

Tim Noble & Sue Webster

Mistakes Are The Right Decisions

VALENTINA FRUTIG

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It was love at first sight when Nicola Erni saw the works from the exhibition titled *Nihilistic Optimistic* by the British artist-duo Tim Noble and Sue Webster showcasing their famous shadow installations. In the original show at Blain Southern in London in 2012, the shadow installations were accompanied by one outstanding sculpture—if it can be defined as such—entitled *My Beautiful Mistake*, 2012. This work immediately reminded Nicola of Robert Rauschenberg’s “Combine” paintings.

Functioning without any light source, *My Beautiful Mistake* plays a crucial role within Noble and Webster’s oeuvre. It marks the definite decision to eliminate the shadow and to understand the work as a sculpture—to feel its haptic presence and to increase awareness of its material and structure.¹ The dissociation of its original presentation aims to understand the sculpture as a single work marking a new direction in the artistic career of Tim Noble and Sue Webster. After admiring the artists’ capacity for creating non-physical images through three-dimensional constructions, the new focus lies on the de- and recontextualization of found material, its created connection with each other, and the revelation of discarded beauty on the streets.

Raw material such as aluminum, steel or rubber are combined with common objects like chairs, a stool or a wheelbarrow that had been piled up towards the studio’s high ceiling. Not only one specific space forms the appearance of the sculpture but also the surrounding area of the studio, located in the middle of Shoreditch in Central London. Tim Noble and Sue Webster are passionate hunters and gatherers of junk spread all over the streets, material left behind on construction sites or objects sorted out and available for free, giving them a new life and function within their works. Tim Noble monitored the wheelbarrow, the tip of the structure, for a while before finally pinching it on D-Day along with its whole content of rubble and stones.² Still carrying its essentials but retired from his last job, the wheelbarrow took the top spot on the structure.

The two piles of books which connect the wheelbarrow and two other bigger objects used to be spread over the artists’ studio. The bad condition of some of them shows their previous habitat—dirty streets or dustbins. Emphasizing their fragility, the staggered order of the books stacked on the floor of the artists’ space was taken over into the sculpture as if planned from the beginning of their arrival to be included in this exact way. Through this new perception, the books receive a connecting function on a formal level, being the support and connection cord between the single elements. On the visual level, they serve as memorabilia of the artist’s journeys through the London streets as well as of their individual compilation in the studio afterwards.

Until this point, we may have been able to identify all the elements included in the sculpture so far. But what about the black round balloon jammed in the middle of the two piles of books? Its human attributes, the round shape functioning as the head as well as the

horizontal protrusion resembling a long nose transform other parts of the sculpture to human limbs. In fact planned to be integrated in another work of art, the unique manufactured aluminum balloon with a rubber coating finally found a new permanent home, together with its wooden transport box underneath the first pile of books. It seems to be the face of the sculpture individualizing it, confronting the observer and raising questions if the human attributes were a straightforward intention to be integrated. The mix of binned and banned materials together with specially commissioned objects shows the alternation between intuition and intention in the artistic practice of Tim Noble and Sue Webster.

My Beautiful Mistake is a piece which changes our perception in terms of valuing and comparing goods with one another—quite rightly considering today’s trend to equip everyday products with a little touch of luxury. At the same time, the structure plays with the original function of the individual objects—carefully planned and reassembled in a humoristic way. Traces of their origin are combined with the marks of the sculpture’s creation. The unification of the artists’ mistakes while working together with other people’s mistake of throwing away useful material results in the best and most productive decision for all parties.

1 *Nihilistic Optimistic*, Blain/Southern, 2012, p. 17

2 Tim Noble, interview with the author, July 13, 2017

My Beautiful Mistake, 2012
Pencil, wood, steel, aluminum, rubber, and cotton on
wheelbarrow, two chairs, stool, books, and tube of paint

