general curiosity, and from the fact that I hate rules.

MDD: *What rules were or are you reacting to?*

PS: I did grad work during the transition from Abstract Expressionism to the high formalism of Greenberg, followed by Minimalism. Any conventional figurative work was banned; drawing was anathema. Making overly large things that went into space was suspect because of forbidden, so-called theatricality. You could include nothing in "real" art that drew from other disciplines, like architecture or the stage.

Left: *redbuttons*, 1987–2010. Mixed media, 26 x 44 x 26 in. Below: *godshole*, 2003. Mixed media, 60 x 30 x 60 in.





MDD: *And this registers in your work how?*

PS: I have gone out of my way to engage the body and use architectural space. Drawing has been very important in leading me to the skin-and-bones schematic understructure of my work.

MDD: *Did you have an epiphany that allowed you to cast off all the grad school dogma?*

PS: I realized that I wanted to make stuff that embodied physicality instead of just depicting it, or illustrating it, or merely pointing to it. What possible reason could there be for “referencing” physicality? That is an oxymoron, as I see it.

MDD: *Can you elaborate?*

PS: I can go to school and learn to make a perfect foreshortened arm—in fact, I can. But that is not the act or experience of foreshortening, which is the *feeling* one has of contraction as the opposite of stretching. I want to create conditions in my work that produce those experiences in three dimensions as senses in your body.

MDD: *Then the '70s caught up with you in the activation of perception and space stressed in Minimalism.*

PS: Yes, that almost scientific vibe you get in an Andre, a Judd, or a Stella. But there, it's almost like form could be put on autopilot and the work would make itself. The final import of that work is the elegance of some formal algorithm. Of course, Judd was interested in the nature of form and color, but that stuff was intentionally self-referential and what I call “germ free.”

MDD: *Do you feel that a slightly messier, less germ-free approach is linked to Los Angeles?*

PS: Here in L.A., there were hybrid and spatially extensive works that completely mixed up forms and experience. So, “messier”? Yes, please. The formal virtues of, say, Kienholz and Nauman are quite underrated, but their choices are no less precise than those of Judd.

MDD: *You keep mentioning balance between technique and*

mood, maybe because you come from both literary and scientific entry points.

PS: For me, the impact of Nauman or Kienholz is less based on formal continuity and consistency than on a very discernable narrative tone in their work. I wanted to make work that used an awareness of the body and careful process to push you out into general questions through form—sort of like inviting you to contemplate your navel, turning you inside out and dropping you out of the other end.

MDD: *Should we get the elephant out of the room and talk about the LAPD headquarters commission from 2009?*

PS: “Justice,” “power,” and “protection” are words that have a reality attached to them, and that reality is part of policing. They are also constructs or symbols. In both of these contexts, they mean different things to different people—ask a wealthy white guy in Malibu what justice or protection is, and he has one idea; ask a kid from South Central, and you get another. I wanted to create a physical experience not so literally related to those concepts.

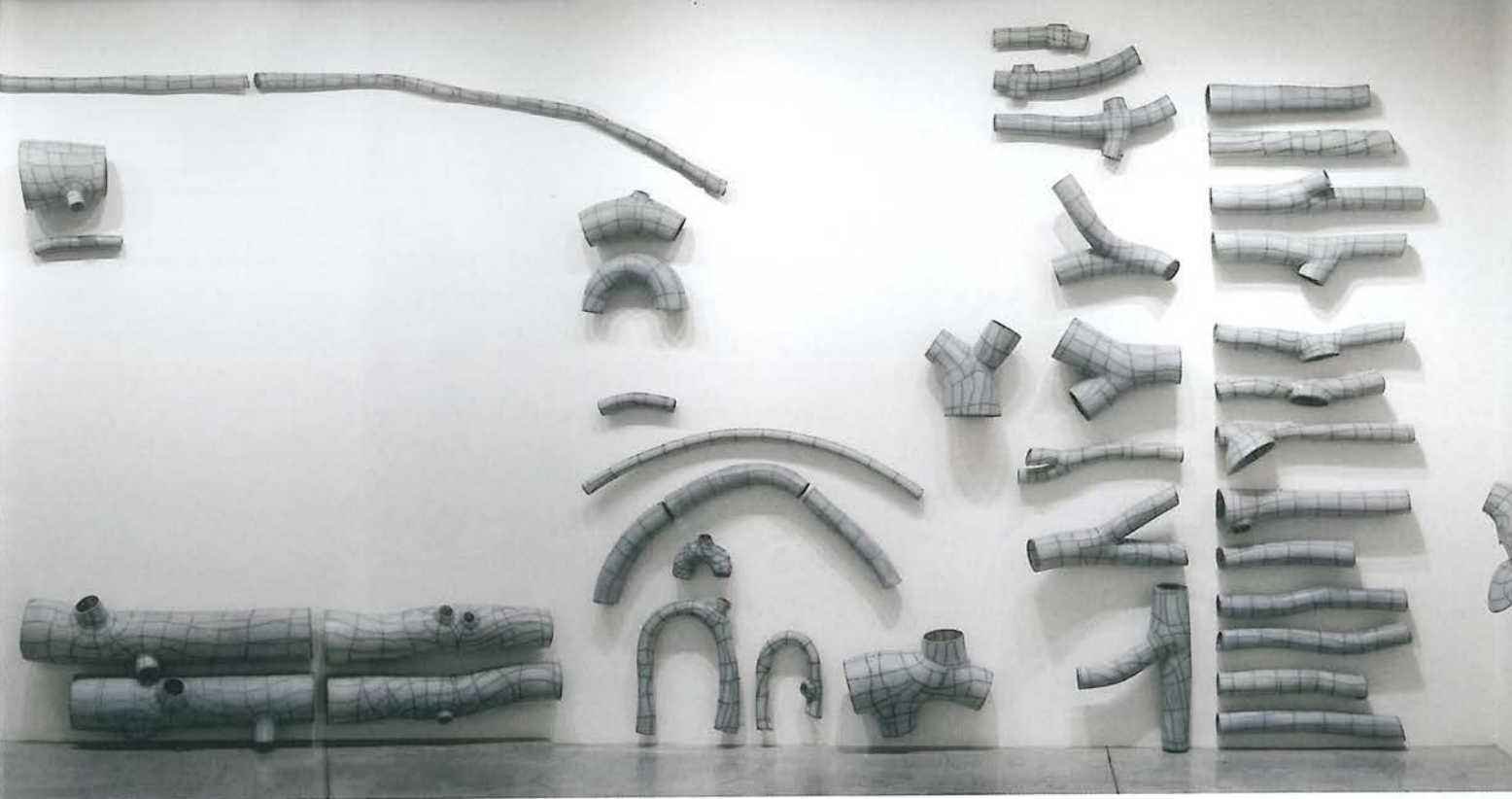
MDD: *But why monkeys and quasi-porcine shapes?*

PS: I got to thinking about animals and what they stand for, how their shapes and symbols mean this or that in various cultures through time. Childhood memories of animals get mixed in, and a concept's born that keeps evolving as you invent and solve formal issues. I expect and hope everyone will have a different take. Do I expect a frontal attack from educated people? No. But I have been at this long enough to know that can be part of it.

MDD: *As tough as the LAPD project might have been, your façade for the Indianapolis Public Library is just plain stunning.*

PS: *thinmanlittlebird* is a two-part work installed on a 1917 Greek Revival building designed by Philadelphia-based French architect Paul Cret. It's a pretty building, and it had two exterior pedestals that were left un-appointed by Cret.

MDD: *You've played with the pedestal idea in other works.*



Above: *godspipes*, 1997–98. Mixed media, 189 elements, dimensions variable. Right: *romandrain*, 1993. Bronze, water, copper, and pump, 58.5 x 23 x 34.5 in.

PS: I had spent a lot of my career avoiding the pedestal because it's a whole extra formal element in which I had no interest, and pedestals remove a work from immediate space, putting it back up behind a proscenium or stage.

MDD: *But as is your way, rather than avoid an issue, you take it on.*

PS: That's true. The LAPD commission started with existing pedestals. In a Lannan Foundation installation years before, I launched a very tall figure off one pedestal and floated a contrasting horizontal figure over a second one. At the Cret building, I wanted to respect the whole Beaux-Arts tradition but also move the sculpture forward to a current moment in art. On one pedestal, *thin-man* plays with the Greek ideal of human form, more a gangly vine gesture in bronze than a Hellenic god. *littlebird* cantilevers over the twin pedestal, a small cast sparrow sitting on an 11-foot diameter torus. The Neoclassical style uses polyhedrons, cubes, cones, and spheres. I saw the torus as an updated Platonic form. The doughnut shape is everywhere—cells, galaxies—so I imagined this hovering universe of knowledge.

MDD: *Can a public art audience handle the degree of ambiguity expected by gallery-goers?*

PS: Each venue has its imperatives. Art is not always courteous, but public projects are always courteous; sometimes they commemorate. You have a mandate, an art committee or commission that dispenses money. There's usually some narrative you're asked to address. Some people call public commissions "functional art" because they fulfill certain explicit social functions, like regional semiotics or history telling. Ideally, for me, making or conceiving art is not driven by a function or a meaning.

MDD: *But you actively throw your glove in to do public projects.*





Above and detail: *thinmanlittlebird*, 2009. Cast bronze, 2 elements: 44 x 4 x 4 ft. and 5.25 x 11 x 11 ft. Work installed at the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, IN. Left: *churchsnakebedbone*, 1993. Bronze, copper, pumps, and water, 87 x 77 x 38 in.

PS: I do it because the upside is that in public space many people can have an experiential reaction. For what I want to investigate, that is really attractive.

MDD: Could you say something about the atypically illustrative “thingsgetwet” series, which was shown in your recent career overview at L.A. Louver?

PS: It’s a series of realistic, oddly mysterious everyday objects cast in bronze with copper and designed to have little channels delivering water. But it’s not atypical—I have always worked with verisimilitude when an idea asked for it. The project came from a cancelled commission at Dartmouth College’s Hood Museum that was to be a fountain mixing everyday objects, medical models, domestic and religious artifacts, architectural references, and engineered water pumps. I had this idea that all of the objects, as well as the whole high-versus-low culture thing, would be enlivened, abstracted, soothed, eroded, and equivocated by being bathed in water.

MDD: What happened to the project?

PS: The commission fell through, but I resolved to make



Above: *breadwaterwall*, 1993. Bronze, copper, water, wood, and pump, 51 x 62.5 x 18 in. Below: *oldwetbrick-house*, 1993. Bronze, copper, pumps, and water, 36 x 42 x 42 in.

a series of individual water works. While most of the elements were made from scratch, I wanted to have the impression that they were found. The very realistically crafted objects in “thingsgetwet” may seem anomalous, but they have a kind of relational syntax and become small organisms in themselves.

The powerhouse is a model of an 18th-century steam plant that initially supplied steam, then electricity, to the Miami County courthouse in Troy, Ohio, where I was born. It was originally going to sit atop a casting of a small wooden sleigh fashioned for my grandmother by my great-grandfather. I wanted a beautiful remnant of my Scots-Irish and Mennonite blacksmith past, so I paired the powerhouse with something feminine from my family. That sort of collision of sensibilities recurs for me, where one pole is made vivid by its opposite—you find this as well in *trunknutsWHITEHEADfloater*.

MDD: So, is this autobiographical?

PS: It is not autobiographical per se, but I wanted things close to my experience.

MDD: I still see the body referenced here.



PS: The model of Chartres Cathedral in *churchsnakebedbone* is the ultimate body analogue, with its Gothic skeleton and stained glass skin. Similarly, the frame of the bed is the skeleton to the mattress and the snake on top is the most primal alimentary canal.

MDD: What are you engaged in now?

PS: At the moment, I am preoccupied with some works related to smoke and what I have been calling “inyandoutys,” which are iterations of simple convex and concave surfaces.

Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue is a writer based in Los Angeles.