



Taslim Martin's studio is one of the most wonderfully messy places I've ever been (a statement with added gravitas for those who know me). In a double-height room in a converted Victorian school in North London, every surface overflows with things. Two very large metal sculptures take up most of the space, but look closer and you spot models, moulds, a shopping trolley full of off-cuts, an old poster of Eames chairs, as well as a scatter of phone numbers jotted straight onto the walls. An old maths teacher of mine once explained (and excused) my own untidiness as a symptom of creativity: by Mr Neuth's logic, Taslim Martin is very creative indeed.

And he is. His practice has covered a dizzying array of materials and objects, from ceramic seating to painting, from street furniture to portraiture. Just 10 minutes with him and showing takes over from talking; a piece of plasticine and a knife must be found. He is a self-confessed process freak.

This has been a busy year, with work showing in South Africa and New York; the two large sculptures in his studio are meant for London, more specifically the Horniman Museum and Brixton. But the day we meet he's just returned from hanging his *Disparate Nature* show in Rochdale. Part of a nationwide multi-artist series, *The Shape of Things*, Martin's exhibition is partnered with textile artist Tanvi Kant's. True to its name, *Disparate Nature* reflects the breadth of Martin's interests, with sculptures, furniture designs, paintings and installations all made from clay, wood, wax, plaster and cast iron – Martin returning again and again in conversation to the phrase 'one craft into another'.

Left: Taslim Martin in his studio, with *Brixton Twins*, left, and *Blue Earth*, right, 2010

Right: *Helix Form*, plaster, 2010
Below: *Helix Form*, work in progress, 2010



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Carpenter-turned-artist Taslim Martin moves between disciplines and materials, ranging from painting and sculpture to furniture. Teleri Lloyd-Jones wonders if this is why his studio is such a mess. Portrait by Julian Anderson

PROCESS DRIVEN

The process freak has chosen sledging for the main installation. This method extrudes plaster through a wooden profile, to make a continuous shape (think corncob). Martin enjoys experimenting with or 'misdirecting' a method, and after many attempts created a curved sledged form to act as a brick; in combination with multiples of itself it creates a sweeping helix, which could continue indefinitely. This form is the 'blank canvas' onto which marks and symbols provided by exhibition visitors will be stamped. At regular intervals, Martin will visit Rochdale to select the marks and print them onto the surface of the helix, adding new sections when needed. So how precise do modular form and

mould have to be? How tricky is the geometry? Surely this is an ideal job for digital technology? Martin first explains the budget, then expands: 'I really like the deliciously low-tech aspect... It's not venting my eccentricity, it's saying "You don't need all that stuff, these are the old ways..."' You look at something and think, "Blimey, how was that made, how did you do that?" But the reality is that people have been doing this for centuries. And it was much more difficult – if you think of a beautiful old mediaeval castle, the circular towers, the stone staircase which would often have a hand rail carved into the wall – it's the same process, same ingenuity! Same sort of geometry, centuries ago.'



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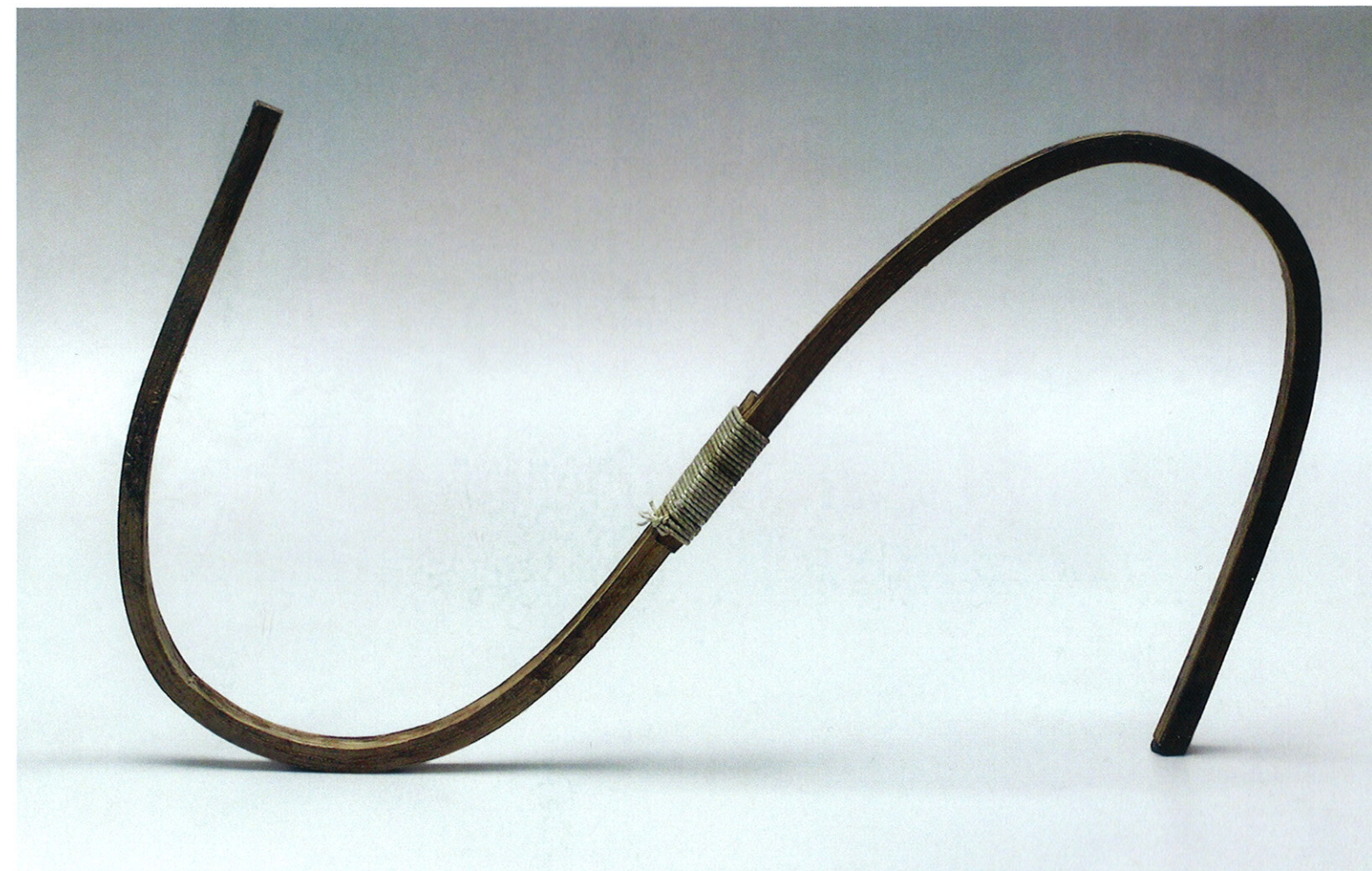
BUTTON STOOL PHOTO: FRANK THURSTON

Spread, clockwise from
above: *ST Bench*, steam
bending test, oak, 2010;
Portrait Head, Raimi, cast
iron with rust patination,
2010; *Button Stool*, slip-
cast earthenware, wood,
35 x 63 cm, 1998; *Secret
Dovetail stool*, sand-cast
aluminium, 40 x 42 cm,

1995; *Twins*, artists
impression of work
placed in Dower House
Garden, Ickworth
House, Suffolk, work
now at Milton Keynes
housing development,
brick, mortar, concrete,
bronze, 1.8 x 1.6 m
and 1.8 x 1.5 m, 2003-05



IMAGES COURTESY OF ARTIST



are collectors who only collect porcelain; the word
“ceramics” means nothing to them, “Oh that’s very
nice, but it’s not porcelain.” Or they only buy silver.
I think this pigeonholing is a hallmark of craft – but
these are the same hard-earned skills. Yet the mate-
rials you use for something mean it will be viewed and
sold in different ways.’

The main focus of *The Shape of Things* is to make
new craftwork which, says project director David
Kay, ‘explores the distinctive contribution artists
make to influence or reflect national identity, the
intercultural nature of British society and its con-
nection with global cultures.’ Martin is British-
born with a St Lucian mother and a Nigerian father,
so multiculturalism and national identity runs
throughout his work – but it’s by no means its core.
Africa ’95 at the Royal Academy ‘knocked my socks
off,’ he says. Then during his masters at the Royal
College of Art, when his main preoccupation was
ceramic furniture, he was awarded the Paolozzi
Travel Scholarship. Heading to West Africa he
studied both historical and contemporary art,
meeting and talking to curators and artists. This
revealed the one-dimensionality of his experience
of African art in Britain. ‘A lot of what we think
constitutes African Art in the great collections of the
big Western museums has a really heavy ethno-
graphic curatorial hand on it from the legacy, the
history... The big museums, the British Museum,
the National Portrait Gallery, the V&A to some
extent, part of their being is about cultural capital,
it’s about presenting what they do in the best light –
they’re not really in the game of shining a spotlight
on a questionable past of some of the acquisitions.

There is this tension. Any time I engage with the
British Museum there is this tension, and you do
need to find a way of negotiating around that.’ His
relationship with the British Museum began in
2005 when they purchased *Secret Dovetail*, a metal
stool made by Martin for the Crafts Council’s
Mixed Belongings exhibition. It has recently been
placed on display in the Africa Gallery. ‘When I saw
it in there I was a little bit emotional, I was moved,’
he recalls. ‘You have all these beautiful artefacts
which I’ve loved for years, and then there’s my
work in the same case – It’s quite a thing, it really is.’

With a piece on show at the British Museum,
public sculpture commissions and work travelling
to MAD in New York, Martin’s career seems to be
going from strength to strength. Faced with such a
broad output you can never be sure what will come
next, but he will certainly continue to be driven
hard by his own curiosity. He quotes Picasso: ‘Some
people are afraid to try something new – I’m afraid
not to.’ He quickly notes that he’s not comparing
himself to one of the gods of modern art. But he is
moving to a new space in Camberwell, after a
decade in this Tottenham studio, so it’s an exciting
period of change for him, and perhaps a new era for
his practice. I just hope he remembers to write
those telephone numbers down in a safer place.
Taslim Martin: Disparate Nature is at Touchstones
Rochdale until 3 October. Work by all artists in
The Shape of Things shows at Flow Gallery from
9 September – 6 November. For details, of these and
other shows, see *Crafts Guide*. A video of the sledging
work can be viewed on the latest issue page at
www.craftscouncil.org.uk; www.taslimmartin.co.uk

This is his second career, after 13 years in carpentry and joinery. Drawn to rational problem solving, the young Martin enjoyed his time at the joiners shop: 'The old boys spent a lot of time working things out, they would say, "It's not the cockups, it's how you get over them. Sit back, have a cup of tea and think about things."' Executing architects' plans, seeing flaws and rectifying them, Martin is adamant about the value and ingenuity of individual craftspeople: 'There's this notion that craftspeople are automata or Frankenstein's monster,' he continues, 'as if they need thousands of volts of electricity and to hear their master's voice before they can be galvanised into action, to do the bidding of a real creative force. I've never really liked that.' During the recession in the early 90s, he realised that better carpenters than him were out of work. 'I thought if I'm going to be on a budget I might as well do what I really want to do. So I went to art school, and I haven't really recovered financially since.' At its heart, the change was a search for creative freedom.

Martin's approach sees no boundary in era or material; it's an almost egalitarian questioning of why and how certain traditions exist. In Rochdale, for example, he's showing the same sculpture in iron, clay and wax, to investigate conventions of hierarchy in material; he also presents portrait busts in, unexpectedly, cast iron. While he remembers fondly a tutor from his degree in Cardiff who had been making salt-glazed teapots for 20 years, his own appetite for adaptation seems unending: such defined, restrained practice is anathema to him. 'My tutor's was a very singular pursuit. There



BUTTON STOOL PHOTO: FRANK THURSTON

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