PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH: SELECTED WRITINGS

By

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A Written Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA
2011
PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH: SELECTED WRITINGS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my editor, Jeremy Abernathy, and all the staff at BURNAWAY.org, for their hard work, support, and patience during the last two years, and Michael Rooks, Dana Schutz, and Folkert de Jong for their generous interviews.
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INTRODUCTION

During my final two years of graduate school writing criticism became my primary means of engaging intellectually with the art world and the theories and polemics of contemporary art. Writing became a powerful lens through which I could bring my questions and concerns into focus, and through which they could be dealt with almost, as it were, from the safety of the "third-person." Simultaneously, criticism became an invaluable way of developing and engaging with a broader, more sophisticated, and more dynamic artistic community.

In lieu of a traditional written report I have decided to present here selections from my writing, which I feel, at this moment, constitute a more full representation of the research, development, and progress I've made during my time at the University of Georgia.

The following articles, essays, and interviews are selections from approximately two years during which I served as a monthly contributor for BURNAWAY.org, an online publication of art news and criticism based in Atlanta Georgia. During that period the publication won numerous awards including consecutive Best of Atlanta: Best Local Arts Blog and Best New Trend in the Arts (2009 & 2010, Creative Loafing Magazine) and a $30,000.00 development grant from Possible Futures Foundation, Atlanta.
MICAH STANSELL'S PRESYNAPTIC POTENTIAL

Originally published January 15, 2010

Micah Stansell’s Presynaptic Potential, which unfortunately will only be on view through this Saturday, January 16, is a big-time undertaking: five projections displaying five different channels of video, spread across three walls of one of Atlanta’s more imposing spaces, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia. This is not your parents’ video art. Where artists like Naumann or Baldessari used the camera as a crude but ruthlessly efficient documentary device, Stansell’s video work presents us with something more lush and cinematic.

Stansell isn’t just an artist who uses video, but a genuine Video Artist, one whose craft makes full use of the medium in terms of monumental scale, rich color, movement, time, sound, and so on. (The video even stars a rather breathtaking female lead.) It’s all very beautiful, and very slick, maybe even a little too slick. I found that the production value was at times a distraction from the more delicate and human content of the film. The various edits and visual effects, though they effectively convey the film’s illusory, almost phantom, narrative, at times bordered on a kind of film-industry mannerism.

That said, the installation as a whole goes a long way toward insuring that Stansell’s films are experienced as something other than “industry standard.” With the two largest projections placed exactly opposite each other, one on the left and one on the right as you enter the space, Stansell creates a dynamic and kinetic viewing experience. It’s impossible to see both screens at once, and yet it is immediately apparent that both are happening at once—that the imagery of the two screens occupies the same narrative space and time. Trying to take in both channels simultaneously is the experiential equivalent of the kind of “dyadic relationships” and “binary pairings” that Stansell speaks of in his statement about the work. The twin projection screens are two hopelessly separate, yet contiguous and interdependent realities. Three smaller, circular projections line the back wall of the gallery and function collectively like a kind of Greek chorus witnessing the tragedy unfolding in the main projections. The edges of these smaller projections seem to constantly shift and dance, but on
closer inspection, you realize that this effect results from the videos' projection through circular holes cut into sheets of paper.

Suffice it to say that there's something supremely charming about an installation dominated by big, crisp, cutting-edge video projections in which one of the most important visual effects is the result of three sheets of 8.5 x 11 copy paper and a handful of butterfly clips. In this instance, as in many others, Stansell’s inventiveness, creativity, and willingness to experiment come shining through. Literally.

*For full text including images, video, and hyperlinks visit:
http://www.burnaway.org/2010/01/micah-stansell's-presynaptic-potential/
ROBBINS AND MYERS SUMMON THE FORCES OF NATURE

Originally published July 23, 2010

When I showed up at The Atlanta Contemporary Art Center on a stormy Friday night earlier this month, I found it absolutely crawling with patrons and buzzing with energy. Over 450 people had descended on the gallery, drawn in by the promise of witnessing Shana Robbins’s most recent performance, *Supernatural Conductor*, scheduled to coincide with the opening of her exhibition by the same name. Amy Myers’s *Feminine Space* also opened that evening. The place was packed.

A strong turn-out, however, can come at a price: Peaked anticipation eroded into frustration as many found themselves struggling to catch a glimpse of the action across the dense sea of heads and shoulders clogging up the gallery. The long commentary thread under BURNAWAY’s video of Robbins’s performance originally posted here, which I strongly recommend reading, gives a very clear and fair sense of the concerns many visitors were left with.

For my part, I sympathize with those who were unable to get a clean look at the performance they were so excited to see. Nevertheless I think we, the audience, should be cautious about confusing the kind of intact viewing experience we would expect from a work of theatre with what we can reasonably expect from a work of performance art. Still, all parties would have benefited from a little more planning.

For those of us who were lucky or assertive enough to see most of *Supernatural Conductor*, the performance was not without its bewildering moments. I was absolutely dumbfounded as Robbins, dressed in the costume of her persona called “Monstrous Feminine,” emerged from behind an enormous, patchwork doily-scrim. She hurled a handful of sparkling dust into the air and, with the help of America’s “You Can Do Magic,” suddenly converted the previous 30 minutes of the performance into an extended introduction to what was now a one-woman, Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”-esque music-and-dance routine. What was she doing?! I was so confused I was giddy.
Prior to this moment, the audience saw her buried alive (lying interred in a cutaway coffin that was pressed up against the glass of a gallery window like a terrarium) and exhumed by a concert pianist amidst the building lightning storm outside. Robbins then entered the gallery clad in a moldering, black Victorian dress. Walking and then crawling backwards, she entered her installation where she stood with her face protruding through a hole in the middle of an oversized dreamcatcher. Despite the melodrama of it all, an intense seriousness had taken hold throughout the performance to this point.

But now—as Robbins danced popping-and-locking her way across the gallery floor—all of her carefully cultivated solemnity was suddenly and unapologetically thrown out the window. This was a perplexing move, and one that put a lot of demand on the viewer. To go from somber Gothic drama to the glitter of VH1 with almost no transition was tough.

But if you could hang on, those several moments of emotional free-fall provided a unique kind of ecstatic reward. Contemporary art often espouses a clichéd goal of subverting expectations—but it’s not every day that our expectations are actually subverted. Robbins’s closing act was gutsy.

Still, I was left uncertain as to what kinds of conclusions were meant to be drawn from the work as a whole. I half suspect that what Robbins had secretly hoped for was that her appearance as a grooving green mummy would have been enough to induce the audience into a spontaneous dance party. Perhaps she wanted to whisk everyone away in a wave of blissful rapture? Now that would have really been something!

What remains in the gallery after the performance is the residue of a practice that could be categorized as contemporary shamanism (a term Robbins resists). The artist uses performance, video, sculpture, photography, drawing, and painting as a means to invoke the spirits, primeval forces, and consciousesses of the estranged natural world around us.

For their part, Robbins’s sculptures, drawings, and films are as much artifacts as they are art. Like the costumes and stage props left behind from some bygone opera, they constantly point the viewer back to that instant of performance when these objects must have been charged with power. They’re less awe-inspiring by themselves, but they do make us wonder what that generative moment was like, and what it would have been to experience it.

Despite the artist’s insistence and the insistence of others, notions of the feminine surrounding the work are of exaggerated importance. What we perceive is more a by-product of Robbins’s own
distinctly feminine appearance and presence than any intrinsically female aspect of the imagery. One could argue that, rather than emphasizing her femininity, the personas the artist adopts take her further toward the realm of androgyny.

What would happen if *Supernatural Conductor* was performed again by a male? If we re-tailor the mummy costume and substitute a Victorian top hat, cane, and coattails for the dress, we might find the larger meaning of the work surprisingly unchanged. And this might be true for much of Robbins’s œuvre. With so much focus on concepts of self, it’s easy to confuse the coincidence of the artist’s gender with the artist’s choice of themes, such as her role as a spiritual medium.

Where Shana Robbins’s work focuses on the role of the artist as spiritual emissary, Amy Myers’s work is about helping us see the spiritual world for ourselves.

Myers’s massive drawings are imposing. As with Robbins’s performance, these images have to be seen in person to be fully understood. They are often discussed in nonrepresentational terms. But in the context of this exhibition, they function almost as portraits: the abstract representation of a fertile infinity, a universal creative force. This makes Myers’s categorization of her drawings as “feminine” all the more profound and exciting.

If they are female, they are female gods. They are the deities toward which Robbins’s rituals and actions make petition. Their vulviform shapes are the pathways through which stars are born. When I approached Myers about my animistic interpretation of her work, she responded that she knows one of her drawing is finished when it “feels like somebody is there in the room” with her.

*For full text including images, video, and hyperlinks visit:
WHY BRING KEHINDE WILEY TO ATLANTA'S HIGH MUSEUM?

Originally published October 1, 2010

The article below comprises two parts, beginning with a transcribed interview with Michael Rooks of the High Museum and ending with an opinion essay on the work of Kehinde Wiley.

The High Museum of Art announced in January of this year that they would be staging an election. Patrons of the museum would be allowed, via direct, democratic process, to influence the direction of the museum’s permanent collection by voting for their favorite artworks in several categories from among a curated roster of candidates. The four works with the most votes would win.

The eventual winner, now acquired and nestled safely within the museum’s permanent holdings, is the work titled Thiago Oliveira do Rosario Rozendo by artist Kehinde Wiley. The modestly scaled portrait (or, at least, modestly scaled by the artist’s standards) was nominated by the modern and contemporary collections curator, Michael Rooks.

Since the first time I encountered Wiley’s work, I was left with a nagging question, one that his significant art-market success only seemed to aggravate. I found it difficult to put this question into words until New York Times critic Roberta Smith came along and did it for me:

“Is Kehinde Wiley a Conceptual subversive who happens to paint or yet another producer of pictorial fluff that makes him our latest Bouguereau? Do his big, flashy pictures of young African American men recast as the kings, dandies, prophets and saints of European portraiture subvert the timeworn ruses of Western art and its hierarchies of race, class and sex? Or are they just a passing art-market fancy, with enough teasing irreverence, dollops of political correctness and decorative punch to look good for a while above the couches of pseudoliberal pseudocollectors?

**Interview with Michael Rooks**

It was with questions such as these that I sat down for a conversation with the man responsible for the
purchase, Michael Rooks. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

**BURNAWAY: It’s not every day that you get the chance to make a purchase for the collection. When the opportunity came along, how did you decide on this particular artist and this particular artwork?**

Michael Rooks: Kehinde Wiley is an artist that has importance to a younger generation whose heroes aren’t limited to the realm of “fine arts.” He’s a young artist who is directly engaged with many levels of culture and with the globalism of the new culture. He’s important globally both in terms of the market and his subjects. Also, if you look at the museum’s collection as a whole, you find that all the work by African American artists is all from older periods. There was a kind of demarcation, and very few acquisitions had been made since around 1980. We need to bring this collection into the 21st century. This is an area of the collection that I’m committed to expanding.

**Does knowing that Atlanta has a large African American population make it even more important to make sure that African American artists are adequately represented in the collection?**

Definitely.

**Would it be reasonable to suggest that, in making a purchase of this kind, the museum is consciously trying to give, for lack of a better term, a shout-out to the black and, more specifically, hip-hop communities which are so important to Atlanta as a cultural center?**

Certainly. My primary motivation in purchasing the work is my belief in its absolute value as a work of art, but I’m also encouraged by the idea that it can be a means of connecting with that segment of our constituency.

**As a curator, do you feel that a museum has a responsibility to build a collection that is reflective of its respective constituency, or do you look at the constituency and try to create programming that will introduce it to what’s going on in the bigger world around it?**

My job is about striking a balance between exposing the community to new work and new ideas and being responsible for making sure our collection is relevant to our community as it currently exists.
It’s not about me imposing my viewpoint; my first priority is always the community. Atlanta is a sophisticated, 21st-century city, I would never presume to try and illuminate our fellow Atlantans about the world. I’m trying to develop exhibitions that will bring people to the museum and get them to see the museum as a member of the community. And as a participant in the community of arts and ideas here in Atlanta. I’m looking for ways the museum can help catalyze that community.

A moment ago you mentioned Wiley’s appeal for the “younger generation.” Do you feel that, as the museum’s curator of contemporary art, you have a special responsibility to try and connect with that younger generation?

My job is to see if I can help our audience engage with contemporary culture. As the contemporary curator, I have to view works in terms of their relevance. Regardless of my personal opinion, is it relevant to what’s happening now? That said, Kehinde Wiley not only represents this generation but also transcends our time because the work is ultimately all about beauty. But that beauty is problematized in interesting ways; it problematizes the cult of the masculine.

Critics of Kehinde Wiley, myself included, have said that he exploits identity politics without really advancing the conversation. What are your thoughts?

Kehinde Wiley, as a gay, African American male, has advanced the conversation because he’s broken through a boundary, a glass ceiling that was there.

Coming from such a specific place, then, how does Wiley’s work transcend that position to achieve a more universal appeal?

Hip-hop is universal! [Laughs] The series Global Stage transcends race, nationality, and sexual orientation to talk about the global nomadicism that has characterized the last 20 years of cultural production.

You mean like the nomadicism we see in something like Afropop Worldwide?

Exactly. And as I said before, Kehinde’s work is about beauty. His imagery is immediate and can be appreciated by a wide audience—I feel it’s something that [we] can get the average viewer interested in and excited about. We are a general museum and want to be able to bring in a general audience.
Purchasing an artwork is different than curating an exhibition because, I assume, you have to consider what kind of relevance the work will have 20, 30, and even 50 years from now. Do you think this piece will be relevant in 50 years?

I’m confident that it will retain its significance in our collection, especially in Atlanta and the Southeast. Kehinde Wiley is an artist that represents square one for this milieu, so future conversations will always point back to him. Artists like Jonzeal Brown, Gajin Fujita, and others that work in similar hybrid styles will always be discussed in relation to Kehinde Wiley.

I have a sort of pet theory that the secret for success in any art scene is a strong intersection between the various branches of the arts. In towns like New York and Los Angeles, you’ll notice that communities of artists and musicians, for example, can be virtually indistinguishable. Hip-hop has been the dominant cultural force in Atlanta for several decades now. Wiley has worked with prominent hip-hop artists in the past, such as Ice Cube. Have you ever considered that, by showing a commitment to work of this nature, the High Museum could get to a point where artists like Andre Benjamin or Ludacris start showing up at art openings and become active participants in the visual arts community?

I never thought of it in terms that were that literal, but I think that that would be great and something from which everybody could benefit.

You could put the Wiley up with the Richters, and maybe you could get people interested in some of that stuff too!

[Laughter] We’ll have to see about that.

Essay

Since Kehinde Wiley’s exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2008, the artist has done little to allay the concerns of critics like Roberta Smith. What has he done? More of the same, really. More photorealist paintings of young African (African American, Brazilian, or otherwise) men set against ornately patterned, Louis Quatorze-meets-Louis Vuitton backgrounds. Despite the obvious display of skill and the undeniable visual appeal of the works, I continue to find myself unable to make the jump from casual admirer to believer.
Wiley’s work explores representations of race. Although I doubt that the artists who created the Neoclassical European portraits that Wiley quotes in his paintings conceived of their artworks in overtly racial terms—as paintings of white people—it is only when viewed from this perspective that they become a meaningful starting point for Wiley’s works. They are a kind of racial bait-and-switch, presenting persons of African descent in the style of European aristocrats. If we substitute a poor Irish farmer for one of Wiley’s hip, urban African American adolescents, the picture would lose almost all of it’s zip.

The problem, as I see it, is this: Wiley’s depictions of black men provide only a very simplified, dare I say, stereotyped representation of black-ness. They hinge around an almost one-dimensional characterization of their subject matter. Wiley’s insistence on placing them within a polarizing context only further reinforces a quick read of his subjects as simply one half of a binary system: black figure/white ground. Once you get past the double-take reaction, there’s very little else being said.

One of the things that I admire most about art is its ability to transcend from the specific to the universal without sacrificing the individuality of the subject or author. What I find unsatisfactory in Wiley’s work is that both of the representations around which it is intended to function (that of young, urban black-ness and that of classical, European, aristocratic white-ness) are of the specific—and not the universal—kind. As I find myself outside the limits of both these categories, the works remain decorative to me. I understand the equation, but I am not pricked.

A friend of mine who knows I’m a David Hammons fan recently brought my resistance to Wiley’s work into question on the grounds that, from his perspective, both artists’ work were intrinsically linked with notions of black identity. To try and explain myself, I drew a parallel between these artists and what I considered to be their organizational equivalents, the NAACP and the Black Panthers. The NAACP, I explained, is about being black, while the Black Panthers are about being pissed off.

Being black isn’t something I would presume to understand; being pissed off is. I would argue the same fundamental difference separates Wiley’s work from that of Hammons. Wiley’s work exploits blackness simply as a means for subverting expectations. Hammons’ work, on the other hand, though delivered from the perspective of the African American male, is ultimately about anger and disenfranchisement, about the tension and resentment you can feel toward your own body, place, time, and culture, which is something almost anybody can relate to.
One of the things that makes Atlanta such a unique and exciting city is the presence of a substantial, black middle and upper class. When I first came to the Atlanta area from Florida, I had hoped to find that this demographic would be reflected in the makeup of the visual arts community. But, in my experience, it isn’t. By and large the people you encounter in Atlanta galleries are the same moody white people you’d expect to find milling around in Williamsburg, Virginia.

In my opinion, this is the greatest potential value that the recent acquisition can have for the High Museum and the City of Atlanta. By helping the museum connect with a younger, African American audience, works like Wiley’s portrait could eventually help shift the balance of the art scene toward one that is more reflective of the unique demographic realities of the city.

As a closing thought, allow me to affirm that hip-hop music has, more than any other cultural phenomenon, been responsible for putting Atlanta on the map in recent decades. Most of Atlanta’s cultural capital (figurative and literal) is tied up in the hip-hop scene.

Yet the visual arts seem to dawdle behind in their own separate reality. It is within this context that an acquisition of a work like Kehinde Wiley’s could be seen, even by skeptics like myself, as a critical step toward building a necessary bridge between these two seemingly segregated artistic communities. Purchasing hip-hop-themed artwork can, depending on your view, seem like either a patronizing or smart way of extending a fraternal hand of welcome to a group of fellow artists whom we, the visual arts community, would like to have as our peers and allies.

For full text including images, video, and hyperlinks visit:
DANA SCHUTZ, A NEW YORK PAINTER LEARNING HOW TO DRAW AGAIN

Originally published January 19, 2011

Dana Schutz burst onto the New York scene in 2002 with her brightly colored canvases in which malformed denizens act out strange scenes of violence, self-mutilation, and self-contemplation with an almost child-like innocence. Schutz was in Atlanta for the opening of Drawings & Prints, her exhibition at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center (ACAC), and was kind enough to sit down with me after the artists’ panel to talk about her show, her recent turn to drawing, and why she doesn’t like stripes.

Charles Westfall: This is the first time you’ve done a show of drawings and prints; was it something you’d been wanting to do, or was it an idea that ACAC approached you with?

Dana Schutz: It was both, really. Stuart Horodner approached me about it, but it happened to be at this moment when all I’ve been wanting to do is draw. I had been making drawings of all of these off-hand, made-up portraits — like twenty a day — just to get used to the brush and the ink. And it felt really good. Drawing is a completely different head space. I’ve been feeling like I need to be drawing to get where I want to be with my paintings.

You’re still talking about using a brush though, which for a lot of people equates to painting, right? So how do you define drawing as a separate practice from painting?

There’s something about painting that feels more real; there’s actual physical material there. With drawing I always feel like it’s dust, like it’s not a real material. Drawing becomes more about “line quality.” And I tend to draw in black and white, so it becomes even more about line, and how lines activate the white of the paper to make space. In painting the space and the image can actually be built into the material itself, whereas in drawing the space of the image exists between marks on a page, which is a much more abstract concept. So it’s been more difficult for me to work toward a kind of drawing that I can accept and feel comfortable with. But it’s been a challenge that I’ve really
enjoyed.

Is that what you mean when you say that drawing is a different “head space”?

Yes, but also it’s a different mental space. I think the thing that’s really exciting about drawing for me is that the feeling of judgment is very different from in a painting. The drawings that I really respond to are usually like Bruce Nauman’s drawings; they have a kind of energy to them that’s closer to thought or notation. They’re not about trying to make great, finished drawings. Drawings are more suggestive than paintings, so with drawing you always have this question of when is it enough? Sometimes a drawing can be really off-hand, and maybe not be quite enough, and yet somehow it still works and is stronger than a drawing that’s neatly rendered and totally filled up. It’s like with those portraits I was talking about; I could do a hundred of them and maybe only one would be good — but that’s OK. And then you’ve got something: You’ve got this one drawing you like.

That kind of goes back to what Stephen Schofield was saying during the panel: Drawings are allowed, sometimes even encouraged, to have a kind of awkwardness, and that can somehow give them a greater sense of authenticity.

I loved that! He was talking about drawing in a cardboard box; I was getting this mental picture of him inside a big box, being kicked down a hill or something, and he’s in there trying to make a drawing! [laughs] Blindfolded or something, who knows.

The press release for the exhibition talks about your use of drawing as an “exploratory” medium: As a painter, how does exploratory drawing compare to the traditional notion of preparatory drawing?

Well all of the drawings in the show relate to paintings that I’ve done. Two of them — Swim, Smoke, Cry #2 and Talk Talk — were actually made after the paintings, so they’re like the opposite of preparatory drawings. The image was already organized, but the drawing gave me the chance to change it by moving it into another material where it could express different things. Usually, if I’m actually drawing to prepare or sketch out an idea for a painting, it ends up almost like a game plan drawing; it’s very loose and schematic. With the painting Face Eater (2004) it was actually really tough. I had made a version of the painting earlier, and it just didn’t work out; it looked like a mess. So I started making drawings, and even the drawings were very difficult to figure out. How can it still
be a face when it has no face, you know? You need two eyes for it to be recognizable. So that was a case where the drawings were really helpful to organize the structures and plan how to actually build the image.

**But those aren’t the kind of drawings that you’re showing here, or are they?**

Well one of them was! [smiling] There’s the one of a person being poked in the eye. That one is preparatory, where I actually really liked the balance of the drawing, so I took it directly for the painting. With the others it’s there, but in a more roundabout way. Because you take a drawing that you did, for example, where you know you liked a part of it or worked something out in it, and then those parts work their way into something else.

**The drawings and prints in the show span a period of about ten years; do you feel that your relationship to drawing or printmaking as a practice has changed over that time period?**

I think it has totally changed! I was invited to be in a drawing show in 2002, and I panicked because I was like, “I don’t show drawings!” I haven’t even made a “finished” drawing since undergraduate school! So then it became a decision: How do I draw?

Initially it was a real struggle, trying to figure out how to draw in a really honest sense. I didn’t want it to become just a process, like patching a hole in a wall or something, just a series of steps. I used to be so afraid of paper; I would just touch it, and it would be destroyed immediately. But now I’m feeling less afraid, and I’ll just tack some up on the wall and start drawing. Coming here for the artist’s talk and panel and everything, I was really scared and thinking, “How am I going to talk about drawing before a panel?” I don’t even have a clear way to articulate what a drawing is.

**You’re one of the most recognized painters of the last decade; was there a moment when you felt like “I’ve arrived!”?**

The whole thing was a huge surprise, a surprise that people actually responded to the paintings. But then it was also a really intense time in NY and in the art world, because it was the beginning — right on the cusp — of this big art boom. And I think that amplified a lot of things. That part was really uncomfortable. At first it was super exciting, of course, because you were like, “Oh my gosh, there’s actually people at the show who I don’t know!” But then it got tricky, because, around 2003, the art
world exploded in a completely different way.

And do you think that affected your career?

I think it affected everyone’s career, because it amplified everything that was there. And it distorted a lot of narratives. It just seemed really alienating; I guess that would be the best way to describe it.

I think that one of the reasons your work has been so successful is because it satisfies a need that each generation has to identity a voice from among its own ranks that can serve as a unique and timely vision of the existential crisis. How would you respond to that?

I think that early on that was a really important question for me. It was actually the question of how to make a painting that I felt really excited about at the time. A lot of contemporary painting back then seemed like it was telling you that it was weird to make a brush stroke unless it was somehow a fixed quote. And I was savvy; I read all the theory of all the reasons why you couldn’t just make painterly paintings. And, you know, Luc Tuymans was so seductive, and people were making paintings that came from photographs, because the language of photography in painting implies a kind of distance. So the question was: Could you make a painterly or even colorful painting that didn’t have that kind of distance? Or would it just be read as completely naive? So, if you wanted to do it, it was going to be at the expense of seeming out of it, at that time.

But you were willing to take that risk?

Yes. Because, like you said, every generation, there’s always the question of: Why does it have to be this way? I’m sure painters who are emerging right now are going through the same thing: Why does it have to be this way? Or, why can’t it be …? Et cetera. You know?

And, as an artist, you have to move into that unknown territory?

Yeah. Like why does there have to be so many … stripes? [laughs] Or whatever. I don’t know what I was saying there about stripes.

For full text including images, video, and hyperlinks visit:
FOLKERT DE JONG, AN ARTIST OF SPIRIT AND STYROFOAM

Originally published April 17, 2011

Folkert de Jong is a kind of modern-day Dutch master: His sculptures convert base materials into physically and philosophically complex work that is true to that legacy in both letter and spirit. Steeped in the rich history, politics, commerce, and art of the Netherlands, his work exhibits the acuity and practical ingenuity that have long made the nation greater than the sum of its geographic parts. His work thrives on the tension between the triviality of modern culture and the historic brutalities that have made it possible. de Jong recently visited the University of Georgia as part of the Lamar Dodd School of Art’s visiting artist lecture series, and he was kind enough to sit down with BURNAWAY to talk about his work, his signature material (Styrofoam), and his thoughts on spirituality in the arts.

Just arrived from NYC

Charles Westfall: You have a solo exhibition that just opened at James Cohan Gallery in Chelsea, is that right? How’s the show being received?

Folkert de Jong: Yes, it opened on April 1. There were many people at the opening, and I’ve done some interviews with art magazines — so far it’s been good. And it’s always nice to get a direct response, to be there in the same room with my work and the audience.

CW: Were there any responses at the gallery that surprised you?

FJ: Some people asked if it was necessary to have the background information to understand the work. Usually, people have a lot of ideas and interpretations about the work, even if they know nothing about it. My work is very figurative, and so there is often a sort of immediate moment of recognition, when it reminds people of something. And then there is a snowball effect of associations. I think that’s an interesting way of beginning to look at an artwork: You get involved with it, then you have a moment of recognition, and then you start to go deeper. With my work, there is often a
moment when people are a bit shocked about what they see. The subjects are a bit dark.

**Fear and trembling (with glimmers of hope)**

**CW:** Speaking of the subject matter, you’ve said that many of the characters and narratives in your work make reference to real people and historical events, but you never quote those sources directly. By keeping the narratives loose and the references open, are you hoping to keep the meaning of the artwork open as well?

**FJ:** Yes, because otherwise it could become sort of flat, or maybe a bit educative or moralistic. You might think, “Oh, it’s a representation of this character,” and that’s it.

I use references to history and art history, but I also disconnect these events from their origins and misplace them into another context. There is a moment of confusion, and then you have to ask, “What is this character doing in this context?” And maybe you start to reconsider this character, or this historical event. You wonder if it’s something that you have taken for granted. And maybe you consider whether the nature of these events might be different from what you learned in school. [Smiles]

**CW:** Terry Eagleton, in paraphrasing Adorno, said that the artist’s work is to — and I’ll read you the quote:

“[expose] the fault-lines of the present without proposing an alternative to it.”

He suggests further that the presentation of “negative utopias,” as opposed to utopias, is the only real way to get things moving forward. For me, this idea of a negative utopia resonates very strongly with the subject matter of your work. Would you agree with Eagleton and Adorno’s assertion?

**FJ:** Yes … [wincses] … But at the same time, I think it’s important try to give an element of hope or something. Because I think it’s very interesting to talk about the dark side of human existence — but then a lot of people are already familiar with that, you know?

**CW:** What is that element of hope in your own work?

**FJ:** I think there is, well … [thinks a moment] …. I often think of making something grotesque so
that it becomes humorous, so that it becomes lighter, so that it becomes easier to face. We have to face these sides of our human nature and accept them as a part of our life, rather than put them in a corner and say they don’t exist. But I think in order to make it discussable you have to make it a bit lighter. And I think the materials that I use — because they are, in a way, very superficial, or very playful — help people feel comfortable to talk about these serious things. They show that these things can be talked about.

I recently read an article on Philip Guston — about his work, and about the element of irony in his work — and how this irony is what enables us to accept heavier subjects. I think it’s all about creating some sort of balance.

CW: So you’re saying that the materials in your work, by being playful or ironic, are working to kind of disarm, or mitigate the potential shock of the subject matter, right? But, in addition to that sense of irony, the Styrofoam also gives the work a very contemporary feel. Is that sense of the contemporary nature of the material also important? If so, how would you describe its relationship to the historical quality of the subject matter?

FJ: I work with these characters who wear these kind of historical costumes, and what I’m interested in is their motives. And, by transforming them into these high-tech or contemporary materials, I am showing that people are still the same today as they have always been — that [these characters] always exist, you know? What is motivating these characters in this new context is what has always motivated them; only the outfits or materials have changed.

Material and meaning

CW: Speaking of motivations … Let’s talk about your motivations.

FJ: Sure! [Smiles]

CW: As much as any artist I know, your practice is identified by the use of a particular material. We’ve already talked a little about the ideas behind the Styrofoam, but there is a small quote that I wanted to ask you about. You once said, “[As I] started using the material, I slowly started to discover [its] political side.”
Now that you're in the mature phase of your work, there is a very clear relationship between form and content. But in developing this style of working, did the content drive the form or — as the quote seems to suggest — did the form, the unique nature of the material, lead to the content?

FJ: It's interesting what you are asking: if the material follows the concept or the other way around. I don't really consider myself strictly as a sculptor. For example, if you're a sculptor and you think, "Ok, I am going to make a sculpture," and you are always thinking about material — you think in terms of material. For me, all of the research is in my head: It's more about ideas than three-dimensionality.

And so this means that sometimes accidents can happen, because you are not so focused on the material. So then you are open to something unexpected, and these unexpected paths can lead you to a solution. When I first encountered Styrofoam, it was just this very weird material with a strange color, and it had a sort of attraction to me. And maybe intuitively or subconsciously, I knew that this material that is so unnatural and so light would be a kind of interesting combination with my ideas which can be so intense and dark.

[Editor's note: Styrofoam is a trademarked name. The generic name for the material used for disposable coffee cups is polystyrene.]

But normally you would start with an idea, and then you find your media. For me, it is not that black and white. I think it's somewhere in between. It's good to be open, because the right material could be somewhere you wouldn't think to look for it: in the hardware store or in your mother's garden. Your attraction to a certain media could be motivated unconsciously by the necessity of finding something that can materialize your ideas.

But I should say that there is something more important than ideas or materials: how an artwork relates to reality. Art is so often exhibited in an institutional context or in a gallery, but what is the relationship between an artwork and the real world? We're not living in an art institute; we're living in a real world. And I think art's relationship to reality has become unclear.

CW: Could we say that your work operates in a similar way, by taking Styrofoam insulation, a material that performs a very specific, real-world function, and superimposing an artistic meaning?
FJ: Yes, but I think you would be surprised by how many people don’t realize what the material is. When I make my work, I try to build it up between the materials and the ideas to make it so exceptional, or surprising or shocking, that you forget about “art” for a minute. You’re being dragged onto a strange roller-coaster ride of memories and associations … and then confusion. [Smiles]

Beauty vs. kitsch

CW: Part of that exceptional quality in your work, if I may say so, is its tremendous visual appeal. I mean, it looks great. With that in mind, I had another quote of yours that I wanted to get your thoughts on: “It is the curious eye that makes the brain want to know more ….”

FJ: Yes. Early in my career, I was very interested in live performance, video, and movies. I was experimenting with television and how it has the power to be so attractive — how it can draw you in and consume you. And I think these materials I am using now have a very strong visual attraction in the fact that they are very colorful or strange. This triggers some kind of curiosity: They have to laugh, or they want to touch it, or just think about the work.

It is a technique that companies also use to promote a product: They do a study on how to trigger the psychological mechanism that makes people want to buy. It’s not that I want to make art like that, but it’s a kind of model. And it helps you understand how deceiving or misleading the appearance can be. What you see is maybe not the true motive behind the material. It can look very candy-like and attractive, but at the same time you’re looking at something highly toxic.

CW: There is a tendency among some artists and critics to be suspicious of beauty — where the experience of attraction is thought to interfere with, or distract from, art’s real or pure function ….

FJ: Yeah, because maybe they think it’s too easy or kitschy or something. Or they think that entertainment is not supposed to be a part of going to an art show. “Entertainment” has become a negative word. I think that beauty or attraction are not necessarily a bad start — or are maybe even a very good start — but it all depends on how layered it is. If you look at art history, like Pop art, for example, you see that many artists have researched this idea of immediate appeal, or instant attraction.

Childhood and studying medicine
CW: I think there is a parallel there to how we represent history. In the past, you’ve described being a little boy, playing with your brother in the old Nazi war bunkers that still exist along the Dutch coast, pretending to be soldiers, and dreaming about war. For kids, war is total candy — it’s the coolest thing ever — because of how it’s been represented to them in John Wayne movies, or on war monuments. But then at some point you get older, and that façade falls away.

FJ: Yes, and I think as adults we still have this ability to be attracted to something in a naïve or innocent way. Something strange or provocative triggers our curiosity. Children are often really excited about my work, because it has the elements that children get excited about. And most children don’t have the same moral issues as grownups, so they’re just completely happy to see this colorful material. And I think it is still in us as adults, even though we know better — the ability to have a moment of attraction that you cannot control. And that’s the moment when some information is being implanted in your system. [Laughs]

CW: Let’s go back to your youth for a minute, because there is a question I want to ask you about your sudden change in career paths. When you were young, you studied medicine. You even worked as a nurse for a while, but you didn’t find it to be as fulfilling as you had hoped. So then you decided to become an artist.

Do you feel that there is a relationship between these seemingly divergent career choices? Do you think that they can be traced back to a common instinct or motivation?

FJ: Yeah, you’re right. At first, you would think it’s so much of a change, from hospital to art school, you know? But, at the same time, there must be a kind of shared fascination. I’ve met many artists who are also studying sociology or psychology, and psychologists who are interested in art.

For me, it’s obvious that my real interest is in the human condition — because you don’t visit a hospital without a reason, right? You go there because you have a problem. And I think it’s interesting that, in a way, we are so adapted to the idea that you only go there under a negative condition: We only discover how fragile we are when we become ill. When we go to an art gallery, we also can discover how fragile we are. I think there are a lot of similarities.

CW: But, in pointing out our fragility, isn’t there also the hope that medicine and art can be restorative?
**FJ:** Yes! And also I think about a kind of spirituality that comes from accepting your destiny, which is a way of not being afraid of what we are heading toward. That can give you more confidence. There are bigger power structures that make us afraid. Because, when you are afraid, it is a way of controlling people. There is this whole psychological power game that we are a part of — but I think we can escape if we rise above it. Art has the ability to do that, to make us lighter, you know?  

**Religion, spirituality, and commerce**

**CW:** So, for you, is that the role of art: to sharpen the way we see things?  

**FJ:** Yes, and I think that is what gives it that element of hope that you asked about. There is a function for art more than just to entertain or be moralistic. But that’s not really a new idea. In the past, art had a much more central function in society. It was more related to religion, like art in churches for example. But now it seems that art has lost its power, because other media took over the task of visualizing God, or because mass media took over the function of religion.

So people are not as concerned about the role of art anymore. They are more concerned about the role of TV. [Laughs] So art only plays a small part in our lives. And now artists are wondering how to properly use mass media in an art context. Things are confusing, because there is the reality of the media — what we see on TV — but then suddenly it also becomes art.

In the context of art these days, if you talk about religion, it’s kind of strange. When other technology gave us the ability to broaden our world, to make our world bigger, we understood that maybe God did not make everything. And then we think maybe we can control things better, we can make things better, or change the processes. We have lost this sense of spirituality, and the hope that somebody will save us! [Laughs]

I have read the Bible — my family is very involved with the church — and it just doesn’t speak to me, so I cannot relate to that. But I understand that it gives people hope; it gives them a tool, or something to hold on to that will guide them. I think it’s still necessary to believe that you can improve yourself and your surroundings and live alongside other people.

**CW:** And so, for you, art is a way to get back in touch with that spirituality, and maybe extend it to others?
FJ: I think so, yeah. Without having to become a preacher or something. [Laughs] When I am sculpting this foam, at some point it's going to become something of real value both for me and others. It can be the same with music: There is a kind of ritual that we are attracted to. There are different ways that we replace this religious presence. Even if you are not religious, it's still very good to be conscious of the spiritual, and of belief.

CW: Would it be fair, then, to compare the artistic expression of belief, with the religious expression of faith? ... That's kind of a big question!

FJ: I think that could be very true. And I think maybe I am very religious in that way, maybe not in a Christian way. But I believe in the spiritual — more and more, I find this word in my mouth.

In a really good artwork there is a moment when something starts to rise above the work, you know? There is the sense of visualizing something that you cannot grab. And that is something magical or spiritual. It allows you to go above the materialization and into a world of spirit, or thought, or whatever you call it. And I think you learn from that: to relieve the misery, or to accept the malfunction of people and the world. And then you can understand that it's all part of the balance of the whole thing: both the origin and the destruction.

And so the artist is the musician, and, as long as his music is playing, the room keeps moving. The dance keeps going.

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