

Work Hard, Be Powerful, & Be Crazy: An Interview with Madison Nelson.

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In early April I had the opportunity to sit down with artist and Texas State Student, Madison Nelson. After laughing about our almost identical last names we discussed artwork, inspiration, and goals.

Nilson: What is your major and do you have a focus for your artwork?

Madison Nelson: Yeah, so right now I am studying to get my bachelors. I'm a studio art major and my concentration is sculpture.

Nilson: What do you make your sculptures out of?

Nelson: Oh, lots of stuff. Yeah, I've been really experimental recently so I'm like wow tons. The majority of them are based with like metal, or plaster, or wood as like an armature and then I just do a bunch of like heavy layers of mixed media on top of that - so I like to incorporate found objects and textiles.

Nilson: That's really cool! I love sculpture, I have a little wire sculpture I did in 8th grade of a guy doing handstand that I still have. So, what is your background as an artist? When did you start art classes, did you do them in high school, or is this a newer interest that you have?

Nelson: Yeah so, I took darkroom photography for my last two years of high school and I liked that it really introduced me to the art world in general. And then whenever I came to Texas State, I was an English major. I started to just notice like an art brain consumed my normal brain and just thinking, language is such a beautiful form of art, so I wanted to get more into like materializing narrations. So, I switched to studio art and I took intro or 3D which Jimmy taught, so that's kind of full circle since now he's my thesis teacher. So, I took one 3D course and was like this is love, so after that I instantly went into sculpture one and then it was history. I guess I really found it in college like my passion for it in more of a formal education, but being introduced to it in high school helped

Nilson: Since you were an English major before is there a specific piece of literature that prompted you to be interested in sculpture and art?

Nelson: That's a good question, gosh I feel like there's a lot. I really like reading scripts from different movies and having the subtitles on. I was like that's really powerful and then from there just always looking up like song lyrics. As far as like an actual book would go, um I don't know. I really like a book I just finished up, so I didn't impact me early on, but it's called Art of Travel by Alain de Botton. It is like all about psychogeography and like the psychology and stuff behind art. I thought that was really interesting and it just tied in a lot of influences in my work because it talks about different things that like the science of sculpture I always like to refer to in my work and stuff. So, it really talks about perception and sociology as well as like physical

locations. It's interesting, you know, like reality verse anticipation or imagination. I like to find like contrasts in that. I wish I found that book early on, but I'm glad it came to me when it did.

Nilson: That's really cool! I mean from your description of it, it really sounds like how words inspired your sculpture. The psychology of it goes hand in hand. So, do you have any influencers when it comes to your artwork, like famous artists or a piece?

5:51 Nelson: I guess my top favorite artists would be Nick Cave, Alex da Corte, and Petah Coyne. I could just keep going, but I feel like those are probably like the heaviest influencers. I like got obsessed with all of their work and started like reading about them too. The way that they talk about their work is so beautiful. I'm sure you can tell I try to have really good vocabulary, but my mind is just like 90 miles an hour all the time, so I say "uh" and stutter. But I just love how like they're just so absorbed with their work that it's like all of them. They don't like snap in and out of like okay now I'm doing this and stuff. It's just constantly in this mentality of creating no matter if that is a conceptual or physical thing but they all work with textiles and found objects. So, they do like really immersive installations as well - I appreciate that about them. Then they're all members of the LGBTQ+ community or women or people of color. So, it's really beautiful to see how they bring their own experiences into the work and just create inspiration and empowerment and commonality through like art. I just think it's so beautiful that they get to do that and have that platform for it.

Nilson: Yeah, that's great! You mentioned for their artwork as well as your own you like use textiles and found objects. So, I'm in a textile class right now, so is there a certain type of textile you like to work with, or particular types for different concepts that you use?

Nelson: Yeah, so I mainly like to use 100% cotton kind just because I like to work with paper pulp. I like abaca as well. I guess besides that kind of format is material manipulation. I really like to sew and stuff. I just got a patchwork sewing machine for like my birthday, which is now almost a year ago – just got it! I can work with sewing leather and latex. I try to be environmentally conscious in my decisions you know, so with weaving or stitching work I use natural materials. There's so much contradiction in trying to make didactic environmental commentary while at the same time being an artist and realizing how much waste your using. I do try to go to resale stores or junk yards and just see what I can find or what people are trying to give away. It's interesting the value ascribed, like societal values to these objects when they're just like discarded, you know. Imagining what their story was or where all they've been is really interesting too. So, for the like synthetic or plastics that I use I like to work like a lot of film, plastic film. I just started collecting play aluminum foil last year. Doing this huge installation, I ended up only like buying less than \$30 worth of foil and I was able to fill the whole installation room. So, that was like really cool. Now I'm trying to do that with bubble wrap and cardboard and other things.

Nilson: Is there a certain reaction you want people to have to your work?

Nelson: I want them to be transfixed. What I'm most attracted to and try to emulate is lack of a focal point. Almost like, you don't know where to rest your gaze and it such large, monumental scale that you don't know where to put your body either. And there's just all these

different ways to look at a piece. You know, growing up with the Internet there is such, especially now with the pandemic, there's such a realization on having experience. You know, the digital experience versus the physical is really interesting. I'll always try to document my work and no matter if I do it on my phone or DSLR or have someone from the photo department like take a picture of it. But it's just not the same as experiencing. I feel like that is the underlying quality that I look for. I want to create an experience or communicate an experience of visual abundance.

Nilson: I really like that you get lost in the work, I enjoy that too. Have you ever gotten a negative comment about your work and has it ever influenced your work and how did you react to that?

Nelson: I thought about this earlier when something about high school photography came up. So, my photo teacher in high school, I was in a different, totally, like obviously everyone is different in high school, but I was nowhere near as ambitious or centered or healthy as I am now. So, I definitely wasn't the best student. But I felt like he was very discouraging of my work and I remember whenever I got into college - I got into college really late - I found out actually when I was in photo. I got the email, and I was like excited. And he was like "so why are you going to college?" And I was like, oh I want to study like something creative, at the time English, and use that as a vehicle to express myself and understand the world around me. He was like "Oh well, I mean just based off of what I've seen now, I feel like that's going to be a waste of time." I was like, what! He was like, I don't think you're serious enough about art to be successful. And honestly if I didn't hear that, I don't know if I would have had that initial *oh yeah*. It fueled me and made me angry. To have that sense of reflection of, okay this is someone who's witnessing a very fundamental part of my practice and he's saying that he doesn't think I have like enough interest to do it. Well, he never said ability! It was hurtful but in all the right ways that was able to motivate me at the end.

Nilson: That is so ridiculous because obviously you're serious enough to want to pursue this since you applied to do something creative. Well, I'm glad it turned out well in the end! Is there a favorite piece that you've done and why?

Nelson: Yeah, my favorite piece I've done is the aluminum foil installation. You went through the installation itself and then I had this tiny little door. I'm 4'11" so I'm pretty short, so I made it enough that even I had to duck down to get under. Then you walked in and it's like this big red, lots of lights, and reflective stuff hanging. It's almost a maze kind of deal, and I had cherries embedded in a lot of crevices. I feel like this is my favorite because I successfully combined found objects and textiles. And I had plaster and wire armatures. So, I got to incorporate all of my favorite parts of everything 3D. I really liked it; it was fun. Then there's this band in town, Wezmer, kind of a psychedelic rock group and they recorded their EP album in here. It was really cool to see something that was just a class project almost a set design kind of thing. It really made it feel like a completely different experience having like a performative aspect on top of it. There's this collective called A.V.A.F. (Assume Vivid Astro Focus) and they are bonkers, they are so brilliant. It's these two guys and they have like all their friends and random people from across the world, from like all different mediums come and perform in front



of these like huge murals. They'll have like installations with cultural stuff incorporated into it. I feel like doing this led me to them. A lot of points of success came from this piece.

Nilson: Lastly, do you have a piece of advice for aspiring artists or people that are just now starting their college art career?

Nelson: I swear I give myself Ted talks all the time, like wow, if only someone would ask me. Where were you at 4 in the morning? I guess the best way to understand what is going on in your head, is to completely get out of your head and the ways that you perceive things. Focus on what you respond to and your interests and then you'll start to, dare I say manifest, opportunities. It'll really inspire you too, you know, choose what makes you passionate and to be really deliberate with your time. If you spend energy and time working hard and like trying to better your work or self like you're going to. That last part sounded like, duh! Work hard, be powerful, be crazy. Get out of your head, experiment with everything, try everything.

