

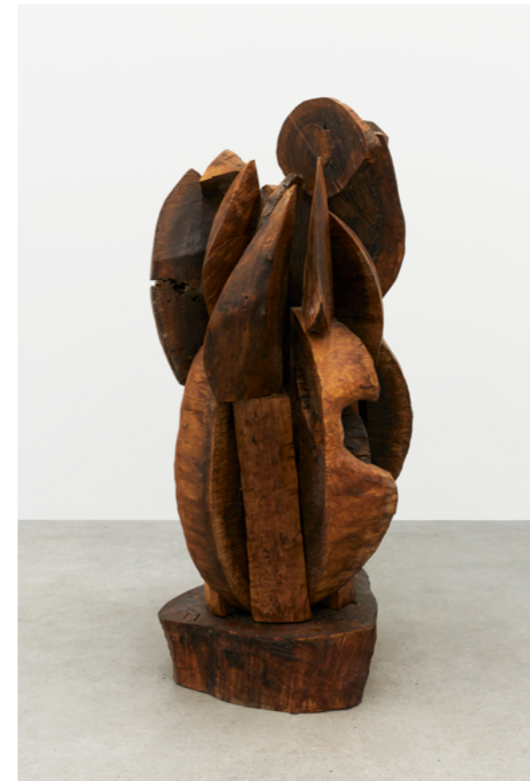


TRACEY EMIN - ANTHONY SYMONDS - CHRIS KRAUS - THADDEUS MOSLEY - LAILA GOHAR - MATTHEW BARNEY

M A R F A

Sculptor Thaddeus Mosley and MARFRIEND Andre Walker are having a laugh together over the phone. The appetite comes while eating, and MARFAMILY soon feel famished for Thad's pearls of wisdom learnt over 94 years.

THADDEUS MOSLEY in conversation with ANDRE WALKER
Photographs RACHEL CHANDLER, TEREH IDIA & TOM LITTLE
Artworks courtesy of Karma, New York
Thank you Addison Richley at Karma, New York & @harrietteflorence
Location Rockefeller Center, New York & Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



Components
2017

ANDRE We are on! Okay, cool. Hi Thaddeus, how are you?

THADDEUS For an old guy, I'm good.

ANDRE Were you sculpting today?

THADDEUS Oh yeah, I do it every day that I can.

ANDRE I read an interview with you and Hans Ulrich Obrist, and at the end of the interview I just cried because I'm 54 and just couldn't believe the amount of energy you have.

THADDEUS Well, I used to have a lot more but I'm 94 now. I just keep going because it's what you do if you're trying to be an artist. I was supposed to be in New York City last week to see my bronzes that went up in Rockefeller Center, but I couldn't do it because of you-know-what.

ANDRE Just to be clear, I don't know much about art - I'm more of a fashion designer!

THADDEUS I did a show in a gallery in Cleveland some years ago, and the paper did not have an art interviewer, so they sent someone down from the realty section of the paper to interview me.

Whatever you want to say or ask is fine because when it comes to art, only the art itself is what's important to me.

ANDRE Beautiful, beautiful. I'm happy to hear that. When I first started reading about you, I was like, «Who is this man? He went to college, he joined the Navy... » You're like *Mr Perfect*. You have six children, you're like superman! I was totally in awe. I couldn't believe it, and I just felt ridiculous in my own life after reading about you because, my god, you also worked at the Post Office for 40 years whilst pursuing your art. Oh, and you also have a journalism degree from college. Wait... am I being too much?

THADDEUS My choices came down to, I won't say desperation, but more because they were what I had to do to maintain a family and myself. When I joined the Navy, I was drafted and I got out as fast as I could.

ANDRE How long were you with them for?

THADDEUS About 18 months. When the war ended, they said if you want to be discharged you can, so I came out and I went to the University of Pittsburgh.

ANDRE You got your first journalism job in the 50s, what was that like for a black man?

THADDEUS Well you know, back then, there were very few corporations who had Afro-Americans working for them. I didn't think that I was going to get a job when I applied but felt that I must make them realise that I'm here, and not only am I available, but confident too. Of course, many people were surprised. When I graduated in 1950, there were three daily newspapers and in Pittsburgh, and they were all run by white people. I went to a couple of places that had in-house magazines or industrial corporations that had a monthly or weekly magazine and ended up at the Pittsburgh Courier, which was the leading American weekly at the time. I had three children though, and with hospitalisation and pensions and all that, I had to join the Post Office instead for the security it provided my family. The Post Office, and civil service in general, was a refuge for many artists and Afro-American men. When the local mines and mills began to fail, many of us went into the postal service. It became the backbone for lower middle class African Americans.

ANDRE Right.

THADDEUS Of course, now there's way more educated Afro-Americans than in my time, but people are still unprepared for the idea of educated and talented Afro-Americans, particularly at the corporate level.

ANDRE I've been very lucky, so I can't really comment. When I say lucky, I do mean lucky, because I didn't even graduate high school. It's not that I was unintelligent or didn't have any desire for knowledge and learning, it's just that it was a riff between my parents and myself that ended up with me rebelling in the direction of my career choice.

THADDEUS Very few parents want their children to become artists! I didn't start thinking about it until I was almost 30 and was working for the Post Office. I didn't know much about art technically and probably still don't. We used to go over to Carnegie and look at the work of international artists. Finding out about African tribal art was one of my passions and still is. It is such a vast continent and so diverse a place. I met a man at the museum who collected works from African tribes and by a couple of other artists, and it really







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showed me how these people, who weren't academically trained, could do the most fantastic and amazing sculpture. How they were able to abstract the human form and face, and so forth. To me this sculptural language is the basis of modern art. It changed the face of Western art and it's still relevant in fashion, dance and music. That was my focus. How do I make these things? How do I see things? In what way is it combined with Western ideas of sculpture?

ANDRE So you know that movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, I was wondering what you think of the part where Sidney Poitier says to his father, «You see me as a black man, I see myself as a man!»

THADDEUS I think that all people are people. If you're a friend, you're a friend. As they say, some of my best friends are white. The woman I date now is Japanese, and we've been dating for 14 or 15 years; time collapses when you're an old person. I recognise the beauty in every culture, everyone has made a contribution. I only know that I'm a coloured man because in this society they keep telling me every day that I am one.

Andre laughs

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ANDRE Exactly.

THADDEUS We were told where we could live, the jobs which coloured people could get and the people that coloured people should marry. The ghettos are, of course, not for the advantage of Afro-Americans. It is there that people feel hidden, and where they can't really advance economically or don't have access to other experiences, be it education or careers. When I grew up in school, we didn't know that there were such things as architects. I had no idea that eye surgeons or astrophysicists existed because it's just not things that were presented to us, so we didn't understand that these were professions to aspire to.

ANDRE How does your art fit within these thoughts?

THADDEUS I think that as an artist, there's been so much stress put on relevance and so forth. How relevant is your work to the Afro-American community? Does it excite change or bring about change? Well, I've never done anything I thought would change anyone's mind, but for me, art is a very personal journey. I can remember in the 60s, when there were a lot of people saying, «Well if you

aren't doing so-called black art, you're not a black artist». To me, people who felt that way and who's art wanted to go that way, I think that's fine. I have nothing against that, or those who wanted to paint nothing but abstracts or seascapes.

ANDRE I agree with you 100%. I could talk about this for a hundred hours. It excites me because this is how I've lived my career. I feel as if I'm the first designer who is black who was allowed to be a designer without having to be a black designer, as my work didn't have to be contextualised via my race. I'm happy to hear it from you because I believe that this is a foundational truth, and that truth is linked to humanity, not society or commerce. The human is an individual, and if a black person wants to paint flowers or do sculpture, whatever they want to do, I don't feel like their work has to be socio-politically informed.

THADDEUS Yes.

ANDRE I've been doing some research recently, going way back, almost looking at the history of racism, maybe trying to figure things out for myself in a way.

THADDEUS Someone was talking to a friend recently



Thaddeus Mosley Studio
Pittsburgh, 2020



Perge Modo
2005

about the social upheaval that we're experiencing now, and they said how it had been better at one point, and all I could think was when was that!? When I was a kid in grade school, one of the big things in the news was always lynchings, mainly in the South, but a few in the North. I can't remember any time in America where white and black people were anywhere near equal terms... and if it happened, I certainly missed out on it. I was involved as a consultant on a project about WWII a few years ago, and the project leaders were asking veterans about their experiences during that time. They asked if I was a veteran and I said, «Yes, of the black navy». They all refuted it, saying, «We never had a black navy!» They did. There was a segregated black navy, black army and black air force.

ANDRE It's true. Wait... we have gone off topic. Let me check my notes again... What do you think about when you're working?

THADDEUS The joy for what I do, and like any artist, seeing how things may come to fruition. How you see your idea as a seed or a sapling, and how it comes into a shape that is nearly what you had in mind. The closer it comes

to that idea in your mind, the happier you are. That to me is the joy of being an artist. It was funny, a friend of mine called me a couple of days ago to tell me that someone from The Wall Street Journal reviewed the work at Rockefeller Center and thought it was conservative.

ANDRE Oh...

THADDEUS I never get upset about reviews or overwhelmed or excited if they're complimentary. Nothing changes the work, no matter what people say.

ANDRE It's funny that in the art world, the word conservative is considered a slur. Can I just say, I love you so much. Can you adopt me? I don't know what to do, I need to work with you. How do you keep motivated to create work?

THADDEUS Some people look for a kind of inspiration that comes out of the blue or something. I can't say that they're wrong or right, but for me, there's only one way to produce, and that is to be productive. You've got to work. Very rarely do I think that what I'm making is going to be great, I just start out and hope for the best. To me, art is like running a marathon

- it's long distance. In order for me to accumulate any kind of work and be able to enter shows, I set aside many hours a day, and then on the weekends I double that time. People always say to me, «Man, you have a work ethic». No, I just have a desire to produce.

ANDRE But that's where the work ethic is, Thad. Just get over it, you're outrageous.

THADDEUS Every discipline is all consuming.

ANDRE It is a total honour to have spoken with you. I would definitely love to meet you one day in real life.

THADDEUS I hope I last until then.

ANDRE How are you feeling right now, you good?

THADDEUS You never know how you're feeling when you get to be this old, or even when you're young for that matter.

ANDRE Enjoy your dinner, Thad. And thank you so much for everything.

THADDEUS Anytime. Bye for now.

ANDRE For now, exactly.

