A photograph of a modern cityscape. In the foreground, a large, glossy red sculpture, resembling a thick, curved pipe or a stylized letter, dominates the right side. The background features several tall buildings with glass facades and red accents. A green lawn is visible in the lower half of the image. The sky is clear and blue.

# Steel Fluency

A Conversation with

# John Clement



*Kini's Playground*,  
2005. Steel pipe and  
steel plate, 180 x 96  
x 96 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST



BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

John Clement is a mid-career sculptor whose studio is now located in Long Island City, Queens; until recently, he had been working at an outdoor studio in Bushwick. The new space is across the street from Mark di Suvero's workshop, where Clement learned the basics of welding metal sculpture some two decades ago. Clement belongs to a group of (mostly) men who work on large-scale metal sculptures; his ellipses of six-inch metal tubing appear monumental and elegant at the same time. During our discussion, he elaborated his vision of contemporary sculpture—a point of view that examines the issues of new art with considerable insight.

**Jonathan Goodman:** *When did you know that you wanted to become a sculptor? Was art school helpful in your training?*

**John Clement:** I was fortunate enough to find sculpture, or better yet sculpture found me, within two years of graduating college. It wasn't as if I knew I wanted to be a sculptor, because I really had no experience with fine art at all and didn't even know it was an option. I spent four years of college walking under a big Alexander Liberman, never, ever really looking at it. At the time, all I knew about myself was what I didn't want to be. After college, around 1992, I was working multiple odd jobs in New York City; I also took some drawing classes at the School of Visual Arts (being a disciple of *MAD* magazine, I was always in love with cartooning and thought I'd look into that a bit; I discovered that I wasn't very good).

**Wiggle Room, 2008.** Steel pipe and steel plate, 110 x 120 x 360 in.

Then I learned that there was part-time work available in the tool room of the SVA sculpture facility, and I took the job. Once there, surrounded by all the sculpture students and their materials, I started to fool around with wood and plaster. A professor there, fellow sculptor and now good friend, Joel Perlman, saw what I was doing and asked if I wanted to learn to work with steel. It was a medium I knew nothing about, so I was inclined to say yes. I had a eureka moment when I first welded two pieces of steel together; a switch went off in my head, and I knew, just *knew*, that this was for me. Art school was key in introducing me to materials and people, though I was not really enrolled in the program. If I had attended art school in a formal manner, my path would have been much different.

**JG:** *You worked closely with Mark di Suvero in his compound in Long Island City. How long did that last, and how old were you at the time? What was it like working with di Suvero?*



**JC:** From around 1994 until 1999, I worked with Mark as an assistant and rigger, as well as an artist-in-residence at Socrates Sculpture Park (Mark was the driving force behind the creation of the park). This is where I really started to fall in love with public art. I was about 25 when I started there. It was the most important, fun, and informative time of my life and my career. When I was first introduced to Mark and the job he offered, I was still new to the world of sculpture. I had heard Mark's name mentioned but didn't really

**Fe, 1998.** Steel pipe, 72 x 110 x 96 in.

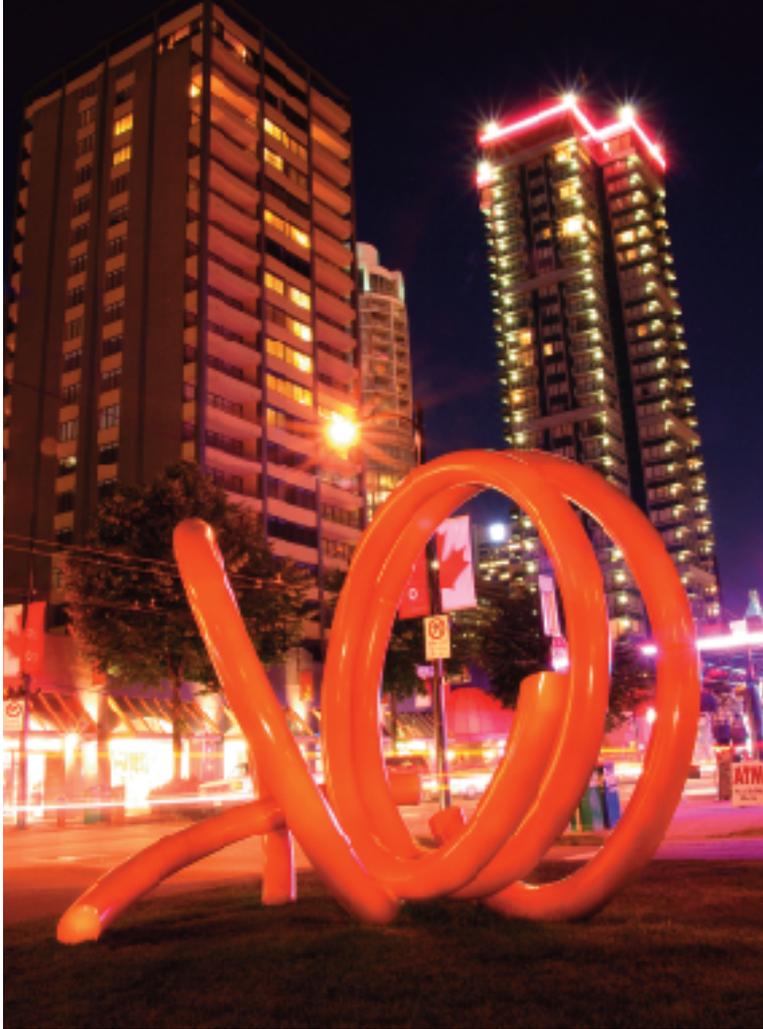
have a full appreciation of who he was and how much he stood for. It became real clear, real fast, once I immersed myself in his world, just exactly who he was. I knew from the moment I met him and stepped into his studio that it would be an honor and privilege to be part of his outfit. It felt like I was actively participating in art history, learning from a master of sculpture. It was an amazing experience, and essential to my growth as a sculptor and young man.

**JG:** After you left di Suvero's compound, you rented an old firehouse as the site for your work. You then moved on to a mostly outdoor studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn. What were some of the advantages (and disadvantages) of the two sites?

**JC:** After I stopped working full-time for Mark, I stayed on a bit as an artist-in-residence at Socrates. It was around this time that I was introduced to John Henry and started working with him part-time as a rigger during



**Jelly Bean, 2009.** Steel pipe and steel plate, 120 x 120 x 72 in.



*Jasper, 2008. Steel pipe and steel plate, 100 x 120 x 120 in.*

his installations. This was another life-changing experience, because John is not only one of America's most accomplished sculptors and public art pioneers, he is also an amazingly generous man—someone truly dedicated to making art accessible to the public. After leaving Socrates, I had an outdoor studio in Bridgeport, Connecticut, of all places. Peter Lundberg, a good friend, fellow sculptor, and also a di Suvero disciple, had been asked to form a sculpture park in Seaside Park in Bridgeport. The city gave us some land to work

on, and we did just that, commuting daily from Brooklyn up and down Route 95. We eventually got kicked out when the administration fell out of love with the arts and someone broke into our tool shed (a 40-foot container) and stole all of our stuff. Some of our works still remain on site, as a tribute to the process of public art. After Bridgeport, I found a great studio in an old firehouse in East Williamsburg. I was there for almost 11 years; it was a great place to work. In 2011, I relocated into a new studio, also in Williamsburg. About three-quarters of my space was located outdoors, which has its ups and downs. Being exposed to the elements has a negative side, obviously, but there is something really glorious about working in open air. It reminds me of the early days working at Socrates.

**JG:** *Steel sculptures are sometimes difficult for technical reasons. Could you talk about some of the special skills needed to make large steel works? Are they difficult to learn?*

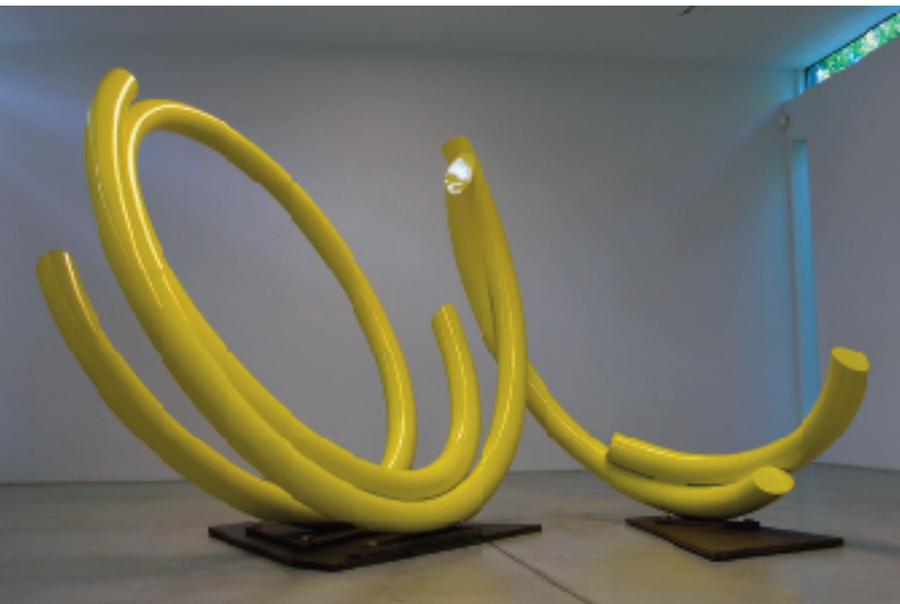
**JC:** Working with steel can seem like a daunting task, but it really is just a matter of learning the materials and techniques, like anything else. There has to be respect and patience applied to the process, which can sometimes get in the way of a whim or make that whim a bit dangerous. Welding, rigging, engineering, and logistics are just a few of the skills that sculptors (not just steel sculptors) need to become fluent in, especially if you are building your own work and figuring out your own problems, which not a lot of people do these days. These skills can be difficult to learn if you are not in full understanding of what you are doing. All of your understanding and techniques are woven into your fabric, as part of a daily routine.

**JG:** *Is there a place for welded sculpture in today's art world? Or do you feel that your audience is already diminished? Isn't there a greater demand for other kinds of three-dimensional work, such as installation?*

**JC:** There is and will always be a place for welded sculpture. I wouldn't say the audience is diminished as much as I would say there are so many forms of art to look at that attention is often given to less traditional, more experimental works. I have absolutely no problem with this; I didn't get into this lifestyle to become a rock star. In fact, if everyone did what I do, then I would just be like everyone else—that's not what I want to happen. Although other approaches and forms of art may differ from mine, I fully respect individuals and their efforts to create, and will defend their right to do so.

**JG:** *Who are some of the sculptors that you admire? Have they directly or obliquely connected with your work?*

*Alee, 2010. Steel pipe, 72 x 72 x 120 in.*





*Shazzam*, 2012. Steel pipe and steel plate, 192 x 110 x 120 in.

here than in other places. Every artist has numerous friends or acquaintances who were once artists but have given up. I'd be lying if I said that a portion of my pride in being a working sculptor doesn't come from the fact that I've done it in New York City. In regard to the notion that there is so much bad art, well, that's a subjective point of view. There is certainly a lot of art being made here, so there will be that much more bad art to see, depending on what one favors or not. On the flipside, there is plenty of great art as well.

**JG:** *Is abstraction in sculpture still a valid style? What can be done to educate those who don't understand the field? How is it possible to bring art to regular people?*

**JC:** Yes, it is still valid. As far as educating folks about it—the only way is to keep doing it. Public art, something that I have focused on since the beginning of my time with Mark and still hold dear, is one of the most important ways to get usually inaccessible abstract work to the people. My public installations have brought me all over the world, from the wealthiest of neighborhoods to the poorest of communities. The sited pieces always create a dialogue, no matter what the demographics.

**JG:** *Do you have an idea of what direction abstract steel sculpture should take? How happy have you been with your own work, and where do you want to go next?*

**JC:** I'm positive it will progress. Every day, hundreds, if not thousands, of potential sculptors are born; and as living artists, we pass on our traditions and methods to the following generations. Steel is such a great material that it will always be accessible and used in important ways. As for my work, I feel very confident about the exploration of line, form, and scale that I am involved in. The evolution of the work over the last 18 years has been challenging, fulfilling, and great fun to be part of. Each new work poses a new set of questions/problems to be solved. The materials need to unlock and reveal the form for the work to be successful.

Having given myself fully to the artistic process of trial and error in the studio, there is always the unknown when I begin a new work, no matter what the scale. Each work is informed by the lineage of pieces, mine as well as others, that came before. All I can ask is that my process continues, further expanding my understanding of my own voice, and of the simplicity and beauty that lie in the three-dimensional composition of line and form that is sculpture.

*Jonathan Goodman is a writer based in New York.*

**JC:** I normally don't like to list influences on my work, most likely because there is no one sculpture/object/song/image/idea that has more of an influence than another. If I name names I almost always forget to include someone, and then I feel horrible, because they are all so important to me. For the sake of this interview, I can safely say John Henry, Mark di Suvero, Joel Perlman, and Andrew Ginzel served as mentors and friends; they have helped me along in many ways, and I have learned from them as individuals, as well as from looking at what they have created. I attempt to help younger artists as much as I can and hope I can have as much of an influence on them as these guys had on me.

**JG:** *Does New York's status as a major international art city help artists or hurt them? If there are so many artists in New York, why is so much of the work unsuccessful?*

**JC:** One of the greatest compliments I have ever been paid by a writer is being called "a New York City artist." I love this city, its history, its inhabitants, what it symbolizes to the rest of the world—all the good and bad that comes along with it. The city itself has been a true inspiration and driving force. You are surrounded by many people from many places with differing lifestyles, but most important, New York presents a real struggle, one that comes with living and working here. For lack of a better phrase, it sharpens the blade. This may sound clichéd and might not apply to everyone, but it certainly does to me. I've always enjoyed challenges and solving problems, and there is no shortage of those in New York City.

I'm not sure if having a studio address in New York helps or hurts; there are great artists all over the world enjoying success, but the fact that one can not only survive but actually flourish here can be seen as a positive. The art world, like anything else, can be viewed as a war of attrition. There are so many obstacles to overcome and factors that can derail you, possibly more