# ARTISTS on ARTISTS

## LAURIE SIMMONS on JOHN NEWMAN

AS I STOOD WITH JOHN NEWMAN IN HIS STUDIO amid scattered worktables covered with the flotsam and jetsam of his complex sculptural process, I found my thoughts drifting toward the question of what we mean when we talk about specificity and eccentricity in artmaking. Newman, both bull in a china shop and kid in his own candy store, talked to me about his delicate materials, his sugar-coated colors and the exotic spoils of his travels (in Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa), all of which belie his minimalist roots and give his studio the combined air of a laboratory and an ethnographic museum. His realm of *distinctive objects* (for he has gone beyond Judd's *specific objects*) resemble nothing else being made today, and he seems willing to follow the implication of his process wherever it takes him.

Newman's studio is a magpie's dream of all that glitters, with cool stone moments of relief. His sculptures are feverish and, though intentionally abstract, could be seen as anthropomorphized chatterers, or vaguely familiar medical models. I am reminded of a story he once told me: When he and his sister were both sick and home from school, they were allowed to retreat to their parents' bedroom, which they nicknamed the Fever Hotel. Would the lobby of the Fever Hotel have for its

**GOLD AND GOURDS ON A MARBLE PILLOW**, 2005, 13 × 19 × 18", CARVED AND POLISHED TURKISH AFYON MARBLE, GOURDS, GOLD LEAF, PAPIER-MÂCHÉ, FOAM CORE, JAPANESE PAPER, WOOD PUTTY, ACQUA RESIN AND ARMATURE WIRE.

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central theme a group of Newman's works? The scale of these sculptures is startling because, while in no way diminutive, they invite you to get up close and personal: to circle around, to lean in. The subtle structure that in theory both visually connects Newman's works and keeps him honest to his reductive beginnings is that of a broken torus or donut. With his systemic premise firmly in place, the artist is able to go haywire, cantilevering flamboyant materials and surfaces off basic structures. What would Newman's world be like if there were closure once and for all? Meandering lines and broken loops offer the artist the chance to weave his magic yet imply a longing for the beginning to meet the end.

Much has been made of Newman's broad range of materials. Can an exquisitely polished, veined marble pillow cribbed from a Bernini really get comfortable with a witch doctor's gourd? Can a pink cobra-like shape fashioned from Newman's so-called home brew (equal parts papier-mâché, epoxy and wood putty) balance a lingam from India (a gift to the sculptor from another sculptor)? Flat-footed and brazen, the sculptures answer yes.

In Newman's work, hot, bothered and irrational thought are the manifestation of a rigorous and intellectual mind. If a position has been taken about the kind of object it is desirable to make, then another decision has been made to let it go to hell in a handbasket. In motion, sweaty *and* rooted, zenned out *and* hysterical, a sculpture becomes both a party invitation to an imaginary place and a reference to what one might find there.

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**POMPOM BATTERY**, 2004, 18 ½ × 19 ½ × 12 ½", MOLD-BLOWN GLASS, SHOLAPITH, COPPER WIRE, MUTEX, SISAL, PAPIER-MÂCHÉ, STYROFOAM, JAPANESE PAPER, ACQUA RESIN, WOOD PUTTY, ARMATURE WIRE AND OIL PAINT.
FAR RIGHT: **CRUSHED AND WEIGHTED-DOWN TURN**, 2005, 24 × 16 × 14 ½", CARVED AND POLISHED BLACK MARQUINA MARBLE, STEROLITHOGRAPHIC PATTERN PRODUCED OF HIGH-IMPACT POLYSTYRENE WITH PALLADIUM LEAF AND STOVE-BLACKING, PAPER AND TAPE.

**PINK STONE PATH**, 2005, 16 × 16 × 13", POLISHED STONE, EPOXY COATING, PALLADIUM LEAF, PAPIER-MÂCHÉ, FOAM CORE, JAPANESE PAPER, ACQUA RESIN, WOOD PUTTY AND ARMATURE WIRE.