When I visit Nao Matsunaga in his residency studio at the V&A he is working (in socks) on a large painting. It is taped simply to the glass front of the studio, and drips slowly into a colourful line on the floor–part of the residue of activity accumulating in his current environment. There is an absolute ease to the way he works that is always readable in the outcome. With direction and intent, but no fixed plan or design, he feels his way towards something, often with a disregard for any perceived hierarchies of materials or process. In previous works he presents bisque fired forms, barely ceramic, and here he uses paint or pen to colour and mark ceramic objects or wooden structures. His work with plaster and painting are no longer confined to a process of developing sculptures, but are present as confident works in their own right.

This ease, intuitive process, humour and an ability to suggest so much through things so ambiguous remain unchanging strengths in Matsunaga’s work. Yet, there are clearly new directions here that continue to push forward, things which have undoubtedly distilled from his time as ceramics artist-in-residence at the V&A in 2014. The museum seems a fitting setting for Matsunaga to work within, providing the opportunity to time-travel, across cultures and traditions, on a daily basis for six months. His usual studio practice involves working closely amongst things in order to evolve them to completion (things he has made previously, the beginnings of new things, ideas, drawings, photographs). Being immersed in the museum’s rich collections seems an elaborate and logical extension of this. In a collection so varied and somewhat overwhelming, Matsunaga embarked on ‘Wild Beast Hunts’, intensively gathering as much information as possible as to “how different cultures depict and abstract nature and in particular, animals, to go beyond the everyday” with a specific interest in “mythical and ceremonial objects and how they have been documented in prints and drawings.”

There is something of a postcolonial explorer in his approach to investigating this very British institution and some of the pieces he has created have a sense of weaponry or implements for such an endeavor. ‘Secret, Shiny and New or Innings’ seems to resemble an imagined Neolithic power tool, whilst other objects, such as ‘Too Tight for Light’ lie speared, perhaps conquered. He explains an ongoing interest in “how early man interacted with his surroundings, and the ways in which primitive cultures shared traditions across the world…universal similarities and primal elements.”

Looking at this body of work, I recall a visit to ancient stone sites, Goonhilly Satellite Earth Station and Porthcurno Telegraph Museum in Cornwall. It was January and everywhere dripped with thick fog, limiting my visibility to just a few metres. Things were revealed slowly or not at all, providing a shifted experience of place. I think about all this not only because of his interest in stone circles but also because of notions of communication and fog. In a sense, Matsunaga creates a welcome fog where the vague outlines of recognisable elements may emerge whilst at the same time things succeed in remaining abstract and fresh. The vagueness of these sculptures can appear part animal, part rock, yet (pleasingly) neither. Communication holds importance in the work; the objects provide sites to pick up intermittent signals as softened, elusive forms or coded surfaces, all of which we receive at varying frequencies, like tuning a radio.
“Each relay willingly or unwillingly deforms the signal according to his own historical position. The relay transmits a composite signal, composed only in part of the message as it was received, and in part of impulses contributed by the relay itself... Actual events usually excite strong feelings, which the initial message usually records.”

A charged significance is demarcated by a stone circle in the landscape with monumental weight and clarity, even if from our own point in time it may be difficult to entirely comprehend that exact significance intended. Here, on a smaller scale, grouped elements such as ‘Never Gonna Tell It’ also hold a charged significance in their attachment to each other, where gathered components prop and support something greater between them. The markings may elicit a sense of early forms of writing or the importance and pride denoted in the decoration of ritual objects. Likewise the paintings, shown here for the first time, combine gestural, expressive brushwork close to calligraphy, with blocks of meticulous, repetitive patterning akin to the carved surfaces of many three-dimensional works. Surfaces lead back to objects and objects to surfaces, with an overriding approach throughout. A pace is defined, across media, combining a rapid, unfussy, energy and a slow, careful working of materials.

There is a pleasure to be found in not grasping everything at first glance, coupled with an underlying sense of what it means to be human, to make things and to attempt to understand the environment we find ourselves in: questions which defy any fixed position in time.

Phoebe Cummings, 2015