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JAKE MICHAEL SINGER

We will meet again in the sky . Great pyramids if Giza . Art D'Égypt 2024



Contradiction, Multitudes and Magical Correspondences

written by By Sean O'Toole

Strata, recursive patterns, associations, metaphors and ghostly traces abound in Jake Singer's resolutely physical and sensuous sculptural forms from his Murmurations series. Started in 2019, each sculpture in this on-going series comprises vast quantities of stainless steel rods, which Singer layers like thatch and evolves into emergent forms suggestive of mythical winged beings and masses of birds in flight. The forms are not explicitly organic or figural, nor are they wholly abstract; rather, they hint at images and behaviours from the physical world while also presenting as

non-beings, things, digital phantoms, pointillist avatars of post-internet possibility. To borrow from poet Walt Whitman, Singer's sculptural practice embraces contradiction and contains multitudes. Singer is in essence a dualist. It is important to declare this upfront, to assert Singer's philosophy as a sculptor, which, of necessity, frames and directs his technical prowess as a maker. But what does it mean to be a dualist in actuality?

In a passage from Neal Stephenson's acclaimed sci-fi novel *Snow Crash* (1992), which popularised concepts like "avatar" and "metaverse", the protagonist Hiro is told the following by a digital librarian: "All philosophies are either monist or dualist. Monists believe that the material world is the only world – hence, materialists. Dualists believe in a binary universe, that there is a spiritual world in addition to the material world." To which Hiro smiles: "Well, as a computer geek, I have to believe in the binary universe." Singer too is a computer geek, albeit increasingly now a hacker of metal IRL (online patios for "in real life"). He is a materialist interested in a binary universe of threatened birds and emergent bytes, an artist open to the possibilities of a spiritual world, a sculptor committed to evoking the immaterial in solid forms.

The Murmurations series owes a debt – ideationally as much as formally – to a key sculpture of Mediterranean antiquity. The series loosely rehearses a figural element of the Niké of Samothrace (190 BCE), a votive monument that incorporates the winged goddess of victory, Niké, standing atop a boat.

Singer encountered this celebrated Hellenistic marble work in the Louvre as a teenager. The winged female figure presents without arms or head. While there is a strong vestigial trace of this ur-image in Singer's early Murmurations works like *They Who Created Themselves 1 & 2* (both 2019) and *Gyre Breeze* (2020), the original form is, at best, an unreliable echo, a digital phantom linked to an imperfectly reconstituted original.

"My ideal is to make a digital phantom where the materials come together to make a thing that seems unreal," Singer told me of his ambition with the Murmurations series. Unlike the Italian Futurists, who in their embrace of velocities and machine technologies declared their allegiance to the beauty of automobiles over the Niké of Samothrace, Singer is less clamorous in describing how new technologies,

science fiction and futurist thinking generally have replenished his artistic practice. Like the Futurists before him, he rejects the gesture of the plinth – his sculptures are resolutely anchored to the earth. But, being a dualist, he retains a residue of sincere interest in classical figuration. While aware of the potency of technology, he nonetheless has a deep interest in myth and non-mathematical thinking.

Maybe this relativism is what is necessary in negotiating the astonishing sci-tech transformations of daily life that, on closer inspection, form the occluded subject and deep context of Singer's Murmurations series. Writing about these transformations in the early 1990s, before the full-blown commercialisation

of the internet, sociologists William DiFazio and Stanley Aronowitz noted that scientific and technological innovation was, for the most part, no longer episodic: "Technological change has been routinized.

Not only has abstract knowledge come to the centre of the world's political economy, but there is also a tendency to produce and trade in symbolic significations rather than concrete products." Although not about artistic practice, DiFazio and Aronowitz's prescient analysis about technological change, abstract knowledge and symbolic significations surfaces themes that have occupied Singer throughout his career.

He is particularly insightful about the life as an artist in the age of networked computers. "The idea of meaning today is rapidly changing," Singer stated in 2017. "If something is meaningful it gets seen and then liked, copied or shared but seldom looked at multiple times. Considering how infinite the space of the Internet is, the sculpture's space tends towards zero." The spectacle and tyranny of the immaterial image represents the central challenge faced by sculptors in the twenty-first century. How, in this freighted situation of copies and simulations, does one make an impact IRL? Singer's answer: by

embracing contradiction and pursuing multitudes, by “playing with the relationship between digital and physical,” as he put it in 2017.

Singer’s practice encompasses both physical sculpture and various forms of digital image making. This hard-soft binary speaks to an increasing cleavage between what Stephenson describes in *Snow Crash* as the “meat world” and “metaverse” or “bit world.” Singer is comfortable operating in both realms. Although energised by post-internet culture, in a conversation Singer invoked formative encounters with works by performance artist Tino Sehgal and sculptor Antony Gormley as galvanising. In published interviews he has frequently cited author William Gibson as influential. The dystopian cyberpunk novels of Gibson and Stephenson might seem far removed from Singer’s affective sculptural forms, but dig a little deeper and the predictive language of cyberpunk, with its zingy neologisms and pronounced interest in new technologies and stark binaries, provides a fertile sense of Singer’s practice, not just its youthful genealogy but its current occupations, too.

Singer announced his artistic ambitions in *Catastrophes* (2016), a solo exhibition comprised mostly of sculptures and photographs. The assemblage sculpture and digitally collaged photographs showcased Singer’s interest in repetition, layering and incremental variance. More obviously abstract, his mild steel work *Escalation Incident with Dissonance* (2015), a freestanding Escher-like geometric maze made from replicas of the metalwork used in building emergency escapes, is an important precursor work to his *Murmuration* series. Its ambitions were immediately recognized and Singer was commissioned to produce a public sculpture, *Evacuation* (2016), which featured found examples of metal emergency escapes.

Where Singer’s earlier recombinant sculptures exhibited a strong inclination towards found materials

and bricolage, his *Murmurations* series is defined by his inventive use of a single material: extruded lengths of stainless- steel rod. Initially presented in its raw industrial colour, silver, Singer has over time invited colour into his compositions. Vivid and refracting, these dancing colours wonderfully complicate what initially presented as a formal exercise in translating two distinct references: the *Niké* of Samothrace and murmuration phenomenon in nature. Luminous, seductive and diverting, colour undermines; it also complicates simplistic narratives valorising the organic body – however disfigured (*Niké* of Samothrace)

or ephemeral (bird swarms) – in an age of digital evanescence. Singer’s interest in the murmuration phenomenon recalibrated his practice. The poetic language used to describe the shape-shifting and sympoietic behaviour of vast flocks of birds in flight entered Singer’s lexicon in 2019, but the idiom it refers to is hundreds of years old. In English, we speak of a murder of crows, a quarrel of sparrows, a deceit of lapwings and a murmuration of starlings. The collective noun describing a constantly deforming

body of starlings in flight derives from the distinctive flapping sound produced by this mass of birds as they gather to roost. This sociable behaviour is not limited to European starlings, it is also observable in

parts of Singer’s native South Africa, where huge masses of red-billed queleas glide, dip, twist, decouple and recombine in mesmerising aerial displays.

The formalisation of this behaviour into a lexicon of proper English usage dates to the fifteenth century, when handbooks aimed at the nobility – so-called Books of Courtesy, of which *The Book of St Albans* (1486) is the best known – gathered these collective nouns. “Unlike proverbs, rhymes or homilies, these terms were formally recorded because they formed part of the education of the nobility,” writes Chloe Rhodes in *An Unkindness of Ravens* (2014). “In fact, they were created and perpetuated as a

means of marking out the aristocracy from the less well-bred masses.” But this social history about how the ornamental use of language involves class biases is not what drew Singer to this phenomenon to bracket his sculpture series; rather, Singer’s Murmuration series materialises his interest in the concept of A phenomenon observable in both natural systems (like ant colonies) and artificial systems (such as telecommunication networks), swarm intelligence broadly describes collective behaviour of decentralized, self-organised systems. Since its coinage by theoretical physicists in the 1980s, the phrase has cross disciplines and is used to explore linkages, correspondences and granular dissimilarities between organic and synthetic systems. Understanding its natural occurrence has profound implications in the hard sciences. It has many practical utilities, particularly around data modelling and visualization linked to complex behavioural systems, including the way people behave online or IRL.

Commenting on the strong orientation in cyberpunk novels of the 1980s and 90s towards urban themes and motifs, new media scholar Sue Thomas points to a discrepancy in actual post-internet behaviour. The language and concepts adopted by many internet users, writes Thomas, demonstrates “a strong sense of the online world as a natural landscape ... Since their earliest beginnings computers and cyberspace have been saturated with images of the natural world: fields, webs, streams, rivers, trails, paths, torrents and islands.” Singer’s fossilised depictions of emergent forms in nature and online are correlative with aspects of this swarm behaviour – but are not reducible to it. Singer’s Murmurations embrace the replenishing possibilities of reciprocal traffic between the physical and online, exchanges that for an alert user like Singer are full of magical correspondences, correspondences that can be given sculptural form.

- 1 Walt Whitman (1892) Song of Myself, passage 51:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>
- 2 Neal Stephenson (1992/93) Snow Crash, New York: Bantam Books, p.208
- 3 William DiFazio & Stanley Aronowitz (1994) The Jobless Future:
Sci-tech and the Dogma of Work, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.15
- 4 Houghton Kinsman (2017) “Sculptures for the Internet: In conversation with Jake Singer,”
Artthrob, 3 February 2017: <https://artthrob.co.za/2017/02/03/sculptures-for-the-internet-in-conversation-with-jake-singer/>
- 5 Chloe Rhodes (2014) An Unkindness of Ravens: A Book of Collective Nouns, London: Michael O’Mara Books,
- 6 Sue Thomas (2012) “From Gunny Sacks to Mattress Vine,” in Putting Knowledge to Work &
Letting Information Play, Timothy W. Luke and Jeremy Hunsinger (eds), Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, p.112

JAKE MICHAEL SINGER



ASTRAL FOG

Marine steel
2026
125 x 155 cm

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CONTINUING MURMUR

Marine steel
2025
86 x 80 cm

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CUPRIC MURMUR

Marine steel
2026
82 x 96 cm

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DARK MASS MURMUR

Marine steel
2023
107 x 98 cm

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HELIACAL MURMUR

Marine steel
2026
100 x 140 cm

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KOMBU MURMUR

Marine steel
2026
90 x 100 cm

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LUMINOUS FIELD

Marine steel
2026
162 x 137 cm

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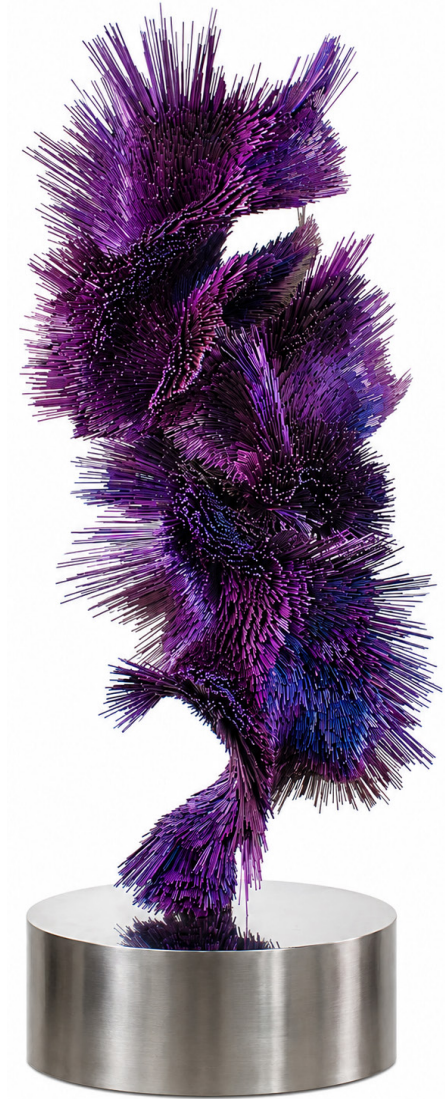


MUD

Marine steel
2025
100 x 95 cm



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NEBULA

Marine steel
2025
213 x 90 cm

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OBLATION MURMUR

Marine steel
2025
88 x 136 cm

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THE WIND MURMURED FROM FAR AWAY

Marine steel
2025
105 x 120 cm

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THRESHOLD MURMUR

Marine steel
2025
97 x 85 cm

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TWIRLING MURMUR

Marine steel
2026
52 x 40 cm

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UNWORLD MURMUR

Marine steel
2024
340 x 190 cm

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VISTA MURMUR

Marine steel
2023
113 x 80 cm

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WISP MURMUR

Marine steel
2023
51 x 49 cm



MONUMENTAL MURMUR (VOID)

Marine steel
2025
400 x 250 cm



MONUMENTAL MURMUR (FIRE)

Marine steel
2025
400 x 250 cm

The Wander of Winds

Tell me.
Where does the Wind come from?
I have not seen its origin. Somewhere over the vast grey ocean I imagine it swirling. Or somewhere in the mediterranean between two continents, the pressure building:
Over cool
dawn waters, colours of the dead sky surging to life.
Golden, vibrant, radiant, burning.
as night
trysts with day,
as water kisses air (softly)
as ocean ponders sky,
as cold joins warm,
as Still starts. Sterling!
as Blue compliments Gold
(about her long robes dramatically, swaying) .
Billowing
over mountains (wearing white hats).
Brushing through the long springing, laughing grass (which you remember)
Gently tickling trees, dancing, saying “shhhhhhhh” (can you keep a secret)
From overly dramatic melancholy,

To the lips of your lover’s smile.
Tell me,
What Mfaz’ did with the wind when he clapped?
Tell me, I want to know.
My Friend,
the lunatic genius, there above the dragon, at the top of Champagne Castle,
smiling, racing, ranting, raving, stomping, screaming, shaking. Joy and dust.
Tell me,
it was there that day he finally crossed into Kwa-Zulu, Rapt in the Field with Friends.
It came
past Tuku too, walking, whistling, in a baritone song. It flew by Bra Hugh (Whew). Like a warm blanket,
taking tired legs home to mother’s tender touch.
And Selda, still singing like Julie at the top of Untersberg before the separation.
Tell me, where did it go?
Toward the
cosmos, toward the stars: a cackling, a crackling ecstatic echo-crescendo.
A celebration of the mystery which we have yet to know.
(From very,
very, very, very... far away)
It came from this somewhere to greet us. And suddenly departed.

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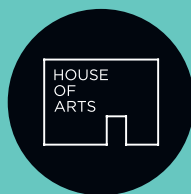
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hallo@houseofarts.at

+43 664 333 0 900