

Introduction ([00:00](#)):

This interview between Chantal Pontbriand, contemporary art critic and curator and co-founder of *Parachute* magazine, and the artist Max Dean took place via Zoom on May 28th, 2022.

Chantal Pontbriand ([00:15](#)):

I'm delighted to do this interview, Max Dean. It is a great pleasure and a great honour. I followed your work forever. We reconnected in 2016, when I came back to Canada after living for a decade in Europe and, you were in the middle of great discoveries then. And we'll talk about that later, but I propose that we conduct this interview by following the letters that spell out your name, and then we can call it *Under the Spell of Max Dean*, which is really everyone's opinion about your work and yourself, dear Max,

Max Dean ([01:04](#)):

Even though there are only six letters to deal with. Okay. So what letter are we starting with?

Chantal Pontbriand ([01:09](#)):

Just before we start, the rules of the game tell us that we have five minutes for each letter. Okay.

Max Dean ([01:16](#)):

Okay. Are you the official timer too?

Chantal Pontbriand ([01:19](#)):

Yes, I guess so. We'll start with M, which is a wonderful letter because M in French literally is. "I love" (aime). Okay. As I said, as we all love you, and I think you introduce this also in your work, for this verb love, because it's very relational. It always has to do with the other. And it also, in my mind can stand for metaphysics of the imagination and that meta I feel is what you're constantly exploring. Yeah. Since last year, when we've been talking all of a sudden so much about meta, but you were in that place since the beginning and M is also mother, and it's

extraordinary in your work, how the idea of the womb comes back regularly as a sphere, as a bubble, as a balloon even. One of your first works, I found out was *Balloon Box* in 1970-71. But when you look at it, it's a wooden box and you can't imagine anything can happen, except that it's actually more of a performance than a sculpture because you can open the box and a bubble, a plastic bubble develops, and in the end finally hides the box. And then you went on to develop several works that have to do with space. For example, I'd like you to tell us a bit about our work from 1977, simply called, *A Work*.

Max Dean ([03:12](#)):

So let me just start about M for "me". So I had, I kind of had an inkling that you were going to ask me this. So I have three Ms the first one is Martha that's, Martha, as in my wife, my partner, she's kind of the preeminent kind of person in my life. And she's very much part of this ongoing work that I'm doing at the moment. The second M would be mother, my mother. It's interesting that you would think of these balloons as being wombs or something like that. I had never thought about them from that kind of perspective. It's a sense of being contained inside something that intrigues me or this kind of envelope or the tentativeness of the whole thing, particularly with the soap bubbles. The third that I came up with was mining like M I N I N G, and the English sense of the word to mine, something to go and seek something out, to look for some kind of mineral.

Max Dean ([04:08](#)):

And I think that much of the work that I've done, I mean, all of my work has been about this question of looking for something or trying to solve or resolve some kind of problem or issue or psychological situation now, or even understanding the autobiographical aspects. So I kind of see myself as a miner and I'm always in search of something. Once I find it, I locate it and I come to some kind of understanding I'm finished with it, and then let the real miners take over and work, work that kind of vein of, of material. To get back to the mother. One of the kinds of, of driving forces, right from the very beginning of the work was my, the relationship with my mother. And I'm fascinated with the idea that as kids we grow up in a family environment and for, you know, five or maybe four or five

years, the world that we live in the familial world like that is what's normal. I was in a different kind of zone, right from the very beginning of my childhood, but I was this kind of independent kid, which reflected this kind of independence and almost hermetic nature of my mother. Well, okay. That's I think we've done our five minutes.

Chantal Pontbriand ([05:25](#)):

You also bring others in and we'll have the occasion to come back to that because most of your works deal with others. <>

Max Dean ([05:33](#)):

A lot of others and we'll get to that. Yeah.

Chantal Pontbriand ([05:37](#)):

I will argue that maybe what you felt was more like difference than independence, because difference has to do with others, whereas independence

Max Dean ([05:49](#)):

Has

Chantal Pontbriand ([05:49](#)):

To do with staying away. Can you talk a bit about *A Work*?

Max Dean ([05:56](#)):

Yes. Okay. So, *A Work* is actually *Max Dean* – colon– *A Work*. And it's me residing in this shed for six weeks and waiting for people to come and being this collective memory, which was the conceptual frame about it. One of the great aspects of that piece is the title itself, because right at that, and if not earlier, I had realized that in making things or in doing what I was doing, I was really making myself. I wanted to explore and find out who I was, and to advance and to move forward. And so, it's this quest to figure out who I am as an individual, which in turn opens up the situation to say to the viewer, who are you? and all those kinds of other conversations that we get into. But really the whole point about it was I'm still in the process of developing, as we all are. And I think that's the

really great thing about human nature and individuals is that we can grow forever and expand. And so that's the essence of that piece, right - of the seclusion and then people coming in and doing something.

Chantal Pontbriand ([07:06](#)):

I think we should talk at this point about the piece you did at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 1978, which has a strange title because it's just the underlining sign.

Max Dean ([07:19](#)):

Yeah.

Chantal Pontbriand ([07:21](#)):

So, there, contrarily to what you say, you don't control the situation, you control the mis-en-scene, but you, you don't control what will happen. But at the same time, you put yourself in a very risky situation because your legs are tied to a rope, which goes up to the ceiling. Can you explain the role, what happens in the role of the public?

Max Dean ([07:56](#)):

So just to set the scene, the audience is sitting in this gallery, and there's about in this particular case about 20 to 30 people there. And there's a machine on the far left of the audience, and there's a wire that goes from that machine up to the ceiling and then down to a doorway over on the audience's, right. And so as the whole performance starts a light goes on and a timer starts and it's timing down 30 minutes. And, and as that's going on, a winch starts to coil up the wire and into the gallery is pulled this figure by his feet. And his hands are tied, he's blindfolded and he's gagged. And in the middle of the audience is a microphone and a small stand. And, as the performance proceeds, there's this kind of chatter or something going on, and no one knows quite what happens.

Max Dean ([08:44](#)):

And then at some point I think it was about 10 or 12 minutes into it. Someone made a noise and a loud enough noise to realize that when they made a noise, the light and the machine turned off, but the timer

kept moving on. So time advanced. And if the audience decided to make enough noise, they could stop the process of the person being pulled up by their ankles, up into the ceiling. So, there was this conversation in the audience, and I remember someone saying something and then someone from the background said, “say that louder”. Because they wanted to stop it.

Chantal Pontbriand ([09:20](#)):

It went on and on. I remember, yeah, well, they had to make noise.

Max Dean ([09:23](#)):

Yeah. They had to make noise. So what happened was the timer times itself out at 30 minutes, the light goes off the timer stop, the motor stops. And I just lay there. All of a sudden there was like five people trying to untie me. In many of the interactive pieces that I've made I'm presenting the viewers with a situation that involves risk. There has to be some kind of consequence to the action. It's just not like flipping a color from red to green. You have to be challenged about whether or not you are going to get involved. But there's always that moment of consciousness about how we present ourselves and how we respond in those particular situations. And that's exactly what I want to do or have done in a lot of the artwork. I love the art situation because it's this kind of artifice in some senses it's that we get to be reminded of these experiences and how we would respond to it.

Chantal Pontbriand ([10:19](#)):

Yes. But it's also a very ethical stance, because there's a moment where you can take a decision. It's up to you. So, it's very respectful of the other.

Max Dean ([10:32](#)):

Yeah.

Chantal Pontbriand ([10:33](#)):

That would lead us to X. I call it X-human.

Max Dean ([10:38](#)):

Ex-human?

Chantal Pontbriand ([10:39](#)):

Yes. You've dealt a lot with that. It's a condition, but also a potential. You've greatly explored this in your robotic works and a major one already conceived for the National Gallery in 1980.

Max Dean ([10:57](#)):

*Made to Measure*, the title comes from clothing, where you would go to get a made to measure suit. So that's the title: *Made to Measure* in the sense of me going to a building. And I got this room and I had to make something to fit. I had lived in Ottawa for three or four years at that point. And I was fascinated by that corner on Elgin and Slater where the cars seemed to come right at you. So it's basically this confrontation. It's on the fifth floor of the building where I have three Ford Pinto cars, which advance on you once you're in the gallery. And you're pushed into this closet which looks outside, and looks right down onto the street and you see the cars coming at you. But again, it's this notion about the exterior physical risk that you face on the street and the kind of social contract that we enter into, and this kind of parallel activity that exists in the gallery where we're free and able to engage in conversation and thought without being physically - in most cases- ever endangered.

Max Dean ([12:07](#)):

So, we know that there's a kind of security about it, but yet on the street, we enter into a social contract with people that when the light's green, you advance and when it's red, you stop. And when that's violated something of consequence happens. So, there's a parallel between these kinds of two realms of the art world and the real world. And I tried to merge them together there.

So, my take on X is not any kind of word it's kissing, because I always see those two where they come down like that and they meet like that. And I never got the X and O thing that people put on letters. And I thought, okay, well what's the X what's the O. And then I suddenly

realized, oh, the O is the hug. And the X is the kiss. And so I'm fascinated by where we come together as people, the intimacy that we have and that we share. We have physical intimacy, we have romantic intimacy, and we have intellectual and I think we have artistic intimacy.

Here we are, Chantal, I mean, it's been decades. Are we addicts? Are we art addicts or something like that? What keeps us interested in this thing? I would have to say that I think it's the degree of intimacy. We're sharing on a very amazing level that you have these aesthetic experiences that you're revitalized. And there's this kinda kissing? For me, you know, that's one of the great advantages of being in this kind of world. We might not be monetarily wealthy, but we certainly are emotionally and intellectually and aesthetically billionaires.

Chantal Pontbriand ([13:45](#)):

I'm surprised you've come to this idea of the kiss because I was going to close this chapter with the work *Mist*, which is a three-screen video installation you did in 2002, where you see waterfalls, but then all of a sudden you see a leg with a stocking appear. It's one of the few works where you directly have anything referring to erotica. Maybe what you've just said, explains it all.

Max Dean ([14:18](#)):

I've not only had it on my mind, but the point is I've always been a big fan of Duchamp and buried in Duchamp is erotica. So, if we use another A here for anything or E for everything, if we think of anything and everything like that, I'm interested in using objects that we as individuals know. I don't want to invent something that's completely unknown to people because then they have to spend all of this time trying to figure out just exactly what it is. When I say a chair to you or a table to you, you are actually sitting in a chair right now. And I imagine that your computer's on some kind of table. We have these lifelong experiences with these objects. And so all of a sudden, I can start playing, trying to move the variables around in a way that is compelling, it's like making different connections.

Max Dean ([15:14](#)):

So you've got a chair basically that falls apart and puts itself back together. And it's a chair that's basic but when is it a chair? Like, you know, philosophically, is it a chair when it's standing? Or is it a chair when it's all in six parts or when it's reassembling itself. So, here's another interesting aside about that. We were working on the chair and Maia Sutnek came up. She looked at me and she says, this is all about falling. And I go, what? She says, this is all about falling. It keeps on falling apart. And then she says, well, there's so much going on in our Western world about falling. We fall in love. We fall asleep. We fall into depression, yada, yadda, it just goes on and on and on. So, all of a sudden, what's interesting, I think about the art world, for me, is that you initiate these conversations.

Chantal Pontbriand ([16:03](#)):

Knowing we would do this exercise when I was in Venice, your table came to mind because you exhibited that table in the midst of the Venice Biennale exhibition that Harold Zeeman had done at the time. That was quite a daring gesture because you went into this room and there was only this little, very simple table. I must say that what impressed me most at this Biennale was, on one hand, the strong emphasis on identity questions, but then you had Bruce Naumann's work. And you had one pavilion which, when you entered it, was completely empty. You could think there was nothing there, but all he had done was move the walls to a slight angle, which you only noticed when you spent a little time in there. So, it is about *being*. What is it to *be* because you cannot be if you're not in a certain space at a certain time. And I feel that we get that feeling in your work also, that it has to do with what it is to be, to create devices in order to make us think of this fundamental metaphysical question, finally.

Max Dean ([17:33](#)):

That whole question of being, for example, is one of the driving forces in my work. And there's two parts of it, the aspect of control. And the other aspect of it is fixing. I am constantly fixing myself because I have this condition that I had as a kid of these seizures. And I would have to deal with this. So, for a long time, I hid this. I didn't make it evident. But if you look at the early work, I have to be in control. I'm not going to get in an



airplane with you and fly it because I can't land it. I could have a seizure in the air and we would all perish. So, there are certain kinds of events that, or things I can't do. I have even an exit strategy right now. Do you slip away? That's one side of being in control. My life is about realizing my limits and exercising that, but in turn I want to be fixed.

Chantal Pontbriand ([18:29](#)):

So I was going go onto D.

Max Dean ([18:32](#)):

Okay.

Chantal Pontbriand ([18:33](#)):

and my word for D is diagnosis. We know also that you were diagnosed with cancer in 2012, I believe. And, but then there's quote from you, which says feeling powerless is a very important thing because how do you know when you do have power, if you don't know what powerlessness is? And this you've already been discussing in the last few minutes.

Max Dean ([19:05](#))

The sense of powerlessness. So, mine was a grand mal seizure, which means basically what happens is that your brain basically is overcharged. And in order to get rid of all of this electricity, it sends these signals to your body and you have a convulsion and all your muscles contract. And there, once the train gets moving out of the station, so to speak, you can't stop it. So, there's certain events that we all have in our lives when we do feel physically out of control or hopeless. But the diagnosis is another thing. It's an interesting choice, because that's when you're told something. You're sitting in the doctor's office and the doctor looks up at you and he says, so, you've got cancer. So, what went through your mind? That was a real turning point. Your having the disease is one thing and being diagnosed is another thing.

Chantal Pontbriand ([20:05](#)):

It led you to a series of photographs, *I'm Late, I'm Late*.

Max Dean ([20:11](#)):

Yeah.

Chantal Pontbriand ([20:12](#)):

These photographs bear titles such as, *Perplexed*, *Jungle Studio*, *Mountain*, *Swamp*, or even *Dropping In*, which makes us think of the performance that you did in 1978 at the Montreal Museum. So, you are using the studio as an explorative space to work out something, and you put yourself in a situation - on a mountain, and you appear in a swamp. So, what is going on there?

Max Dean ([20:49](#)):

*I'm Late*. *I'm Late* refers to *Alice in Wonderland* when the Mad Hatter jumps down the hole or the portal. And so, I started to realize that the studio became my portal to anywhere. I could go and be anyone or do anything in the studio. If I didn't have the environment, I built the environment. I built a swamp, we built a jungle, and we reenacted these tableaux and the work becomes much more autobiographical. And I'm mining my own history and my own emotional and psychological background. And then I explore what it means and I play. Play has always been a big part of my life. When I'm talking about play, I'm talking about deep play. And I got introduced to deep play, you know, decades ago. And I think artists and musicians work in this area of deep play, where you're trying to make these connections. So, I'm always pushing the illustrative, and they're kind of playful. And they're about being able to move to a different place. They're really quite autobiographical.

Chantal Pontbriand ([21:56](#)):

They're quite, I'll say, wonderful. In the sense that there is something almost magical in these images. They're very enthralling. They take you in, and the settings are really beautiful to look at.

So, let's move on to E because what you're talking about is ecstasy. Let's talk about Thomas Eakins, a figure that has really occupied your mind in the last years.

Max Dean ([22:33](#)):

My life with Thomas Eakins goes back a long way.

Chantal Pontbriand ([22:38](#)):

I discovered you were an art historian.

Max Dean ([22:40](#)):

I am, I have a BA in art history, but that's another story. So, when I got the opportunity to go and work at Ontario place with the Wilderness Adventure ride, and I found the artificial Mountain and all of these abandoned animatronic figures, I was fascinated by the fact that it had been fabricated. I thought the mountain was real. That's how naive I was - a mountain in the middle of the lake. I mean, how can you be so stupid? And so, I get there to find out that it is artificial. And then in, in this initial visit, I encountered the moose and the moose had been pulled out of the swamp and had been dropped on its head and was upside down and it was broken. And I thought, I got to fix this. So the fixing part came into full play at that point. That's the button that got pushed. We worked it out that we were going to do the thing in the park and to use the figures. So, we wanted to repair the moose.

A lot of the processes that I go through, I go back and I look and I say, okay, where in art have we seen someone do this, a surgical procedure? So, there's Rembrandt, and then you very quickly get to Thomas Eakins and *The Gross Clinic*.

Chantal Pontbriand ([23:54](#)):

You mean the staging of the anatomical theatre is a classic element of learning to become a doctor.

Max Dean ([24:02](#)):

So I have this cast of broken animatronic characters, and I have this moose and I have this kind of amazing location. And so, I thought, okay, I'm just going to be arrogant enough and just reenact this whole thing in this place and copy the Eakins painting. So, there's this sense of like mining art history, because I think that as artists, and as, as people

involved in the art world, we're involved in this very big conversation. And to me, the conversation is the most interesting when it progresses. So in other words, it's about what you're thinking and what you're feeling and what you can tell me. So, the whole notion of working with Eakins has got richer and richer and richer. What was ironic about this whole piece is that here we are building this very elaborate environment with an installation inside this mountain that was open for six weeks, not even six weeks. Then, somewhere along the line, someone asked a question and I said, "the figures have decided to leave the park". And I'm thinking about this. I'm going like, oh yeah, these guys can move and they can go on to other adventures. And so what's happened is they've become individuals and characters in their own right.

Chantal Pontbriand ([25:18](#)):

A life of their own.

Max Dean ([25:20](#)):

Yeah. But more importantly, they have a life beyond me.

Chantal Pontbriand ([25:23](#)):

So this brings us to the second A, which I gave a subtitle to: Another Beginning Before the End. I would like you to talk about the piece, which is called, *Still Moving* that you did in 2018 at the Lever soap factory in Toronto.

Max Dean ([25:45](#)):

Yes. Just to get the title still S T I L L right.

Chantal Pontbriand ([25:49](#)):

Between the Ontario place installation and the Lever soap factory installation, you had all of these figures in your studio, you were living with them.

Max Dean ([26:02](#)):

Yeah. Well, they they're still hanging out here. Yeah. And they they've decided that they are in search of a new home. They're on this Odyssey,

like, you know, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and they're going off to have these adventures. And so they troop through the art park, the Bentway here in Toronto. And they end up at the Lever soap factory, which is an abandoned, very large industrial complex. And at this point, the characters have started to really develop themselves. So there's Dr. Gross, who's the physician. And there's this new character that started out as the woman in Eakin's painting, in our installation it's Sandy. Sandy happened to look like Andy. And Andy, being Andy Warhol, all of a sudden came into existence as part of the troupe. So we have Sandy, Andy, and in true kind of Warholian fashion while we're in a soap factory, what do we do?

Max Dean ([26:58](#)):

Well, we use the soap and we make giant soap bubbles. So, there's soap bubbles. So we, the crew McAllister, my associate and I created a machine that can generate a soap bubble. It's about four to six feet in diameter. And it is created out near the ceiling and drifts down and falls on the floor. So, all of a sudden, they had this new identity. But, it was kind of subversive. They were hidden away in this factory like they were on this *Odyssey*. And then they go on to do, they've done several more gigs, so to speak.

Chantal Pontbriand ([27:30](#)):

There's always another beginning.

Max Dean ([27:33](#)):

Well, yeah, one thing suggests another thing. It's like people say something or they offer something and it presents an opportunity to do something. So, I don't know what an end is. To me an artwork is never finished. Why are we fascinated by Leonardo, for example? Leonardo DaVinci didn't finish a lot of work. You go to see the last supper and it's incomplete. There's something about this incompleteness that we have, or that the viewers get to finish it. The most successful stories are open-ended stories where we, the viewer, get to step into the story itself and complete it in some ways, or think about it, or contribute to it in some ways. You can exit something, but it doesn't end.

Chantal Pontbriand ([28:24](#)):

Tell me, is that why you did all these photographs with loads of boxes?

Max Dean ([28:32](#)):

Well, okay.

Chantal Pontbriand ([28:33](#)):

They are about moving. Aren't think.

Max Dean ([28:35](#)):

Well, they're also containers. They're also a wall, but let's go back. This is a whole series of photographs that resulted in and around the film, Katherine Knight was making about me and prostate cancer.

Chantal Pontbriand ([28:48](#)):

Yes. Which is *Still Max*, I think

Max Dean ([28:51](#)):

*Still Max*. One of the things that very early on came into my mind is that you get this diagnosis and you, you've got this organ, your prostate, the size of a walnut, and it's impacting not only your body, but your whole world. Then try and hide this. They don't want to own up to the fact that they're sick. So, I started this whole idea of having this walnut and literally hiding it, pushing it in my pocket and hoping I could forget it and that it would go away. So, all of a sudden, something that starts out of the size of a walnut grows. And so then we take this growing tumorous art object. It became the tumor in the room. It becomes a big floral bouquet. And then it becomes this pile of plastic. And I thought we've got to contain it. So we build this room, we have a lot around us, and cardboard boxes, thanks to one of our neighbors. And we pile it up, but it's taking over the room. So the cardboard box room becomes a way of containing it or concealing it, but it's not successful at a certain point. The walls fall down and the tumor even grows beyond that. And then it had four more layers on top of that. So, it eventually becomes enormous

Chantal Pontbriand ([30:08](#)):

Before we come to the end, in relation to what you're just describing, I'd like you to talk about the second exhibition you had in which you presented this big tumor-like rock.

Max Dean ([30:23](#)):

Yeah. *The Rock*.

Chantal Pontbriand ([30:23](#)):

You caged it and uncaged it and covered it with tons of clothing. It became a mountain of clothing.

Max Dean ([30:35](#)):

At some point in the film, you see the rock or the tumor caged inside this wire mesh cage. Then you see me cut it in half in the film. So think of a kind of Russian doll, for example, and there are 12 dolls in this whole thing. And the outside doll is the steel cage. And then it comes right down to this 3-d rendering of my prostate. So it starts out as this kind of very small object and becomes this 12 foot by 12 foot by 10 foot high kind of steel cage. And at each one of those stages, we took a photograph of the process. I'm creating an event, so to speak, to photograph it. So we moved the whole cage and the tumor to the gallery, and it filled his larger space like that. What was curious about this is that he wanted to exhibit the photographs at the same time.

Max Dean ([31:25](#)):

People that come to Stephen's gallery are typically wanting to see photographs. So how can we show *The Rock* and the photographs together? We came up with the idea of using window roll blinds. In the gallery itself are 12 photographs, and they're all on roll blinds. So, you would walk in and there was a partition wall that separated this installation from the rest of the gallery, and there were two kinds of boxes there available, and if you wanted to participate, you could put on gloves. I've been working with a guy, Paul Matheson from the art gallery of Ontario, who's an amazing lighting guy he did the exhibition, *In Future*, and he made it just magical. So, I asked Paul if he'd come in and

light this show and he walked in and so he's walking around and about 45 minutes into it, he says, "colored lights".

Max Dean ([32:20](#)):

And I go, what? He says, yeah, I want to use colored lights. We'll use all the primary colors, right. To create white on the wall. We'll throw the red, green, yellow on the wall and it'll create a white light. And then in the center, we'll have all these different colors. And so, you walk into the room and you think you're in a carnival. It's amazing. It's just truly amazing. Because the walls are white. And then all of these various kinds of green cast lights. There were literally hundreds of colored lights in the ceiling. So what really became interesting about this for me was we had made this for the studio, the cage thing. And then when we got to Stephen's, there was another skin, the lights became another layer on it. That was the kind of physical environment.

But then how do we reveal the interior of this tumor? So at scheduled times we would arrive at the exhibition space and we would take the thing apart in front of people.

Chantal Pontbriand ([33:25](#)):

Max, changing is really the end for you. You know, so there's no end possible.

Max Dean ([33:33](#)):

So, one of the things that was curious about getting this diagnosis in 2011-2012, was that it makes you reevaluate what you're doing. And at that point I decided I was going to make a list of all the things that I wanted to do. The list was between 50 and 60 items. And I started to realize that in the list of things like that, there were really about four or five things that were really super important. It came down to two things. I wanted to have fun and I wanted to learn something. If I can't fill one or both of those prerequisites, I'm not interested.

This situation is a great honor. Here we are talking decades later and we're still doing this. This is not only learning but fun. I'm really delighted to do this with you. I think we should do more. It just keeps going.



Chantal Pontbriand ([34:23](#)):

Thank you.