

Matt Connors speaks with Ricky Swallow (2014 Whitney Biennial, January 2014)

Matt Connors: I was pondering your recent work last night, while making a cup of tea with my sort of ritualized hot-beverage setup (favorite teakettle, favorite mug), and it got me to thinking about how the body and (its) perception (vision, touch, taste, etc.) can relate to proportion and material (real or idealized), like how the weight or shape of an object (when held) can determine an emotional reaction or attachment to it.

I feel like your recent sculptures play with these ideas. For one, you're taking on actual vessels (cups, vases) and other kinds of very human-shaped forms that immediately illicit a kind of muscle memory in the viewer's brain. In a way you are reducing them to pure form and proportion, radically limiting material and color. Do you feel like you are playing with a kind of semiotics of forms, shapes, and colors? Especially since most viewers are not able to touch the works, they become almost signs or ciphers . . .

Ricky Swallow: Proportion and a series of reductions seems key; perhaps "abbreviation" is the right term because it proposes a type of editing of the object, without forfeiting a comprehension of that object. I really like this idea of a viewer's mental/emotional "muscle memory" in relation to certain objects. I see my process in part as a means of returning objects, so that the object can assert itself in an autonomous way, have its own singular logic, yet retain some associations of use or function, and at times historical references. The subjects themselves arrive riddled with narrative histories and I think remaking the thing that abbreviation, redirects the object into more formal territory. When a sculpture isn't working, sometimes it's falling too heavily on a reference or function. In approaching certain subjects you have to be aware that you're a guest, and for me personally there is a predetermined freedom in that, as well as some responsibility to act/make/behave well.

The material change from cardboard into bronze seems like a way to finalize the form without losing its studio-built logic . . . despite the industrialized process they go through, they are still rooted in a very personal or individual place. I'm glad, too, that you mentioned color. It's still the most stressful thing for me ("I'm new here"), specifically because it can change the associations of the sculptures so much, or, to take a hit from Robert Morris, increase the "intimacy-producing relations."

MC: I think this seesawing between visual representations and indications of function, zooming in and out from a concrete sense of scale to a ridiculous disjointedness, contributes to an overall sense of destabilization—of logic, of form, of narrative even. There's a certain sense of authority that one immediately feels when encountering a beautifully made, well-proportioned object, that gets sort of derailed when its sense of function is contradicted. The result, for me, has a hyperpersonal, sometimes dreamy logic. Do you think this puts you into some sort of relationship with surrealism?

RS: A useful way for me to think about surrealism is to relax any understanding we have toward an object or subject, to allow for transformation. I think of the work of Christina Ramberg, Robert Therrien, Konrad Klapheck, Domenico Gnoli, or Roy McMakin, for example. Each has produced experiential works rooted in a certain amplification of daily materials, forms, and imagery, with a sense of transformation and peculiar material tightness that I admire—a "dreamy logic," as you put it.

I started practicing Transcendental Meditation this year, and one of its strangest effects happens when looking at objects as you come out of the rest period following meditation. For a brief moment you have absolutely no associations with these things. You just see the structure, form, and color with an accentuated materiality that's more alien than abstract.

MC: I like the idea of a sustained, defamiliarized focus—it's telling of the evolution your work has undergone over the years. It seems like you experienced a moment of permission, allowing barriers between your personal and professional fascinations to disappear. Even though, for artists, these barriers are pretty amorphous to begin with.

In the bronzes, I can feel the impulse that we share as obsessed lookers and collectors, a kind of taxonomy of fascinations, all being fed into the process of making. In a way this permission is also a realization that there are no unworthy avenues for artistic inquiry—the humorous, the narrative, the surreal, not to mention teacups, pinch pots, chair backs, or kachinas . . . Does this moment of synergy between private and professional strike a chord at all?

RS: I'm drawn to objects that are rudimentary in form and color, things that "say it simple." Many of the objects I collect have either been made with a type of material economy related to the maker's familiarity with the form through a repetitious practice, say a potter's, or due to a reliance on limited materials and palette, as in earlier Navajo and Pueblo jewelry. The aesthetic produced by such conditions, the authenticity and magic of the forms, is awesome, and so is their energy. Functional items of ritual—used for ceremony, healing, sitting, drinking—appear so free of any prescribed ego or extraneous design.

Occasionally there's a sculpture I can see coming out of a specific form at home. This black flag relief I'm working on relates to a Tobia and Afra Scarpa brass sconce in our entrance—its curve, the way it hugs the wall with grace and weight equally. The first vessels I cast from collated pieces of cardboard into bronze were literally formed around cups, bottles, and crucible forms I had collected. The patinas I've developed often approximate a ceramic glaze I like or the pigmented quality of mineral paint evident in Native American artifacts, specifically Hopi.

Collecting things is a habit, and making things is another, and I treat them as equally instructive rituals. I really believe in learning an object: its identifiable characteristics, provenance, and chronology, especially via dialogue with those more familiar with the material. Within the crowd of veteran vendors at flea markets and Native American antique shows, which I frequent, there's a generosity of information buzzing around. The history behind these artifacts often goes unrecorded, so there's a constant reassessment of physical characteristics, an obsessive object-reading.

MC: I see this transparency in your bronzes, revealing a process and materiality, as a kind of generosity, similar to what you referred to in communities defined by their elective affinities (which ideally would be true among artists and art audiences, right?). It makes these pieces really legible, referring to objects or functions in the physical world. But at the same time they are quite mysterious and incredibly fluid. How do you think such a determined clarity leads to the undefined, multivalent presence of the finished pieces? Do you think your work gains mysterious steam, so to speak, from reading the pieces over time, or as sequences in an exhibition constructing their own formal vocabulary or grammar? Or do you think "ours is not to wonder why"?

RS: I always aim for clarity in the sculptures, but never a clarity that could occlude any subjective “walkabout” the object could take. So much of the success of any work is intuitive, it’s exciting when improvised behavior produces a form that can be further developed into a sculpture or series. I hope there is a developing formal vocabulary to what I do, and as far as gaining “mysterious steam,” who could hope for more, right? I really dig it when someone responds to the work in a way outside of my own logic, or makes a connection to another artist’s work or tradition of objects I’d never considered.

I like this line from the psychotherapist Adam Phillips: “We are always too daunted by who we are.” I think by making things, making art, you get to offer something that’s so connected to yourself, yet ultimately has the capacity to form an identity beyond your control.

Ricky Swallow, b. 1974, San Remo, Australia. Lives and works in Los Angeles.

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