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Xavier Mascaró interview: 'I'm a sculptor, because I want to leave something behind, some trace of what I have been'

Spanish sculptor Xavier Mascaró talks about his obsession with presence and absence in his work, how ancient cultures inspire him, and the laborious process involved in casting his monumental pieces by hand

Xavier Mascaró: *Departure*
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by ANNA McNAY

Despite being hailed as one of the world's leading Spanish contemporary sculptors, Xavier Mascaró is currently enjoying his debut solo exhibition in the UK at the Saatchi Gallery in London. His work, made from rusted iron and oxidised bronze, fragile aluminium and cracked ceramic, fills two of the top-floor galleries and spills out of the front entrance, where his enormous crouching *Guardians* (2010) greet visitors like the terracotta army.

Fascinated by the iconography of ancient cultures, Mascaró travels a lot, and this feeds into his work in many ways. His own story is one of a path less travelled (in his family, at least) and, crediting art with saving his life as a young teenager, he is taking part in a contemporary art auction, *Be Inspired*, in aid of the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts.*

Mascaró found time to meet Anna McNay and show her around his exhibition, starting with the elegiac *Departure* (2009-11).

Xavier Mascaró: This piece is an installation composed of 26 boats in iron and bronze and fabric. To me, they are related to the present and time that flows constantly. We are crossing time, transported by time, and sort of fossilised. The way I present it, it's as if it's seen from the future and it's archaeology of the present. Although it is an installation of 26 pieces, it's also a large object with an exodus. It's a metaphor for life. My inspiration comes from iconography and history, especially from cultures such as Egyptian, Greek and Phoenician, where the boat has a role in ritually transporting life from one side to the other. In my mind, it's about time, time flowing, and what remains after time has gone, which is a skeleton.

Anna McNay: Is each individual boat made completely by hand?

XM: Yes, my assistants and I cast each one by hand. Then the metal is poured in industrial foundries – but I work with the foundries on this because I like to be in control of the whole process. We do it ourselves because I like to create the conditions for accidents to happen: the metal will not reach everywhere; there will be some tiny explosions – that kind of thing. These allow me to create this organic finish to the work.

AMc: Are the boats that are the same size all made from the same cast?

XM: No. They are all unique pieces. There are 13 different versions of the smaller ones, 10 of the medium ones – which are about 2 or 2.5 metres – and then three of the larger ones, which are about 5 metres long. I like to make them using this sand technique, which, to me, is the most organic way to cast. I use both bronze and iron and, because they don't react in the same way when you pour them, they require different preparation. All the elements that you see in the pieces are a result of the technical process – it's both technical and aesthetic. The ones in bronze require more runners and parts so that the metal can flow; the iron ones are a little bit cleaner, more like a skeleton. The iron is very similar to steel, because it has a very low carbon composition, and the bronze is a little heavier.

AMc: Yet the iron has still rusted.

XM: All these pieces are rusted by combustion. They are in contact with oxygen, so they rust naturally, too. The bronze is very dark grey and the iron is a bit lighter grey, but you get different compositions and sometimes it is a little bit blue. When it is humid, the iron turns brown. That's why the *Guardians* are brown, because they are outdoors.

AMc: And you deliberately want that effect?

XM: Yes. I want that effect and I like the pieces to evolve naturally.

AMc: Will they change over time still? Is it a continuing process?

XM: The ones that are indoors will stay mostly the way they are, because conditions are more or less constant. The ones outdoors will respond to the weather. The elements have an effect, and I like that.

AMc: Shall we move into the next gallery?

XM: Yes. Here, in the next gallery, there is a group of heads entitled *Queen (Head of Alexandra with four Heads of Eleanora)*. They are also unique pieces, based on profiles from ancient coins. I am interested in the hollow space inside the sculpture and how light hits the surfaces inside. This is how you feel the depth of the sculpture. These are all cast in one piece, even though you see many pieces. There is a little welding in the finishing, but it is all one piece at the beginning. Iron can be hermetic, but I want it to be permeable so that you can see and feel through it. If it were closed, you would only feel the skin of it. Sculpture for me is the inside, the intermediate space (which is the sculpture itself) and the outside space – all three spaces. The sculpture is actually the skin of the whole, but there is an inside and an outside.

I made four smaller heads and then a larger one, which is the queen. I'm interested in representing a part of the body – in this case a head – as an abstraction of the whole. It's not an allegorical person I am representing, it's woman or womankind – it's a whole, it's presence. Most of my work has to do with my obsession with presence and absence – the duality – and that's why, actually, I'm a sculptor, because I want to leave something behind, some trace of what I have been.

AMc: Can you explain a little more about your use of sand on the surface of your works?

XM: I like to cast with sand because it allows me to get a more organic finish. Sometimes sculpture in iron or steel is very cold, but mine are all very organic. I want them to be something that happens in an instant, like a little cataclysm. You pour metal and then you unearth it. I like the metaphor of unearthing being the birth of a sculpture. When I pour the iron, depending on the thickness of the passage of the metal and the pressure of the sand, the sand adheres to and melts together with the metal. That's then a part of the texture that you see. The sand is usually dark because it's mixed with resin.

AMc: These pieces are smoother. They are like masks rather than bodies.

XM: Yes. This piece – *Sacred Couple* – is one of my favourites, because here I have been combining two of my obsessions – the presence of the iron and the game of playing with the mask. All of the masks have a mixture of sources of inspiration. Some are Asian, some are African, and some are pre-Colombian. These, in my mind, are inspired by a fertility goddess and a shaman from ancient Mexico. The piece is about stability and the couple as a foundation stone of society. It's about the strength of the woman and the wisdom of the man in primitive culture – although you could also say it the other way. I was playing with this duality.

With *Masks*, I like the fact that there is an absence of the trait-carrying face. The mask is a fascinating, magical object and it's found in every culture. It's been used to play, hide and substitute. These pieces reflect light, instead of absorbing it. They are a lot about air and what is missing. They are made from aluminium and mesh. This tiny one is made from copper and pewter. Depending on the scale, I need different materials.

AMc: How do you get the shape for these?

XM: I build a model and have two different moulds – positive and negative – and then I put them together. I work with my assistants. It is quite laborious work.

I like to be able to work both on a very small scale and on a large scale. I like to think it is not so much about size as about the attitude of the observer. When you do a larger work, it's as if you're talking loudly or shouting; then, when you're doing something smaller, you're almost whispering to the observer because he needs to get very close to perceive what is there.

Couple is a combination of ceramic and painted iron. I like this combination very much and work with it for many pieces. I like to fire the ceramic. It is something smooth that you can caress. It is attractive. And in combination with the roughness of the iron, when I use them together, their interaction breaks both of them. The ceramic is cold and, at the moment when I pour the iron, which is 1,500C, the thermic contrast cracks the ceramic. When the metal is cooling, it is not allowed to contract, because the ceramic is not flexible. So they both break each other, but they are intimately bonded. It's the perfect marriage. Even where you see a crack, it doesn't make it weaker, because the structure is still very strong inside. The bond has an asphyxiating component.

AMc: You were born in Paris, brought up in Spain, and now live and work in Mexico City and Madrid. Is travelling a very important part of your work?

XM: For me, it's very important, because I think the fact of being exposed to more than one culture, more than one world, opens my mind. Also the physical aspect of moving from one place to another is very inspiring. I get many ideas when I am travelling on the plane or train. Your mind stops staring at just one thing. They say in psychology that you have to think as though you were looking through a window on a train. Just let your thoughts pass. And that's what happens when you travel. I like it.

I had a studio for 15 years in New York, which, for me, is the big city par excellence. You can live in your neighbourhood as if it were a village. Now I'm in Mexico City, which is a huge city with many exciting things going on. I like that, but I also need to get out to the countryside for some rest. But I need more of the city and less of the rest. For one year, I had a studio in Mexico, Madrid, and, instead of New York, London. I was trying to figure out where I wanted to be. I loved London, I thought it was great, but then I met my girlfriend – now fiancée – in Mexico, so I had to settle a little.

AMc: When you do have studios in different places, you're presumably working on more than one piece at a time?

XM: Yes, I am always working on several pieces at a time because my processes take a long time. It's a long and slow process. If it were a very fast process, I would act without thinking, which is fine at certain moments, but I like having time to think about an idea that I am fascinated with and want to make – it creates a bond between me and the piece and a need for me to actualise the idea.

AMc: Have there been pieces that haven't made it to fruition because you didn't remain fascinated by them?

XM: There have been pieces that have evolved, that have changed in my mind.

AMc: Do you always model your works on a small scale first?

XM: In the past, I have directly modelled some large ones, but I very much like going through different scales, because each scale gives you different insights into the idea.

AMc: How did you get into making sculpture, because you actually trained as a painter?

XM: I always had the fantasy of becoming an artist when I was small. I was a good draughtsman. But it was only ever a fantasy because I was supposed to become a doctor. In my father's family, my elder brother is the ninth generation in a row in which every single man in the family has been a doctor. We are the oldest family of doctors in Spain. My nephew is now becoming the 10th generation. I was the only man in my family not to become a doctor. I was going to become one too – I wanted to transplant a brain or something, when I was a kid – but then something happened: my mother died when I was 13 and that was a huge trauma. I kept drawing her face for days from memory and, at some point, I got a lot of anxiety because I found I couldn't remember her so well to draw. I thought she was fading away and so I had the first big crisis that I remember in my life, thinking that everything is going to disappear. I wanted to leave a trace of who I am, which people can recover, even when they don't remember my face. So I decided to turn that fantasy into a reality.

At the beginning, I just drew and painted for many years. I also had the fantasy of becoming a sculptor, but I didn't understand sculpture. It takes a while to understand how it works. Back then, I thought it was like a drawing with many different sides. When you become a sculptor, which takes years of practice, you're actually thinking already in 3D. So you might be working on the front of the piece, but you're thinking about the back at the same time. I had some little trials with sculpture, which were quite a failure, when I was 14 or so, but they led to nothing. Then at some point I became disappointed that I was representing light with painting – I wanted light to be real. The same light that lights me should light the object that I create. I wanted there to be a spatial link between the work and me. That was the way that it became physical. As I said, I wanted to leave a presence and I wanted the presence to be physical.

AMc: Was that after you had studied at the Barcelona School of Fine Arts [1983-88]?

XM: Well, I didn't really study. My father helped me all the way, because it takes a long time to become an artist, but he also said that he'd like me to have a degree. I got my degree in painting, but I never attended courses. I went for about two weeks out of five years because the atmosphere at the art school in Barcelona, at least in those times, was not stimulating. I didn't like it. I just taught myself. I learned etching from a book with acid in my bedroom. Then I learned to paint on my own. For sculpture, I went to an industrial foundry to watch and, from what I saw, I understood that it wouldn't work with the ideas in my mind and so I developed a different process, pushing it to the limit. I work by getting to know and understand the materials as they have been used by craftsmen over the years, and then working with them in my own way.

AMc: You have two children – a son of 18 and a daughter of 16. Are either of them set to become doctors or artists?

XM: It's very easy to follow paths. They are both creative. My daughter likes drawing a lot; my son is more into construction and has made a couple of sculptures in my studio. But I never encouraged it because it is such a hard life. If what you're looking for is economic safety, you won't find it there. Also, reactions to your work. When I speak about this with friends, they say that it's the same in all professions, but I think it's more evident in art. Criticism of your work may affect you because you'll take it as criticism of your own inner-self. You are more exposed, it's your means of expression. Until you're very sure of who you are, when you're growing, you have to become strong, because you get rejected so many times that it can be destabilising.

Also, I was working for so long – 18 years – and nothing was happening. There had been a boom in art and everyone was a painter – and I was painting then. So galleries would tell me: "Yeah, we really like it, but there are so many others. Who are you? You haven't shown, so you won't be able to get a show until you've shown." So at this point I decided to garner experience and I went to New York.

So I never wanted to push my kids. I think an artist, if he's got to become one, he'll become one. You don't have to tell him to do so. In fact, it's more a case of if you tell him no, don't do something, he's going to do it.

AMc: So you began showing your work initially in New York?

XM: I began like everyone else, showing in cafeterias and in my own studio. My first real show was at the cultural centre in Barcelona, but my career really took off when I began working with an important gallery in New York and started to have some outdoor monumental shows in Paris and Madrid.

AMc: It must be very difficult starting out working on such a large scale. How did you fund yourself initially?

XM: That's something you learn little by little. You save money to cast a small piece. Then, when you sell it, you cast maybe two, or a larger one. If you want to be free and independent, you have to fund yourself. You have to be crazy enough to create, but not crazy enough to ruin yourself with bankruptcy. You have to have a balance.

AMc: Who owns the pieces on display in the gallery now?

XM: These are all my own. They are from my studio. My studio in Madrid is like a hangar. It is almost 15,000 sq ft. I have a boat sculpture there, which is 18 metres long and weighs two tonnes.

AMc: You are also currently participating in a contemporary art auction, Be Inspired, in aid of the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts. How did you come to be involved and what does the work of the charity mean to you?

XM: I became involved because of my show. The final live auction will take place here at the Saatchi Gallery. Art saved my life. I needed something I could turn to, to give me a sense and purpose. The Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts gives children more exposure to art and helps them to develop more self-confidence. Art helps to enrich their lives. Sometimes children will connect with contemporary art because they are experiencing something similar. I think it's

great that art can be useful. In my case, it was really useful.

AMc: What work have you donated?

XM: It's a *Guardian*, like the ones that you can see outside the gallery, but it's a small one – about 50 or 60cm – in ceramic and iron, like *Couple*. It's a combination of materials that I feel very connected to and it's about the duality between fragility and strength, which I think is a nice metaphor when you're thinking about children and growing up.

I am very happy to be involved because I have always had a fantasy about working with children. For the world to be a better place, you need children to be happy. If children were happy, there would be no problems in the world. It's not an easy task, but you can start in your community, or wherever you can reach.

**For Be Inspired, Mascaró is joining fellow contemporary artists, including Marc Quinn, Gavin Turk, Idris Khan and Tracey Emin, in donating works to be auctioned online from 17 September, culminating in a live auction at the Saatchi Gallery on 1 October. The money raised will be used by the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts for its new Start Hospices Programme, which will enable children with life-limiting illnesses to experience days out with their families at local arts venues. For more information on the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts, and on the auction itself, please see childrenandarts.org.uk*



Xavier Mascaró. *Departure*, 2009-11. Bronze, iron, brass, fabric, dimensions variable. © Xavier Mascaró, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Joaquin Cortes.



Xavier Mascaró. Couple, 2013. Ceramic and iron, 38 x 16 x 15cm. © Xavier Mascaró, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Joaquin Cortes.



Xavier Mascaró. Queen (Head of Alexandra with four Heads of Eleanora), 2014. Iron, dimensions variable. © Xavier Mascaró, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Joaquín Cortes.



Xavier Mascaró. Masks, 2014. Iron, plexiglass, aluminium, mesh, fabric, dimensions variable. © Xavier Mascaró, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Joaquín Cortes.



Xavier Mascaró. Sacred Couple, 2014. Iron and aluminium, 100 x 114 x 43cm. © Xavier Mascaró, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Joaquín Cortes.



Xavier Mascaró. Small Guardian, 2013. Glazed ceramic and molten iron, H64 x W43 x D32cm. © Xavier Mascaró, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.



Xavier Mascaró. Small Guardian, 2013 (view 2). Glazed ceramic and molten iron, H64 x W43 x D32cm. © Xavier Mascaró, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.