

IN THE MAKE

Studio visits with West Coast artists



Randy Colosky

Artist/Sculptor, Berkeley // February 2013

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“I’m in my late 40’s, I’ve got nothing to prove, so I’m going to make whatever the fuck I want.” That’s what Randy said while we stood in his very cold, cavernous warehouse space in Berkeley talking about the mutable, roving nature of his art practice. My toes were numb in my boots, and I was gritting my teeth against the chill that seemed to seep into my bones, but those last few words made me stop thinking about how cold I was, and instead I thought about what a gutsy thing he had just said out loud. I’m certain, that all of us at one time or another, have told ourselves that we are going to create, say, make, write, dream up whatever the fuck we want— but often we keep this thought to ourselves because we’re scared of what it actually means to own it and commit to it and do it. Randy didn’t stumble over his words— they flew out of his mouth like arrows, fast, cutting through the air, leaving any possible extraneous utterances far behind. He didn’t say it until later on in our visit, about an hour or so in, but as soon as he had said it, it felt like I had found a key to his work. I say “a” key because my guess is there are many to still be found.

I should back up a bit and tell you a little about Randy’s work... because it is confusing... shifting frequently and often moving in unpredictable directions. Randy uses various quotidian materials to make mainly sculptural work that is often reductive, conceptual, and at once familiar and otherworldly. He aims to take what is ubiquitous in our lives and through unorthodox transformation reveal another dimension of thought, aesthetics, and perception. He is always on the lookout for how to use ordinary materials in unexpected ways; how to tease out the possibilities and actualize surprising forms.



When we visited he had numerous projects underway, including a 2011 salvaged wood sculpture utilizing retaining wall timbers that he was re-working for the inaugural exhibit of Oakland's new Uptown Art Park. Randy is a self-described "idea machine" and just looking around his studio space it's obvious he needs to keep his hands busy— a multitude of pieces are scattered about, at different stages of construction or deconstruction. His approach to ideas is to work them out physically, to test, push, and play with his materials and shake out all the unseen potential living inside a piece of Styrofoam packaging or a steel beam. What is challenging about Randy's work is also what I appreciate about it— initially it somehow seems impenetrable, perplexing; at times almost too stripped down to find a anything to hold onto...but this forces you to consider your own approach to art that appears inaccessible— it demands that you spend time with it, examining, wondering, theorizing, and that you commit to it enough to find your own points of access.

How would you describe your subject matter or the content of your work?

I look at art in general as sort of a transaction between the viewer and the artist. So I like to play with the poetics of this transaction. I'm very interested in transformations and the function of time in my work. I think transformations can be an effective way to engage the viewer. I like to use formal and reductive art language in my work. I think it's important to leave some room for people to bring their own experience to the interpretation of the work. The content of my work is pretty diverse but some subjects that interest me are science, history, humor, and experiences with my own personal transformations.



What mediums do you work with?

I don't have any specific boundaries with types of mediums or materials. I think the more important thing for me with materials and mediums is to constantly be on the lookout for things that might not be art related and then find ways to use them for art. I also like re-using materials from past shows and reconfiguring them into new works. I

guess its sort of my own recycling program. My show at Chandra Cerrito Contemporary is mostly made from materials from past shows.

Recently I was making a mold of Styrofoam packaging to pour wax into to eventually cast in bronze. As I was brushing the urethane onto the piece it started to look really interesting to me; the architectural nature of the Styrofoam blocks covered with this viscous monochromatic off-white liquid took on an otherworldly quality— sort of an austere ‘non’ quality; as if they had no frame of reference but they seemed weirdly familiar. I have been making urethane molds for years but it wasn’t until I cast this particular piece that I saw the urethane mold material and process transcend just being a means to an end. I really try to have the awareness and humility to change and be teachable by my work process.

Your work utilizes materials that are often familiar and functional, yet the focus is more about elevating the aesthetics and design of these materials— can you tell us more about your interest in blurring the lines of art and functionality?

I try and take materials and processes that are somewhat familiar or ubiquitous and apply unorthodox processes or isolate the aspect of a material that I think is compelling outside of its normal function. One of my favorite examples of this was a piece I did for my MOCFA show. I was trying to quit smoking around that time and was on the patch and I took one off and put it on a wood night table I made years ago. I forgot about it and a couple weeks later noticed this brown square on the wood and I realized it was the nicotine patch staining the wood, so I made a piece with a stencil of the word “NOW” and used nicotine patches to stain the word onto the wood. I felt like I invented a whole new way to make marks. But the content of the piece is really the only thing you can say with that method of communication. “NOW”—it’s funny because it’s so damn true. I feel like my work is its strongest when I can show an everyday material doing an extraordinary thing.



Do you see your work as autobiographical at all? Does personal history work its way into your practice?

Yeah, for sure it's autobiographical. I did a video last year at Incline Gallery that I think is a pretty direct example of this. I'm fascinated with You Tube images of the world from when I was a kid. It's really incredible what you can see now with all the historic media available, it's like being able to retrieve a past dream or something.

One thing I look at a lot is old Vietnam War and Cold War related stuff. I can't stress enough how much of an effect the Cold War had on me. It just seemed like everything could end in a nuclear holocaust at any moment, and its not like if you brought it up to your parents they would disagree with you. I was looking at some iconic footage of B-52s dropping these endless streams of bombs on Cambodia. That footage of the bombs dropping is such a classic moment of the ignorance of the military and shows just how detached people were from the suffering of others and the people 32,000 feet below those planes. I was thinking about how I could make amends for this, what could I do now to change this. Really nothing, but what I realized is I can change the media and its outcome. So I took the footage of the bombs dropping from one plane and reversed the bombs dropping out of the bombay doors and turned it upside down so the bombs from one plane above went back into the plane underneath it. The piece is called "I Take It Back." It's a pretty simple piece and not very well put together, like a memory. I guess what I'm saying with this piece is you can change big things even if its in small ways.



Do you have a day job? What is it? What does it mean to you?

I do custom fabrication and construction and my workshop pulls double duty for art and construction projects. I get a lot of inspiration from the process of building things. There are great formal and process-oriented moments in construction especially when things are in a half-built state. Conceptual artist David Ireland's Capp Street house in the Mission District is a great example of this. He really stripped it down so you can see things like the window weights going up and down and embedded his work directly into the house. My occupation is constantly informing my process in this way. I don't see much separation between building things for function and building them for art.

What are you presently inspired by— are there particular things you are reading, listening to or looking at to fuel your work?

I recently went to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. There are amazing stalactites and stalagmite formations created by the calcite-laced water dropping in the same place in darkness for thousands upon thousands of years to make these miraculous objects. I think my work is a product of a process in which I might not totally know what the outcome will be or one that becomes more involved and developed over time. Similar to the cave formation process, my work has to have some aspect that entails laborious or repetitive activity. I like to feel a real investment in what I make both physically and mentally.



I was working on this piece for my show at Chandra Cerrito Contemporary where I was placing 1500 aluminum two feet sections of tube between two grid frames. I wasn't totally sure what I was trying to do, I had a couple of different concepts but as I was constructing the piece I started to notice how the light became altered as it passed through the aligned tubes. Honestly, I thought it was a stupid idea in the beginning but I know now that if an idea makes me feel insecure and I still take the time to go through the repetitive physical process, I might just uncover something interesting that I didn't even know was there.

I also listen to books on tape when I draw, mostly non-fiction. I like history, science, and biographies. I'm into a book right now by Ray Kurzweil called The Singularity is Near, which is about the next evolution of humans and how it will be a manmade event based on technology. I like my work to have aspects of the future and the ancient in it, sort of sci-fi elements. I feel like I'm living in science fiction.



Is there something you are currently working on, or are excited about starting that you can tell us about?

I have a show at Chandra Cerrito Contemporary that is a reconfiguring of the material from the pieces I used for the MOCFA show. Also the City of Oakland is opening a sculpture park in March that I'll have two pieces in. I'm going to be doing a photo and sculpture installation at the 101 California building curated by Kerri Hurtado, There's a project at SOEX that Daniel Nevers is curating where I'll be putting together a club of people of some sort to build a radio telescope or something like that.

What risks have you taken in your work, and what has been at stake?

I don't have an established look to my work. Tracy Wheeler and Bruno Mauro, the curators of my Ampersand International Arts show, talked about how you have to pull farther back to see how all my pieces relate. Tracy used this quote about a ship tacking back and forth; it seems random but from further back in distance it's actually moving in one consistent direction. I feel like that is really appropriate for my practice. Also, I have a real mission to keep the work reductive. I try not to intervene any more than necessary, or just with only one or two visible processes. I think my work could be flashier or more polished but I like leaving some loose ends, as if its never really finished. But it's a tougher sell commercially.



Do you intend your work to challenge the viewer?

Definitely. I think people are so overwhelmed with being feed information that is easily digestible and part of what I try to do is play with perception. My work has to engage the synapse in a direct way.

I made a piece for my Ampersand International Arts show that looked like a cinderblock with construction foam coming out of it. It's a pretty dumb looking object but its actually made out of very classical labor intensive mediums of cast bronze and tromp loi painted. When people read the label to see how it was made I think their brains were challenged as to what the object actually is. Though the piece doesn't look any different from what they initially perceived it to be.

I went to this 10 day silent meditation retreat once and I'll never forget on the 11th day you got to finally talk to everyone after spending 10 days around all these people basically ignoring each other. I had such elaborate ideas of who they all were. When I finally talked to them I couldn't believe how wrong I was about everyone. That day changed how I looked at everything and I think I like to find ways to share that experience in my work.



How do you navigate the art world?

I remember in 1997 or so I was invited to meet with a gallery in the Mission. It was so big time for me. They seemed to really like my work and they asked me to talk about it, to explain it. I got so angry and confused that they didn't know already by looking at it and I wouldn't say anything. It didn't go well. I had terrible people skills. A couple years after that I realized I need to do some real internal work on myself in general and started a new journey around what was happening for me inside my head that continues to this day.

Then in 2009 out of the clear blue sky Tracy Wheeler and Bruno Mauro called me and wanted to do a "Retrospective" of my work at Ampersand International Arts Gallery. Tracy had seen my work at the SOEX Art Auction for like 12 years running and always really liked my work.

So you never know what's going to happen or who is looking at you work. Sometimes a door will open that you didn't even know existed.

I think the art world is a place where people's idiosyncrasies, fears and personalities become amplified because the parameters are so undefined. So, now I try to be empowered but compassionate. I try to give back without giving away. I think art people, myself included, are figuring themselves out in the art world and the art world is a great teacher.

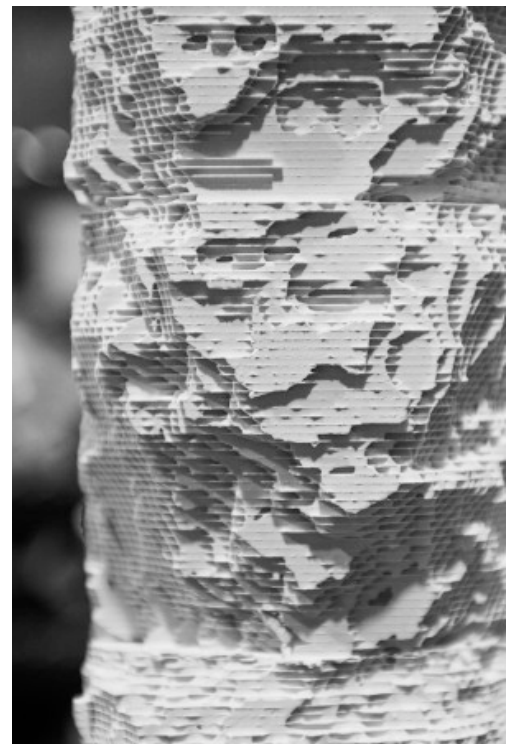


Do you see your work as relating to any current movement or direction in visual art or culture? Which other artists might your work be in conversation with?

My work is in conversation with Anish Kapoor, Roni Horn, and Olafur Eliasson. These artists are conceptual but willing to also make beautiful objects. Natasha Boas, the curator of my show at MOCFA used to tell me that there's a big movement in contemporary art to incorporate craft mediums or more quotidian materials and that she saw my work in that context.

I have a degree in ceramics so I'm really drawn to mediums where you heat things up and they change form, or using molds to make a material do something it's not inherently going to do without a lot of intervention. My hope though is that I have expanded upon that concept to include more fugitive elements like light and other natural forces, or taken the craft ideals and applied them conceptually to more unorthodox or non-art materials and processes.

In terms of local artist I feel a real kinship with all of the artists who participated in the Highlight Gallery's 3020 Laguna Street In Exitum Project last year. I was honored to be a part of that show. I think Jesse Houlding, Chris Fraser, Yulia Pinkusevich, Andy Vogt, and Val Britton are artists that are navigating some of the same territory I am, although all in different ways.



Are you involved in any upcoming shows or events? Where and when?

I currently have a show up at Chandra Cerrito Contemporary in Oakland in February and March with painter Jerry Carniglia.

I'm installing two pieces for the new Oakland Uptown Art Park opening in March across from the Fox Theater.

I'm going to be in a group show, called Permutation Unfolding, at Root Division.

I'm doing an installation at the 101 California building in May.

I'm working on a project at SOEX in October that will be a club that people can join to work on a project together.

To see more of Randy's work:

www.rjcart.com

K. Imperial Fine Arts in San Francisco.

Chandra Cerrito Contemporary in Oakland.

