

2012/13

McKnight Visual Artists

Jim Denomie

Chris Larson

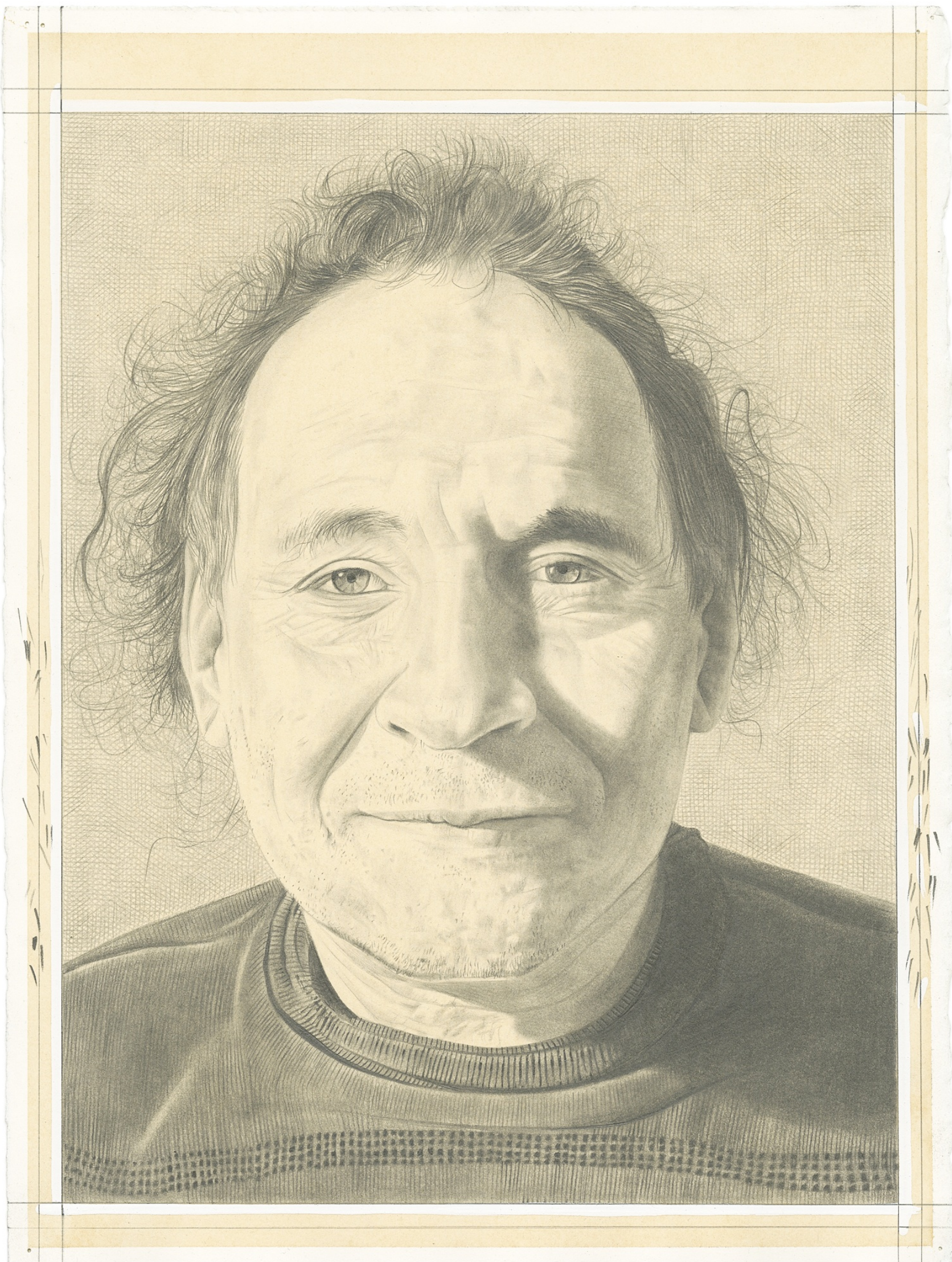
Ruben Nusz

Natasha Pestich

in conversation with

Phong Bui

Jim Denomie



Portrait of Jim Denomie. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Having visited the painter Jim Denomie, one of the four recipients of the 2012/13 McKnight Artist Fellowships for Visual Artists, in his home/studio in Shafer, Minnesota on Tuesday, February 19, 2013 we both were able to extend the conversation two days after, on Thursday, February 21 about Denomie's life and work in my sun-lit room at Le Méridien Chambers Minneapolis. The edited version is the following.

Phong Bui (Rail): Does your last name, Denomie, have any significant meaning?

Denomie: Well, it's a French name because native people in this area intermingled with the French fur traders in the 1700s, but I am not sure what it really means.

Rail: Has anyone in your family kept the family tree?

Denomie: There're some distant cousins who are compiling a family tree now for the first time.

Rail: How far back can you remember your own upbringing?

Denomie: Well, just to my grandparents, who all died 30, 40, 50 years ago. But on my mom's side she had ten siblings, so I have about 60, 70 cousins. And now they all have children, and we have these big family reunions on our reservation, called Lac Courte Oreilles, every memorial weekend, which is up in Northern Wisconsin, near a town called Hayward.

Rail: Where you were born in 1955.

Denomie: That's right.

Rail: What was it like to be brought up in Hayward?

Denomie: Well, I only lived on the reservation for the first three or four years of my life, so there was nothing that memorable as far as I remember. Then my family moved to Chicago as part of the relocation program, which was a federal policy in the '50s and '60s. But we only lived there for maybe a year, and then when my parents split up, my mom moved us, me and my two brothers, to South Minneapolis.

Rail: What was the reason for their split up, Jim?

Denomie: I really don't know the reason. But I can imagine, as young parents, there was a pressure of adapting to the huge transition from the reservation to city life.

Rail: Was there a reason you majored in Health Sciences at the University of Minnesota?

Denomie: Well, I had stumbled into construction when I was about 20 years old, which I'm still involved with. But in 1989 I became sober—I'd been drinking for 20 years—I decided to change my direction in life and go back to school. I was intending to get into the health sciences so I can get out of the construction business. Actually, I was working on an addition to a hospital here in Minneapolis, and this friendly guy in green clothing would come out and smoke his cigarettes in the construction zone. He told me that he was a nurse anesthetist and that his training was a two-year program. It wasn't a lot of school, and it wasn't a big degree either, but he walked into a job making 20 bucks an hour with great benefits, and health insurance, and so on. So I decided then that I wanted to go back to school and study the same thing. And so, I did. I enrolled at the University of Minnesota, I quit my drywall job, sold my house, and moved into a little apartment the size of a photo mat. I'd like to mention that making drawings and paintings when I was a child, was always a favorite activity of mine. And when I got to high school, I wanted to transfer to an art high school because we were at a school where there was a two year experiment with modular scheduling, and it was a disaster. Nobody was making it to classes, nobody was succeeding, and I was one of them. So I went to my counselor and asked if I could transfer to a school where I could focus on art, and she said, "No, you don't want to do that, that's a terrible choice, there's no job, no future in art." And I said, "It's either that or I drop out of school." Which is what I did. I got a full-time minimum wage job, and then later I got into construction. At the U of M, I took the Intro to Studio Arts class as part of a requirement and it sort of woke up my artistic spirit.

Rail: One could say that you picked up where you left off before when you were younger.

Denomie: Yes. It was exciting. Right after that class, I enrolled in my first drawing class, and then my first painting class, and then I switched my major from health sciences to visual arts. And that was it. [*Laughs.*] So I ended up graduating with a BFA in Visual Arts, and a minor in American Indian Studies.

Rail: And with your minor in American Indian Studies that fed endless images to your work, which I would say divide into three separate bodies: The first is the portrait series; the second is the historical narratives/social satires; and the third being the dreamscapes, or surrealist paintings.

Denomie: Well, the portraits are just intuitive and expressionistic, which I would say that they are just about painting. Since I didn't take enough courses in art history I



Dream Rabbit III, oil on canvas, 35"x49", 2001.

was more focused on my interest in expressionist paintings. I like Emil Nolde's bold brushwork and expressive choice of color, but Max Beckmann's wide subject matter—from portraits, still life, landscape to fantastic and mythological narratives—really caught my attention. I could just relate more to his work. The historical/narrative paintings allow me to deal with issues of my identity as a contemporary Native American male living in the 21st century and the political and social issues—historical and contemporary—relating to American Indian history, as I perceive and understand them.

Rail: And the construction of the history paintings tend to be more flat than, let's say, your dreamscapes.

Denomie: I would not quite say that. Not entirely.

Rail: Do you think that a form of automatism stems from your being constantly in flux, moving from one place to the next, which amplify a greater sense of dislocation or a state of being in perpetual exile?

Denomie: Yes. That's the root of my dreamscape paintings. They're about getting away from reality into another space, deep space.

Rail: The series of Dream Rabbit and Renegade paintings are good examples. I also notice how the color palette is darker and modeling is more visible as a whole.

Denomie: That's true, mostly because I wanted to create a sense of atmosphere and mystery to them. In any case, by making those paintings I realized that as I grew up, I became more aware of my ambiguous identity. I was a product of the assimilation campaign, I wasn't taught much tradition by my parents, who were not taught everything from my grandparents, who went to boarding school. Living up in

South Minneapolis, many native people experienced similar circumstances. Even though some were still more connected to the culture, very few actually spoke the language. That is part of the reason I studied American Indian Studies. I was part of a younger group of Native Americans who were going back to learn the history and language, and wanted re-connect with traditions and cultural knowledge that were left behind—ceremonies of all sorts, storytelling, harvesting, song and dance, food, medicines, etcetera—by reaching out to those who still knew these things.

Rail: Was that the time you discovered Surrealism?

Denomie: Yes. And I knew right away that I would be attracted to surrealist paintings, mostly because I dream vividly, and I love my dreams.

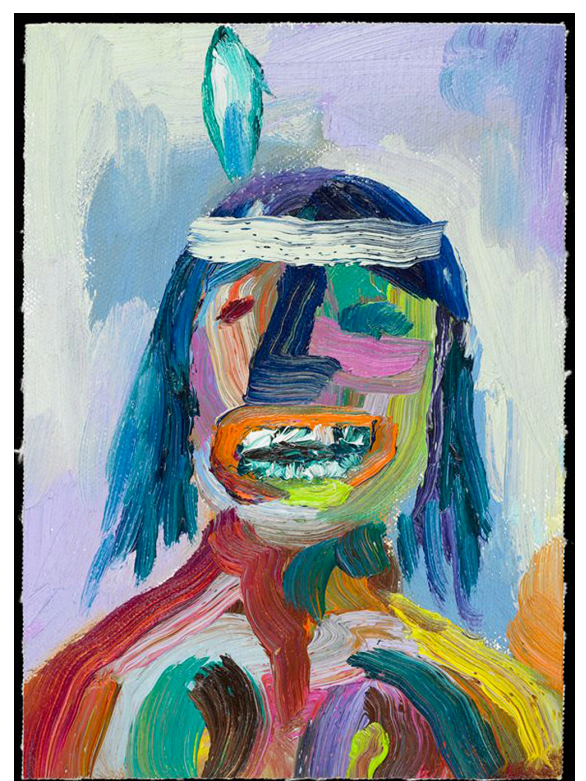
Rail: Is there a particular surrealist artist to whom you would relate more readily, say Max Ernst, Tanguy, or Dalí—

Denomie: Yes, Max Ernst, and Dalí, but I also love Edward Hopper, even though Hopper wasn't a surrealist I just think that his portrayal of melancholy and strangely erotic figures, and the use of colors are not exactly what you would call realistic.

Rail: I totally agree. What about your portrait paintings?

Denomie: In 2005 I decided to do a painting a day for a year, because I was finding it hard to get to the studio because of my full-time job, home maintenance, family commitments, and other social obligations. I told myself that this endeavor was to be about experimenting, exploring, and playing. I wanted to go back to my 8th grade art class where there were no destinations, no expectations and just have fun. I also wanted to emulate painters that I admired, like the Bay Area Figurative painters.

Phong: Such as David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn —



Untitled portrait, oil on canvas, 7"x5", 2005.

Denomie: That painting is also a play on the Minnesota State Seal, which is this somewhat stereotypical, locked-in-time image of when Minnesota became a state in 1858. It shows a farmer plowing a field with the Mississippi River flowing by, and an Indian riding a horse towards the setting sun. *Casino Sunrise* is an updated version of past and present events in Minnesota history. Jesse Ventura, our former governor, is the central figure. And as he went about his business as governor, he just showed many people who he really was. Everyone should know that during his tenure there was litigation in the courts between the Ojibwe people of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the federal government about fishing rights, treaty rights. The Ojibwe, when they granted the federal government rights to the land and the minerals, they retained the right to fish, hunt, and gather on these lands. And so we always had that right. People think we were gifted special rights when, in fact, it's the opposite. But nobody is aware of that history because it is obscure in public school teaching. So, when these issues come up the ignorant become very confrontational, and ugly. Jesse Ventura said, "Well, what about my right to fish with hand grenades? When I was a SEAL in the Philippines we threw hand grenades in the water and dead fish would float to the top." And I thought, what an idiot! That's why I rendered him as the central figure and in the image he's holding a hand grenade, and a fishing pole, and a wad of money, and then the rest of the landscape is just full of these other more contemporary history events.

Rail: That's fantastic. What about the fantastical landscape?

Denomie: When I started my first surreal series called *The Renegade*, the winged horses and flying Indians, and the tall mesa tops were metaphors for confinement and the reservation, the idea of flight became an issue of privilege,



Untitled portrait, oil on canvas, 20"x20", 2013. Photo courtesy Rik Sferra.

and who controls it, and who has access to the rest of the world including down below the water, minerals, and other natural resources. I had recently learned about the history of how reservations developed in this country, treaties, and I saw it visually — first in my mind — a year before I painted it.

Rail: Why do you think the palette in those paintings is so tonal and dark, the opposite of the narrative historical painting, and the portrait?

Denomie: Different forms and content need to be expressed with different compositions, colors.

Rail: That's certainly true.

Denomie: But I think they all correspond to one another because they all developed out of the previous series. It's like a potato growing another arm, or an eye, and going off in a new direction. Or like a cave explorer going into a deep cave and seeing undiscovered things. And then there's a little channel that leads him to another cavern with new images, new ideas, different but still related to the earlier cave. And this cave leads to the opening of another cave. And the explorations continue.

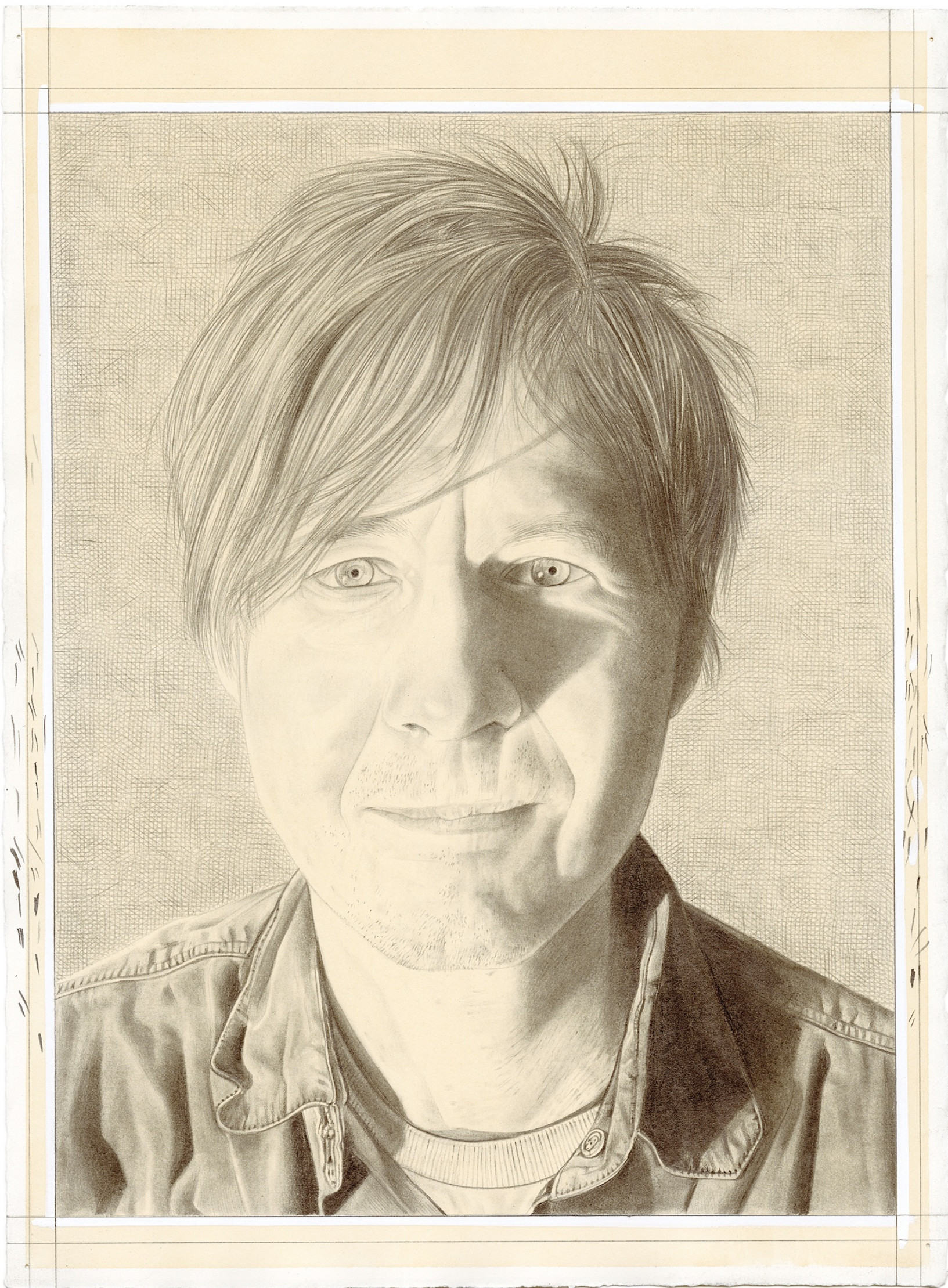


Transitions, oil on canvas, 35"x49", 1997.



The Creative Oven, oil on canvas, 144"x84", 2013.

Chris Larson



Portrait of Chris Larson. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Chris Larson In Conversation with Phong Bui

On an overcast afternoon on Wednesday, February 20, 2013 I paid a visit to one of the four 2012/13 McKnight Visual Artist Fellowship recipients, the artist Chris Larson, at his immense studio in St. Paul, where he has built a monumental structure that contains a variety of constructed interiors for his video works. On the following day we continued our conversation about his life and work at Le Méridien Chambers Minneapolis. The edited version is the following.

Phong Bui (Rail): We had a wonderful conversation yesterday about Giacometti's sculpture, which you first saw when you were an MFA student at Yale. I'd like to begin by talking about your experience of seeing one of his late surrealist pieces, *The Invisible Object* (1934-35), which is in the collection of Société Anonyme, donated to the Yale University Art Gallery by Katherine Drier in 1941.

Chris Larson:

Otherwise known as *Hands Holding the Void*, the figure

suggests a suspended, invisible ball. This suggested movement, as opposed to the static structure that her quasi-geometric figure sits on, is similar to the tension in my recent work, especially with things that are happenings in their subtle ways in these intimate interiors. Anyway, that piece was very important, especially the board set upon the figure's feet in relationship to the architecture of its body, and the strange frame. But definitely everything that was made is meant to be directly in that empty space held by the two hands. Everything.

Rail: Yet, each part is essential to the other. Do you think there is a degree of awkwardness and terror in that void?

Larson: Yes. And the board on her feet reminds me of Bruce Nauman's *Slant Step* (1965), which suggests a function of something, but you can't name that function. Similarly, the purpose of the board in *The Invisible Object* is very mysterious, although you may say that it sort of holds not only against that figure but actually against the space itself.

Rail: You may also think of it as a trapping device.

Larson: Yes. You know, Duchamp's *Rotary Glass Plates (Precision Optics)* (1920), which is also in

the same collection, has the same presence. You see this old motor, and even though it's unplugged you still feel a sense of danger.

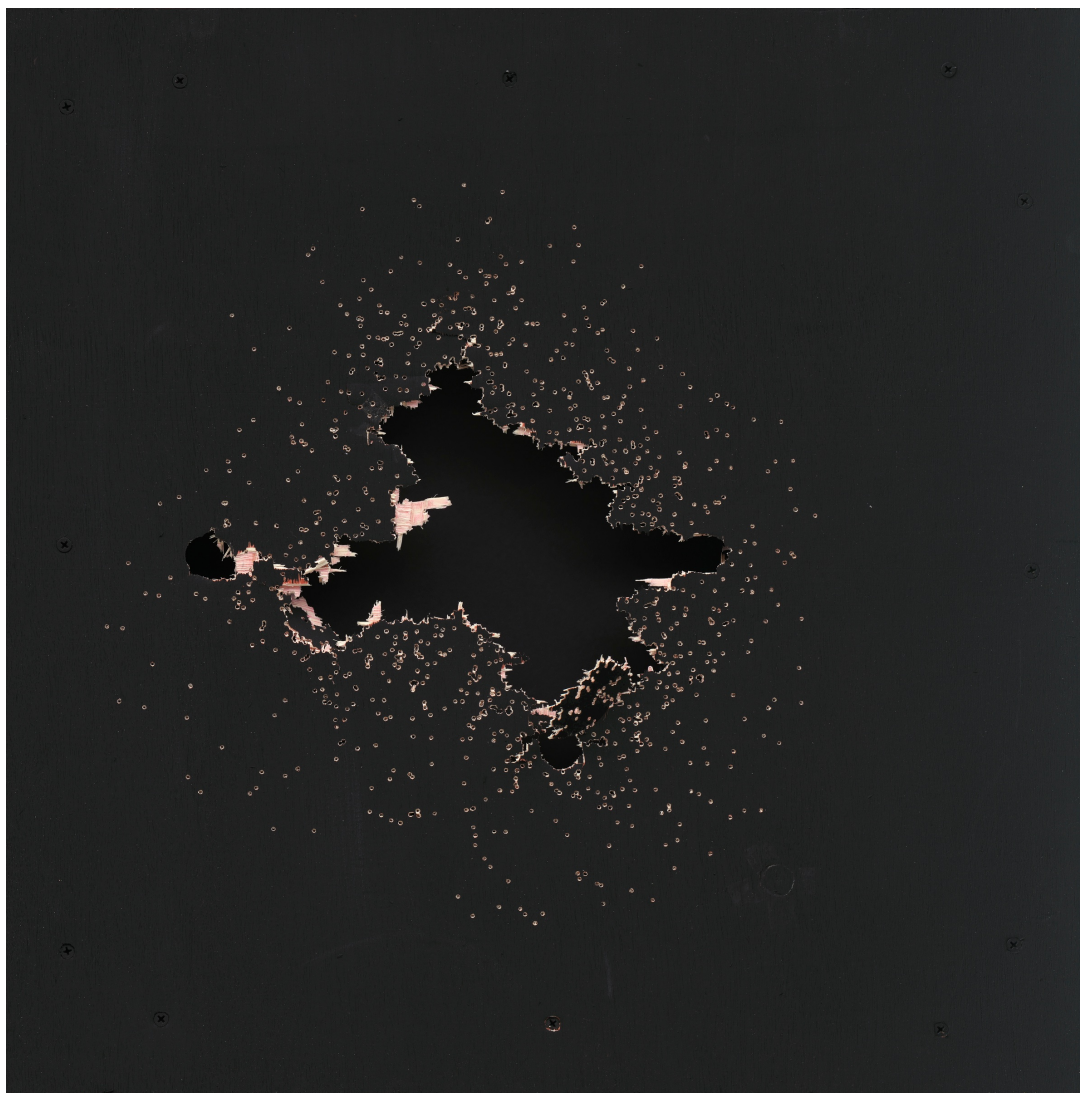
Rail: Definitely. This is an aspect that I sense in your work as well. There is an element of catastrophe, unforeseen destruction.

Larson: Yes. Right now I am working on a project that deals with an element of catastrophe. I am rebuilding to scale a replica of a Marcel Breuer house, installing it in downtown St. Paul, and then setting it on fire. The original house is located a few miles from my studio. Just as my

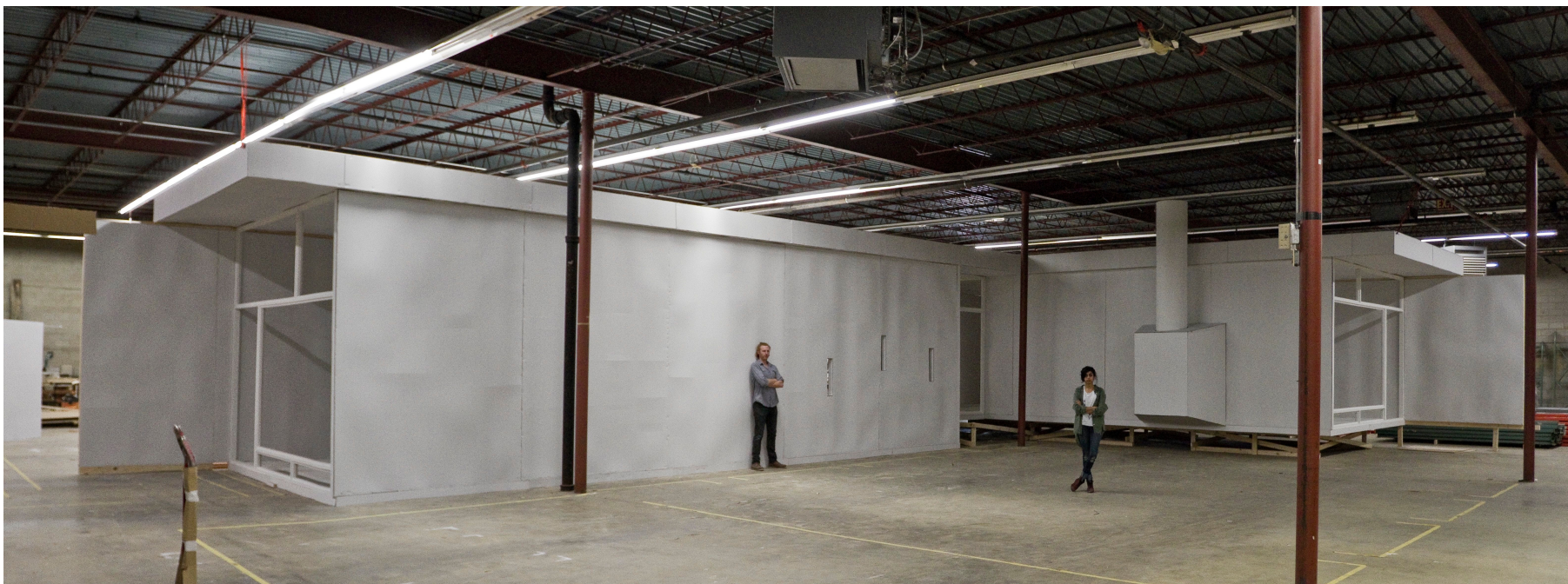
studio and its contents turned upside down in my video *Heavy Rotation*, the act of destroying a Breuer house is a new place to begin...not a blank page, but as an erased page...a palimpsest.

Rail: Do you see destruction as a formal issue, as you previously described the trapping of the feet in the Giacometti? Or is it something else?

Larson: Maybe it's more existential. For example, the piece you saw at the Walker Art Center—it was initially a black painting, which I then shot with a shotgun, blasting the surface to reveal what was behind it. Then I scanned it and printed it as a photograph. But through that transformation



Shotgun Blast #3, C-print mounted on dibond, 24"x24", 2009.



Celebration/Love/Loss, wood and cardboard, 95' x 61'x17', 2013.

something happened. Similarly, the video piece *Heavy Rotation* is an action of me drawing in circles enough to affect the architecture. The floor is cut out through the continuous rotation and reveals the space below. It's very physical, but more psychological, right?

Rail: I'd think so, at least as much as it is physical.

Larson: Maybe Giacometti's *The Invisible Object* lives in that similar space.

Rail: Let's talk about the initial impulse to create *Heavy Rotation*. How and where did it come about? Did it come in terms of a vision or a dream or a thought?

Larson: It was very simple at first. It began when I was planning for a show in Switzerland at The View. The exhibition space is located above the Swiss shores of Lake Constance. It was an underground water reservoir turned into an exhibition space—a very unique and interesting exhibition space. As I was walking through the underground reservoir I looked up and there was a concrete cap in the earth leading to the space above. I got a great sensation of being in two places at one time, just through that portal.

Rail: A suggested space.

Larson: Right. There were these stacked spaces, maybe ten of them stacked on top of each other with a hole leading down into the next space, connecting them all simultaneously. It was very simple: I made a quick drawing, then I went back and started building the rooms stacked on top of each other. And the act of me activating the space disintegrated the floor to go through to the next space. I'm

interested in constant motion. That's why I don't have chairs in my studio. I'm always walking and moving around.

Rail: Right. How did you manage to make that circular gesture fluid, with some pressure, but not enough to cut a hole in the floor?

Larson: It's movie magic. I mean, the hole was pre-cut and the paper was placed over the hole, so all you saw was the paper. Then I created the drawing on top of the paper while there were tabs holding the cut out circle in place. Then as I signaled to someone below, they pulled a cord, and pushed down and pressed the tabs up.

Rail: Oh, I see. Movie magic!

Larson: But I think you sense that something is building up and about to happen.

Rail: Yeah. You do. I mean, I do. How much did you have to plan ahead since the set itself is so expansive and spatially complex?



Celebration/Love/Loss (video documentation still), 2013.

Larson: As I built, I acted it out in my head. I'd already played the scenario out in my head so many times, so that the space was activated as the action was filmed.

Rail: Was the room intended to be that specific size?

Larson: I think the viewpoint of the camera it makes the room seem a little larger than it is. But I did want it to be a bit less than human size, so you felt that closeness of the space.

Rail: You mean claustrophobic [*laughs*]. And then when it finally went through to the floor below, when you climbed down on the ladder—

Larson: It's a room within a wheel.

Rail: Which demonstrates a sense of gravity, and yet there's a feeling of ephemerality or fragility about things that are unavoidably pulled down by gravity. I'm very curious whether this particular tension has earlier references that fed the formal construct of the work. Could you speak of your early upbringing?

Larson: I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and my family moved to Lake Elmo, a more rural part of Minnesota when I was in second grade, where I lived until I went to Yale, which was the first time I had ever lived in an urban setting. I got there and I think I freaked out a little bit. The first thing I did was bring these gigantic logs into my studio.

Rail: Without knowing why?

Larson: Well, I think it was longing for something other than the urban. I started cutting these logs up with these joints. I was sort of building a brand new tree. Some of them went up on one end, made a circular loop like an arch, and then ended with branches at the bottom. It was a hemlock pine, maybe three feet around at the very base, so it was very



Heavy Rotation (video still), 2011-2013.

heavy, and I was afraid that it would just collapse on itself and fall. So I had a post holding up the center of it. One day Richard Serra came as a visiting artist; he would only come to your studio for 15 minutes because everyone wanted to see him. Right when he came into mine, the gun went off. He said, "Chris—what's the beam for?" I was like, "Well, I don't know, it's holding it up." He said, "Pull it out!" I was like, "I can't, the whole thing—it's so much weight, I think it's going to fall." And he said, "Come on." So we both grabbed it at the bottom and we yanked it up and the whole thing sort of just dropped down a little and settled into space. Serra looked at me and said, "Say what you mean, mean what you say." Like, don't mess around. Do what you intend to do.

Rail: In other words, he saw the structure as a prop, an unnecessary element.

Larson: Amazing. He saw right through what was in my head.

Rail: So you felt that was an important moment in which you had to place more trust in yourself?

Larson: That was huge. Don't mess around. Be very direct. Mean what you say, and say what you mean. And in those days our studios were gigantic. I was in the old Hammond Hall, which was an old factory building. I literally worked 15, 16, 17 hours a day in my studio. It really taught me how to work and how to build a practice to sustain after I left. At that time, all of the faculty members were part time. They would come in one or two days a week. The program was heavy on critiques. It was very important, just talking about your work. Then we would have a constant flow of visiting artists coming through our studios, especially Robert Gober and Ursula von Rydingsvard, who both were very helpful in terms of material, and meaning, and action with the material.



Heavy Rotation (set), 2011-2013.

Rail: So you would say that your two years at Yale were fruitful and fundamental to your practice as an artist afterward?

Larson: Absolutely, especially after that encounter with Richard Serra.

Rail: Then once you graduated, you were compelled, unlike most of your classmates who would move to New York to pursue their potential careers in the art world, to go back to St. Paul.

Larson: I was.

Rail: What was your reason?

Larson: While we were at Yale, we would take the train to New York every other week, as much as we could, to see shows in galleries and museums. We would also go see artists in their studios. So I had a sense what was going on in New York. There were warehouses just filled with artists and I thought it was a little bit overwhelming in terms of its close-knit community. I knew coming back to St. Paul I would have lots of both mental and physical space. Yeah, my whole class moved to New York and I came back to St. Paul.

Rail: Did you take any time off between undergrad and grad?

Larson: No. I went straight through, pretty much from grade school to grad school at Yale. No stopping. And it was amazing. As I fell in love with making and producing things, I didn't stop. I never stopped.

Rail: So what was it like when you came back to St. Paul in...?

Larson: '92. Even as an undergrad at Bethel University in St. Paul I didn't have a lot of contact with artists in the area. And I was anxious to get back, get a studio, and see what that felt like. I moved to one of the studios in downtown St. Paul, and one of the tenants next door to the studio saw all of my tools and everything and they were like, "Keep it down in there, okay?" It was not like, "How do you do? Welcome!" I've slowly found artists whom I can have close relationships with, but it was hard in the first ten years.

Rail: When did you have the first impulse to make things?

Larson: It was right when we moved from St. Paul to Lake Elmo, deep in the woods. I would find old farm machinery. Just a lot of peculiar things that I'd seen that I would start to invent uses for. A lot of forts and whittling sticks, just manipulating material.

Rail: What about the impulse to make things with monumental scale?

Larson: That probably began when I worked on a farm, bailing hay for a couple of summers. Objects like the silos, or the barns, or the threshers became very monumental. As I was bailing, I'd get the sense of the season and things moving from planted, cut, bailed, and then into the barn and the horse eats and digests and then it starts over again. Slow, but monumental. I should mention that I got a travel grant from Yale before I left. Peter Schjeldahl was on the committee and he really liked these machines I was making at the time. He said, go find these things, the real things. So as soon as I was given the money to travel I headed to Scandinavia looking for these machines, mechanical devices, wooden contraptions, and so on.

Rail: Early structures.

Larson: Before the Industrial Revolution.



Insecure Architecture, mixed media, dimensions variable, 2012-2013.



Unnamed, white pine, 228" x 600" x 168", 2010. Photo courtesy of Masami Kawazato, Walker Art Center.

Rail: I assume that you find formal beauty in those structures.

Larson: I do. Actually, I got a book on them (*Bernd and Hilla Becher: Pennsylvania Coal Mine Tipples* [1991, Dia Center for the Arts]), where I learned how they were built quickly by coalmine bootleggers. They were there to get scraps of the coal that was left over. They would go in with whatever material they could get—tree branches and boards and stuff—so there's this sense of urgency and necessity. They're not trimming of edges to make things flush. It's not about—

Rail: —Perfection.

Larson: Yes. It's about getting the coal out as fast as they can and get out. And I absolutely love those structures. And I still have to remind myself: "Don't cut, there's energy in things that are raw and imperfect." In fact, when I was making *Unnamed*, a bridge-like form that was severely smashed on each end, people would say, "Oh, it looks like you must have

just whacked at it." But it was very slow. One of the crewmembers at the Walker said that all the wild dip and splashing on de Kooning's paintings was all rehearsed and intentional.

Rail: It's human touch that separates one from another. De Kooning knew what was his. I'm also curious about how, in addition to your appetite for big forms, you seem to find equal pleasure in making small things like those minute, delicate architectural forms that you are making now in the small studio.

Larson: Those came out of paying attention to what happens as I'm doing something else. So as the larger set was being built, things would be activated in the studio that I normally just, in the end, would have swept up. But I felt there were energy in them so I began to make these architectural floor plans out of plaster and then very simple little, tiny, minute

actions carved out of plaster, little tiny plaster boards, smaller than tooth picks.

Rail: Which reminds me of Giacometti's *No More Play* (1932).

Larson: I love those early Giacomettis. And I found the more I took more things out the bigger the room became.

Rail: Like Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio I* (Fat Chance John Cage) video installation where the energy is all taking place on the floor.

Larson: I agree.

Rail: Now that you've made monolithic pieces that were very controlled, assimilated into different spaces, don't you think that with this structure, which constructed with different spaces that serve different functions, you should consider it a new challenge for the work—pushing both monumentality and intimacy at once for the first time?

Larson: I think so. I also know that if I don't move, nothing happens. Even if I've spent this last year moving around in my studio and making things, even though a lot is failure it's

like I know that I'm moving. It's like if the pen never moves, nothing gets written, right?

Rail: Action.

Larson: Action.

Rail: And the acceptance of failure.

Larson: Yes.

Rail: And that's why this book is entitled *Failure*.

Larson: [*Laughs.*] Yeah that was sort of tongue in cheek but still very true, yes.



Untitled, mixed media, 2012-2013.

Ruben Nusz



Portrait of Ruben Nusz. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Ruben Nusz In Conversation with Phong Bui

After having visited John Rasmussen and Midway Contemporary Art in the afternoon of Wednesday, February 20, 2013, Ruben Nusz—one of the four recipients of the 2012/13 McKnight Artist Fellowships for Visual Artists—welcomed me to his studio in the Northrup King Building in Northeast Minneapolis. Below is the edited version of our extended conversation that continued at Le Méridien Chambers Minneapolis on the following day, Thursday, February 21.

Phong Bui (Rail): Were you born and grew up in the Twin Cities?

Ruben Nusz: No. I was born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, my father worked as a contractor, so I grew up watching him build houses and then helping him as soon as I was able, age 10. My mother worked a number of jobs. My interest in art began through my parents, my mother painted as a hobby for a little while and they both taught country western dance.

Rail: You mean in their spare time?

Nusz: Yeah, they are paid for it as well. And they still do it. They've always been passionate about country western dance, line dancing, and expressing themselves that way. My grandfather died when my father was only 12 years old, so watching Western cowboy movies was his consolation. It had a profound impact on him at a young age and so part of his persona was built around thinking about the American West. And even though he's not from the South he spoke with a southern country-western accent. Often people would ask, "Is your father from Texas?" I'd respond, "No, he just talks that way;" he just adopted it. My parents also had their version of Sunday-style painting, which was wood burning as well as stained glass. And then I became interested in comic strips, especially *Peanuts* by Charles M. Schulz, who in fact was born in Minneapolis and grew up in Saint Paul. I was always attracted to Schulz's work partly because he had a wonderful way of balancing humor and melancholy that I identified with as a child. Then when I was probably 12 or 13 my family moved out to a farm by Renner, which was more rural. So as I was progressing from a child into my teenage years, I began to feel alienated in my own body, and being in a rural area the feeling of isolation was even more intense. That's why I was looking forward to getting *Peanuts* in the newspaper, which I soon started to use as a source for drawing all of the characters. Eventually, my high school art teacher, Ruth Jackson, who had a passion for Georgia O'Keeffe, lined up a scholarship for me to an arts summer

camp in Minneapolis, where for the first time I saw paintings in person that I'd only seen and read about in books.

Rail: At the Minneapolis Institute of Arts?

Nusz: Yes. And the art summer camp was administered by the Minneapolis College of Arts and Design.

Rail: And what sort of things were you making then?

Nusz: They were surrealist influenced works, mostly inspired by Giorgio deChirico, Salvador Dali, and automatic line drawing which I loved doing because of the lost/found effect....

Rail: Which is every young artist's fantasy.

Nusz: Exactly.

Rail: Where did you go to art school?

Nusz: I went to the University of Minnesota and there I received a BFA, summa cum laude, in painting.

Rail: Did you go on exploring further the language of surrealism, or take on new experiments?

Nusz: I actually went through a number of styles to learn how to paint. I think that it can be difficult to learn to paint when you're not studying in an academic fashion—even though we were painting and drawing from models—it wasn't to the same extent as the 19th-century French academy training where you would learn to perfect a given traditional technique. So what I would do is vacillate from one style to another. I would paint landscape, still life, and then I would do portraits, and so on. And then for my senior thesis show I recreated bathroom stall walls from around campus, which was intended to be a trompe l'oeil post-Duchampian reference to the birth of painting in caves. It was also a quasi-social piece that dealt with engagement and degradation; the piece asked the question: if something is painted on or written on, will an audience engage with it once it is defaced or if others are involved, communally.

Rail: Were they large in size?

Nusz: No. I hadn't gone all out into something that was all-encompassing in terms of installation—they were still easel-sized paintings with an interest in exploring the interchange between the two- and three-dimensional realities.

Rail: When did abstraction enter your work?

Nusz: That's a good question. Abstraction is a very loaded word for me, and I still question whether I'm an abstract painter, I really do. But it otherwise occurred probably after I graduated from college. At that point most of my notebooks were filled with writing not drawing, and I'd decided to take a break from painting and work primarily on writing screenplays. Then one day a neighbor had come by and saw a small still-life painting I had painted in college, and he said, "I really like this—can I buy it?" And then he wanted to commission me to paint some fruit for him, and I've always loved still-life paintings so I'm like, sure, I'll paint it for you. Actually, this led to painting commissions of people's pets, and so on.

Rail: How long did you undertake such commissions?

Nusz: A good six or seven years. But it was then that made me realize how I missed touching things and the whole physicality of painting, plus my screenplays were abysmal. To go back to abstraction, at some point I wanted to move away from the literal, yet I was thinking of Picasso—how he never was able to make a fully non-objective painting. I identify with that failure. My desire to create an abstract painting is tempered by my ideas about the fictitious nature of reality, which is illusory. So I've always been interested in illusions. I tend now to use abstraction as a direct communication between the painter and the viewer, without contextual sidwinding; a color is like a number. In other words, I also think of abstraction as the triadic abstract relationship between the factual, trompe l'oeil, and photography.

Rail: You mean what is considered a made illusionistic space and what is factually made as a flat space?

Nusz: Yes, totally. I was fairly obsessed with that idea, which led to an installation I did at The Soap Factory in 2011 where I made these hyper-real carved wooden nails and then I painted them with a patina-like rust so they looked like they were like Richard Serra's Cor-ten steel. It's a really big space and it used to be a literal soap factory. There are these old wooden pillars, and I made three nails, which I placed in the pre-existing holes of all of the pillars. I was thinking of these pillars and the nails installed as paintings themselves because they have such a history. And so the nails were almost like directional arrows pointing to a painting that reminded me of what Ad Reinhardt had said, "Sculpture is what you knock over when you're backing up to look at a painting." This situation is the complete opposite; where sculpture is leading you to a painting, and then directing you back to a sculpture again. Trompe l'oeil as a concept has

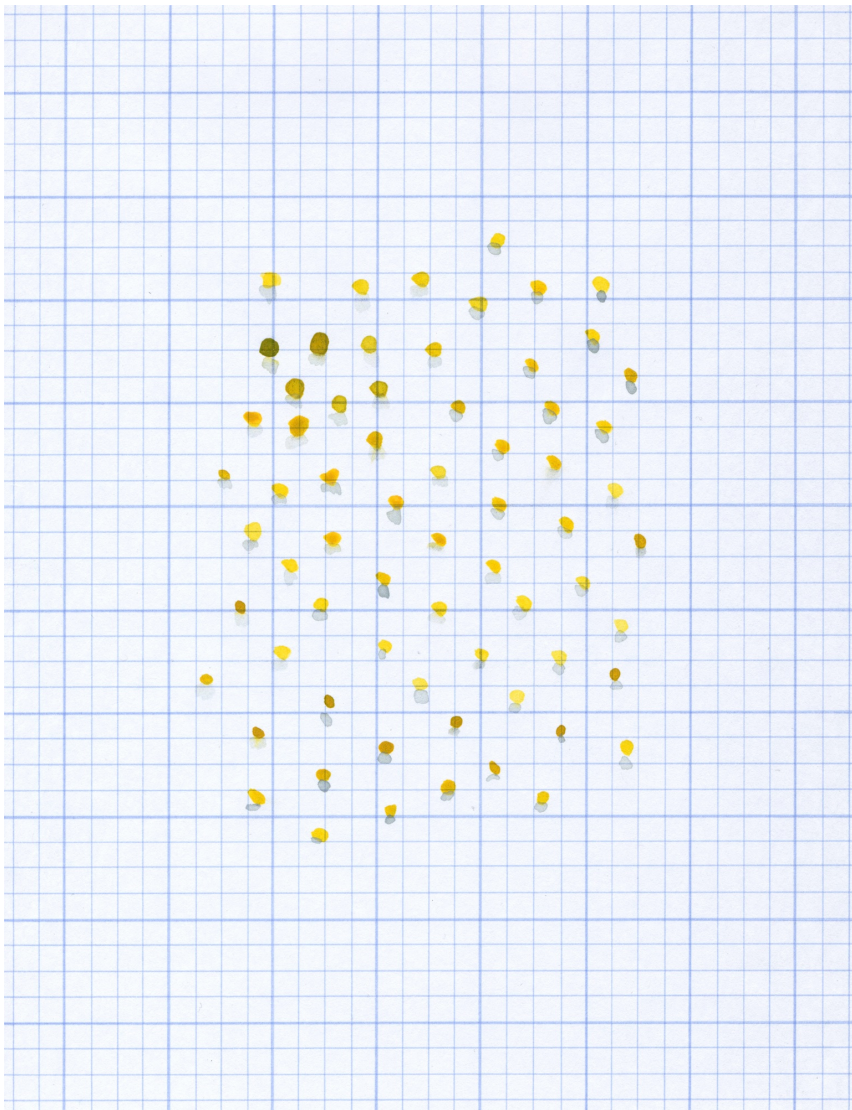
been pretty important to me, partly because I love John F. Peto's paintings.

Rail: Jasper Johns admires his work greatly.

Nusz: Yes, that's right. What's interesting about Peto, to me anyway, is that in his painting, not that unlike a Cézanne where his illusionistic space is being squeezed out as the image becomes closer to the surface so that the whole still-life would fall off the table top—I mean, in Peto's painting the image, it's already at the surface. It's sort of like the still life is right there; it's the surface and it's hanging up and it's flat. What I also really love about Peto is the way he builds up surfaces—like the old saying with Rembrandt where he painted so thick you could pick it up by the nose. If Peto paints a nail, he'll build up that surface so it feels like a nail right there. And that becomes important to me as well when you think about paint and its ability to function sculpturally and how it occupies the physical space. Similarly, when you



Tough as Nails (35 nail facsimiles installed in each wooden pillar in The Soap Factory), wood, glue, paint, dirt, dimensions variable, 2011.



Maya (grid) (1), ink lines on watercolor on paper, 11"x8.5", 2012.

look at my illusionistic frame paintings and, as soon as you get close to them they just break down and become flat. Yet, they're not fully flat because you see the sort of built up ridges, almost a pentimento, that are there to indicate process as well as the physical reality of that surface.

Rail: So it'd be fair to think that the representation of realist painting early on, which basically deals with the same issues—illusionistic space, modeling, and two-dimensional reality of the picture plane being flat—and, your move to abstraction, became an abstract version of the same space. But is there a reason that you work with color tonally, in relation to the grey scale?

Nusz: Well, one of the things I've been thinking about the last couple of years is the potentiality with limitations, and the idea of diaphragmatic breathing, inhaling and exhaling to re-question what painting is; painting is a series of constraints and yet you still have the ability to produce something completely new. And so the palette limitation is a sort of conscious choice to play with those limitations and see how far I can maximize it to its fullest—the metaphorical exhalation. Similarly, the palette limitation in the recent work refers directly to the color card paintings that are oftentimes

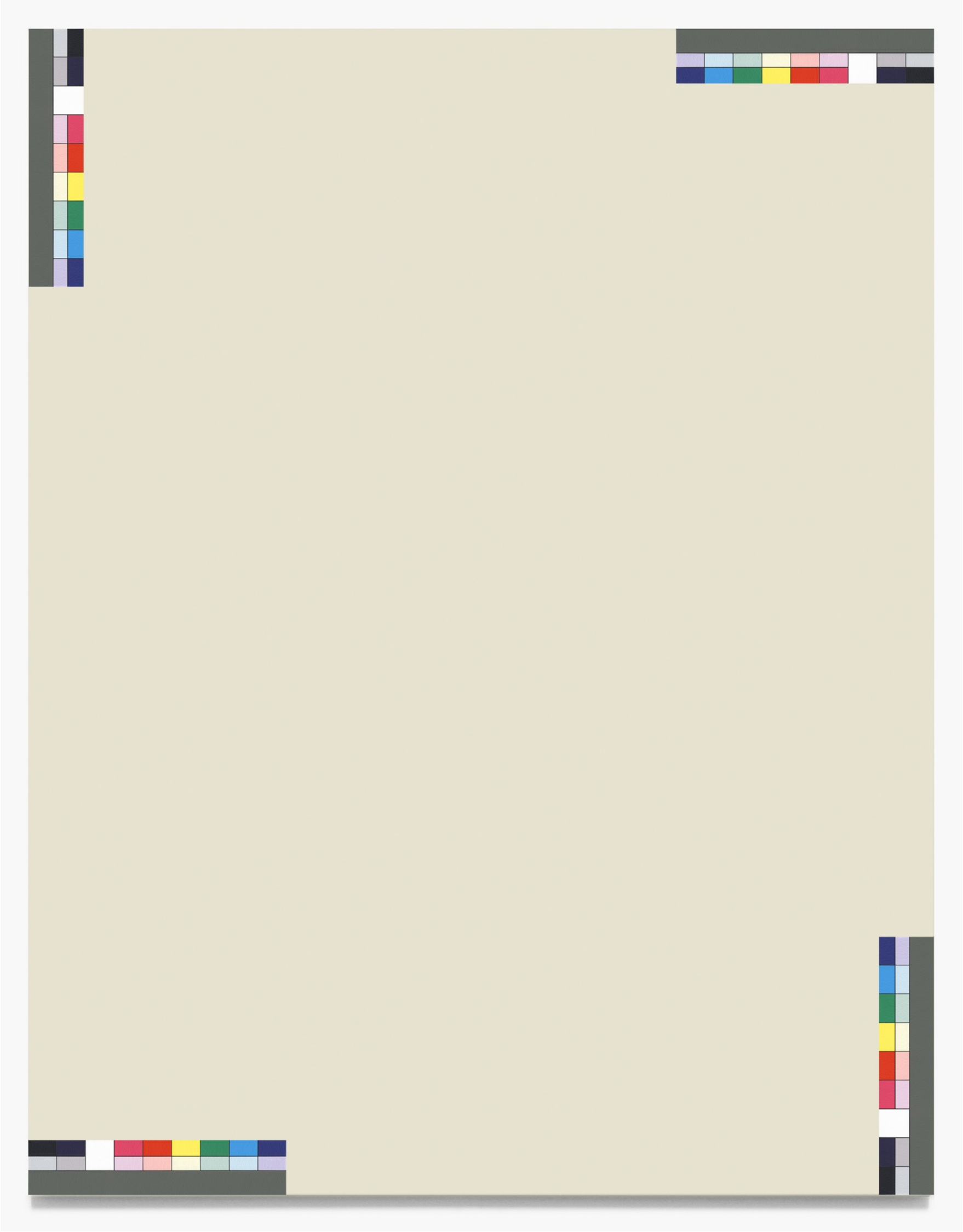
used in printing. So that magenta, for example, is not a traditional painterly color.

Rail: How did you manage to mix that particular color?

Nusz: It's tricky because I have to use fluorescents in conjunction with other colors to get that specific brightness. Quite similar to how color ink is printed on white paper, which gives that translucent brightness, I under-paint in white and then I mix a consistency that is not quite opaque and not quite translucent with fluorescents and cadmium reds, and I sort of tweak it back and forth by adding some white to get that color. So the palette is a reference to the relationship between painting and photography, which however it may seem as a set of constraints, it generates my interest in playing with the shifting between the actual color cards, the actual painting, and this secondary interpretation of the work, that is to say the documentary or the documented reproduction of the work.

Rail: So it seems to me that you accept the nature of what you could create by dealing with a relationship to realism that can replicate the real through illusion, and—abstraction—what to be abstracted from and to—and then a third subtext which deals with the issues of time and commitment to resolve the balance of the two. In other words, this triadic relationship has similarly been explored by, for example, Gerhard Richter.

Nusz: Yes. Also, when you think about the history of painting, often times what gets brought up is the reference in the past to this fictitious notion of the "death of painting," the sort of Rodchenko ending it all and the subsequent actions by Clement Greenberg and the Abstract Expressionists. For me, when I think of 21st century painting, it all comes back to Richter, for multiple reasons, the first one being the relationship between painting and history, and Richter's avowal to separate painting from history, which, in the past, painting was so closely tied to history that they were almost interchangeable—painting was a means of figuring out the Western world and Richter was trying to, because of WWII, separate himself from that, which I think is a huge shift in painting. And then also, in addition to his abstraction, the relationship between painting and photography, and how those two are used—photography more so—to think and look about the world and reality. In fact, when Richter was making his photo-realistic paintings he said, "I wasn't trying to make paintings, I was trying to use painting as a means of photography." He was just using paint to make photographs, and that's an important distinction for him. And the palette was coming directly from the photograph, same with the



Color Cards on Canvas, acrylic on canvas, 63"x48", 2013.

landscape paintings. So he's limiting his palette to what a photograph can produce in terms of color. And so, I'm definitely interested in the same idea, though with the color charts they also closely reference early Ellsworth Kelly's as well as Richter's early color chart paintings. However, Richter is more interested in the randomness of those colors, for me there is a distinction, even though my restraint is similar, my choices within those limitations are very deliberate.

Rail: What about Vija Celmins?

Nusz: Although there exist shared interests between Celmins and Richter as far as their relationship with photography and certain subject matters are concerned, when you see Celmins's paintings in person the surface is built up like Old Master paintings, uniformly smooth, layers and layers of thin paint, whereas Richter is working alla prima, building up the surface and wiping it out. Celmins's spider web images have been hugely influential to me. In fact I think of my graph-paper drawings, for example, as spider webs, an underlying illusion that lies over reality, as a trompe l'oeil graph. I'm thinking about the grid as a veil of the illusory. Actually, for the process, I paint the watercolor first, then the grid gets drawn as the last element, so it takes the limitation and reverses the whole process.

Rail: Would you ever see the possibility of returning to paint full-fledged representational painting?

Nusz: Probably not because I think it might come down to my own personal skepticism of my own eyes and my own ability to see reality truthfully, which is not a way that Cézanne would think. He would never doubt his own perception. He would say this is reality, I'm looking at reality or nature and I'm transcribing it.

Rail: Yes, it's easy to misread Cézanne's doubt. In other words, his desire to make form as solid as possible, or bring stability between the fleeting objects in space as unified as possible, or the more he longs for stability, the greater degree of instability occurs.

Nusz: Right. That sort of doubt shows up in the mark making. Especially in his watercolors, where the task of transcribing the three-dimensional reality into two dimensions becomes so ephemeral. Everything just collapses.

Rail: I agree. In any case, how would you describe your painting *Color Card on Canvas*?

Nusz: Well, from the distance, the color card looks like a color card, but up close you realize that the text language

has been removed and it sort of functions as geometric abstraction. The same with the canvas; when you document that canvas, it looks exactly like raw, cotton duck. But if you get up close, you realize it lacks all of the details and it's completely flattened out, so it fluctuates between an odd, nuanced version of photorealism and a quasi-pure non-objective painting. Which refers to the lack of the aura in the sense that, as Walter Benjamin, in *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, pointed out the idea that once you leave behind this physical, direct relationship with the work, i.e. the photographic documentation, it loses its soul.

Rail: And you accept that reality.

Nusz: I accept all levels of reality not just Benjamin's emphasis on the direct experience of painting, primarily because of my upbringing where there were no paintings to look at until I went to the arts summer camp in Minneapolis in high school. Francis Bacon also shared this type of rural isolation, experiencing much of the world of art through photographs. Yet at the same time those paintings that I first saw were profoundly important to me. The thing is, we don't necessarily construct our reality only from primary experiences, we construct it from all of our experiences. A lot



Edge One, acrylic on canvas, 24"x18", 2013.



Organ Works (after Donald Joyce and Philip Glass), oil, acrylic, graphite on inkjet paper with printed grey ground, 24"x18", 2013.

of that comes from indirect relationships. An email or a photograph of a photograph can be as emotionally poignant as a kiss or a handshake. So I look at this documentation as just another device for communicating ideas.

Rail: How much room do you allow for revision in your work?

Nusz: Enough to be effective. Take, for example, the Organ works, there's so much randomness in the process of moving the paint around, which is a liquid form, in the first stage, then you wait for it to dry, and most of the time they don't end up being useful; they'd just look like a cliché drip, as opposed to compelling images. So I'm interested in how do I let gravity do the work and then find something that appears as if it was a natural form, like a scholar's rock, which is very difficult to achieve. The next stage, after they're dry, I would go over with graphite, if the paper itself doesn't fall apart, or when the oil paint doesn't bleed into the paper, which means that the illusion is lost. This actually applies to the geometric works as well. If things aren't going well, I typically will destroy the whole painting and start it all over again.

Rail: How would you describe the use of the frame and the field of black in the two paintings, *Edge 1* and *Edge 2*?

Nusz: The idea of the frame functions like a door, which if you grab the handle and open it up, there's more potentiality there. In particular, the way that the blacks are used in relation to the frame. Because I'll often times use the blacks and a specific sheen to move over the frame. So the black exists as a way to recede spatially, which makes both the frame and the use of black (like breathing) an open and closed relationship.

Rail: Simultaneously.

Nusz: Yes. I also am thinking about how the frame relates to the surrounding wall space as well, like paintings by

Mondrian, especially his diamond, lozenge paintings, which are so spatially activated.

Rail: I couldn't agree more. I also notice in some of the paintings there appears to be more weight on the lower right hand corner.

Nusz: It's similar to the way that painters make their signatures on the bottom right of the canvas and how we tend to read and see things from the top left to the bottom right. Instead of denying this impulse, I indulge it.

Rail: Which is a Western structure, whereas in the East it's the opposite, or at least the emphasis is equally distributed in a non-linear manner.

Nusz: That's true. For me the illusion functions like two different people telling the same story at the same time.

Natasha Pestich



Portrait of Natasha Pestich. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Natasha Pestich In Conversation with Phong Bui

After having visited Natasha Pestich's Northeast Minneapolis studio in late morning of Wednesday, February 20, 2013 where I was able to see some of her early and current work, we furthered our conversation about her life and work the next day, Thursday, February 21 at Le Méridien Chambers Minneapolis. Pestich, one of the four recipients of the 2012/13 McKnight Artist Fellowships for Visual Artists, seems to divide her studio practice and her community-based arts work with ease. The following is an edited version of our talk.

Phong Bui (Rail): Where and how did you gain your social consciousness that is so present in your work?

Pestich: I would say that this comes from my parents and growing up in an immigrant household in Canada. My parents experienced a lot of economic hardship. Since both of them had been teachers in Croatia, and as they became more stable economically, they saw a lot of ways to improve the communities that they were living in, especially my mother. For instance, I remember there were a lot of accidents, because of fast cars driving in our neighborhood, which frightened everyone. So my mother, who was a physical education teacher, organized games that could be played out in the street, to make neighborhood kids comfortable with the public space and to feel like they had some ownership of what that space was. All of a sudden I found that fear started to decrease in myself. As we were playing in the street she would teach us how to be aware of cars and things that were coming, and move the game to the side. That has really stuck with me. My father, who was not as socially active as my mother, would often

invent or fix things in our home by using his own intelligence or agency. I find that both of those models that my parents provided have instilled in me my own sense of urgency to get something done. There is a multitude of ways to make something happen.

Rail: Excellent. When were you first exposed to art?

Pestich: I grew up in London, Ontario. In my early years I wouldn't say that I was exposed to a lot of art. My dad had us watching a lot of foreign films and reading literature at a young age. That was more of my segue into the arts, through storytelling and film. I always drew, and then found that there was this two-year art program at H. B. Beal Secondary School, and I decided to enroll. So you would take regular classes but you could also get a special degree in the arts. It was very hands on. I was exposed to the canons of art later when I was in college at Concordia University in Montreal.

Many of the teachers worked within different veins of Abstract Expressionism. They almost all retired at the same time and were replaced by feminist artists. So I was exposed to a lot of different ways of making at Concordia, but also maintained my interest in reading fiction. I've read a lot of American and Russian literature. So, yes. I think my impulse towards storytelling is really informed by that early interest in film and literature.

Rail: What sort of film?

Pestich: Mostly foreign films, and musicals. My interest in the absurd could come from musicals. My dad was really interested in them. I also really liked the Ingmar Bergman films growing up, and Emir Kusturica, especially his *The Time the Gypsies*, and *Underground* which both were really important films for me. I also love Italian Neo-Realist films, from Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica to Federico Fellini, among others.

Rail: I wonder where and how your interest in the combined photography, graphic design, typography, with aspects of painting, and certainly printmaking, came from?

Pestich: Perhaps because of the high school that I went to. We were educated in eight different mediums, from ceramics to film, a little bit of design, printmaking, painting, etcetera. I have never felt an allegiance to one medium per se, ironically, considering how much time being a good printmaker takes. Tyler, where I did my MFA, is well known as a painting school, so I had lots of exposure to making painterly prints there and at Concordia. I love that painterly tradition in printmaking. I like thinking about the image as something in printmaking that doesn't necessarily have to be so precise, but more like a constant flow of information subject to perpetual changes. That's a quality I think Rauschenberg was able to capture in his printmaking.

Presently, I think teaching at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD) where on a daily basis I have endless conversations with students, many of whom come from an illustration or design background, has inspired my recent poster work.

Rail: While I can recognize the urgency of your politically and socially driven work, I'd like to ask you about the genesis of Jan Xylander, the fictional character whose work was a subject of a survey in 2011?

Pestich: After our conversation yesterday I was thinking more on how Xylander has marked a return for me to working in the controlled environment of the white wall space. I had been



The Opening Act: A Survey of Jan Xylander Exhibition Posters, 2011. Installation view, screen prints in various dimensions (18"x24" and 24"x36"), objects, ephemera. Photo courtesy of: Amanda Hankerson, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

given the opportunity to show in the MAEP Gallery at Minneapolis Institute of Arts and I struggled at first with this project because I didn't know how to address or approach the space exactly. So finally I decided to incorporate ways in which I facilitate or participate in conversations in my community work, and started to have a conversation with myself about the MAEP gallery space in the museum, asking myself how I could occupy this specific space in a way that's relevant to myself and my own practice. And so this idea of creating a fictional character, Xylander, came about as a way to insert perhaps different conversations within that space.

I was having a drink with a friend, Scott NedreLOW, and he was recalling a time in his life when he lived up north and was painting and he would sell his paintings on eBay. This was the inspiration for Jan Xylander's biography. I became interested in this possibility today of living in a remote place and paradoxically selling work on eBay [*laughs*]. In a way I felt a kinship with that paradox of existing in very different spaces at once, like when I worked at an art college and galleries, a social service center, and pub all during the same period of time. In any case, after having told Scott my ideas, he gave me permission to in a sense appropriate his story—which became the foundation to unpack Xylander and his relationship to the art world through a series of exhibition posters, supposedly produced by six to eight different designers, but actually produced by myself. They're all

promoting his work, but you never really see Xylander or his work.

Rail: Were you thinking at all about the '80s appropriation artists, like Barbara Kruger or Sherrie Levine, who through direct borrowing from art history recontextualize the legitimacy of their work, and whether Xylander is your alter ego?

Pestich: A nom de plum perhaps. I'm still unraveling that question. For me, just as important as Xylander are all the other fictional characters that were created for the project—Sylvia Park, the curator, the artists and designers who made the posters.

I am aware of Kruger's use of images and text and Sherrie Levine's exercises of authorship, but I think for me it's more about creating a space to insert incompatible claims about what we perceive to be true, to perhaps bring in voices that we don't commonly hear, and to question how ideas we subscribe to have come to be. So that when you have a personal opinion, you recognize that that opinion is in some way informed by a social structure. Any time we perform or speak language we're performing a code in order to be understood. I'm interested in creating visual slippages of images that are maybe not so clear or a little bit absurd and ambiguous, with the possibility to evoke empathy and alternative perspectives.



The Opening Act: A Survey of Jan Xylander Exhibition Posters, 2011. Installation view, screen prints in various dimensions (18"x24" and 24"x36"), objects, ephemera. Photo courtesy of: Amanda Hankerson, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Rail: And mystery.

Pestich: Exactly.

Rail: What about the graphic works of Sister Corita Kent?

Pestich: Oh, I am such an admirer of what she accomplished. She was amazing because she would just take what's in her everyday life like Wonder Bread, and turn it into this celebration of life. And the way she organizes space, the colors that she uses and so on, which are all an integral part of her silkscreen prints. Not to mention what she did as an educator, which was equally important. Corita Kent is a good example of what I aspire to do in my classroom. I also love the whole Polish School of posters that my father exposed me to. I just love the way they interpreted American Westerns. It's a certain type of humor that I can relate to. Roman Cieslewicz, Jan Lenica, and that whole generation of the '50s through the '80s were amazing artists.

Rail: The need to re-interpret to the Polish audience is removed once over, which may actually be similar Jan Xylander. It's a different space for sure.

Pestich: I would absolutely agree. It's a space I want to explore.

Rail: Were you from the outset aware of Nancy Spero's work, which through the explicit use of texts that correspond to the body, the female body, throughout the ages generated political, social, and cultural critique?

Pestich: In my undergrad I looked at Nancy Spero and Leon Golub a great deal. When I think about Nancy Spero I think

about how she disrupts a space of authority but in a playful way, visually orchestrating a slippage that reinserts women past and present into the dialogue. It's quite amazing, really.

Rail: Let's talk about the social activism, which seems to have stemmed from your mother, for example, the wonderful story you told about the game playing on the street as one way to reclaim the space. That source is clear, but how did you ever find the time to get involved with your local community?

Pestich: Well, when I was at Tyler, for my graduate thesis exhibition I constructed a room within a gallery and then I printed fabric with a wallpaper pattern that was actually in our house. And this room had this sort of moving, shifting quality that was reminiscent of Doh Ho Suh's house. And I interviewed 30 people about their ideas of home and what home means to them. That piece was really personal for me because in my youth I had experienced an eviction from our home. And, yeah that was a really interesting project to do, where I found myself to be almost more interested in the interview process, than the final work even. [Laughs.] Right. You know, the collective learning that happens when you're in conversation with people.

Rail: Were they people you knew?

Pestich: Yes. You know, the interview is such an intimate thing that to me it just made sense.

Pestich: Post-graduate school I worked in an art and art education department that happened to have a really interesting community arts program. And one day, a PhD



Xylander Exhibition Poster #21 from The Opening Act, Digital print, 26"x33", 2011.

student studying urban education and I were talking about my work and she said, “Oh, you’re a community artist.” And I had never heard this term before! I had no idea what that term was. So, after being in conversation with her, and also because I was in Philadelphia teaching at this school in a very blighted neighborhood, it became very apparent to me what the social inequities were. So it was from that point on that I started doing some volunteer work on community art projects, and after maybe three years or so I was invited to work on this project called North and Beyond in North Philadelphia. We were looking at this place called the Church of the Advocate that housed paintings by two black artists from the civil rights era. These paintings are very loaded, and created contention among the parishioners. That was something we tried to address. This project’s primary intention though was to facilitate youth that were living in this neighborhood to engage in the arts in a variety of forms from visual to dance and spoken word as a way to unpack what these paintings were trying to say. So with every community project I do, all of the content is generated out of a dialogue with the community. It’s not like you’re an artist who comes in and says I see this issue, we’re going to make this piece about it. It involves a lot of listening and talking to people, which is something I really enjoyed doing and could relate to. It’s about seeing where there might be a use for a theatre play or art. So, while I might be leading one activity, in other activities I’m being led by others. It’s a collective education and a way to deal with things that are difficult together. It’s transformative; I mean it’s transformed me. You know I am as transformed just as much as anyone else.

Rail: Were you aware of Joseph Beuys’s idea or belief that if society as a whole is regarded as one great work of art, everyone can contribute creatively, and then only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a conservative and senile social system?

Pestich: I was aware of Beuys’s work and admire his ideas, though an additional model for the work that I do comes out of such things as C.E.T.A. (Comprehensive Employment Training Act) of the early ’70s Administration or the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration) during the Great Depression where artists were being engaged with the community to even question things that we hold dear in our national identity. I love those W.P.A. prints, just even aesthetically, and the energy that they evoke. It is important to make clear that people working outside of the arts influence me. For example: There’s a wonderful woman I was able to meet teaching at Temple University, Lori Pompa, who is really questioning our whole prison system and how we marginalize people in that space.



Pillsbury House and Theatre (PHAT) Mobile project, 2012-13. Mobile screen-printing unit. Natasha Pestich, designer; Mark O'Brien, fabricator; David Green, project community organizer.

Rail: Do you see the continuity between what you’ve done in Philadelphia and what you’ve been doing here in the Twin Cities ever since you came here in 2005?

Pestich: Yes. I began to work on small projects here with Sheridan Arts Magnet School in Northeast, and with the Kwanzaa Church and Juxtaposition Arts in North Minneapolis doing mural projects around AIDS awareness within the community. My latest involvement with Pillsbury House and Theatre began in 2010.

It was truly challenging when I first moved here. I had a bit of an identity crisis, because I had such a built-in community in Philadelphia, and when you’re working in a community it’s not like you do one project and you leave, so it took a while to build a new community. My new start began with MCAD and its community, where I spent the first two years focusing on curriculum development at the college. As far as my



Pillsbury House and Theatre (PHAT) Mobile project, 2012-13. Screen printing workshop at the Pillsbury House and Theatre. By Natasha Pestich and David Green.

community practice went, I didn't feel like it would be appropriate for me to announce my presence as someone who wants to do community work. For me, it's more natural to be invited to work on a project. As I have relocated a lot, the communities I am working with are new to me, and it takes time to build trust and the relationships that carry this work forward.

When I first came to the Twin Cities, I did do a fellowship: the Institute for Community Cultural Development, which is now called the Creative Community Leadership Institute with Bill Cleveland, Wendy Morris, Erik Takeshita, and June-Li Wang as the facilitators; which brought together urban planners, artists, librarians, social workers to think about leadership and community work. So out of that experience I branched off, did a few projects and Bill Cleveland introduced me to the Pillsbury House and Theatre and thought that that would be a relevant connection. Since then we've been working together to create a hub in their lobby space, that articulates how they've changed as an organization with theatre directors Noel Raymond and Faye Price now being in charge of all of the different social service agencies at the Pillsbury House since 2008.

We are currently working on the Arts on Chicago project, for which we received an ArtPlace grant to initiate 20 creative place-making projects throughout the four neighborhoods of Powderhorn Park, Bryant, Bancroft, and Central.

I'm working on one of these projects with David Green, who does truancy prevention at Pillsbury House. We met through this institute process where Bill Cleveland comes and facilitates group reflection among the staff on the regarding the work that Pillsbury is doing and this current project we're working on. So we get together and talk about how we can use our collective assets to affect social changes, and reach people in the community who might not be aware of what places like Pillsbury have to offer. So David and I thought, what would be a better way to reach the community but through a mobile screen printing/spoken word facility, which we called the Pillsbury House and Theatre mobile (aka PHAT Mobile). That's what we're currently working on. David, because he has community connections, is working on recruiting youth who might be interested in learning about printmaking and I'm working on the design of the PHAT mobile.

Rail: That's great. Is there an intersection where are you able to bring your students from MCAD to come and help to create works involved with Pillsbury House?

Pestich: Yes, my MCAD students were an integral part of the project at Pillsbury. I had six current and former students who interned with me and helped to facilitate the design of the Pillsbury lobby space in terms of the wall painting and the fabric printing we did for the upholstery of the couches. We did a number of visualization workshops with the Pillsbury staff to assist them in translating their ideas and perspectives into the final design concept. My MCAD students also worked with kids from the youth program so that when they came into work at Pillsbury they weren't coming in and just painting a wall, but they were actually invested in the community and becoming part of that community. I also invited my MCAD colleague George Mahoney who was teaching a class called Designed Environments to come to Pillsbury with his students and incorporate that project into their classroom. All of the tables that you see were constructed by George's class. Everything in the space, whether it's the wall painting or the tables, you'll notice the theme of mobility and repurposing, being able to reconfigure things according to what you need. Because that lobby is an interactive meeting place.

Rail: It's a social space.

Pestich: Exactly. What's exciting about that work is the way it has evolved in a way I never could have predicted. I'm very interested in blurring boundaries between art and life in this way. It's a big challenge because I have to learn how to use my time more effectively. I think I am excited about the potential of incorporating these different social ideas more in education. When I have pockets of time, I will meditate on these ideas. It's only the beginning.



Creative Place-making Project: Pillsbury House and Theatre Lobby, 2011-ongoing. Wall painting, screen printed couch covers, tables and movable walls, desk and signage. Collaborators include: Pillsbury staff and youth; MCAD current and former students Aaron Barck, Schuyler Huber, Dustin McChesney, Lindsay Splichal, Allison Wightman; George Mahoney's MCAD Designed Environments class (tables); and Tandem Made (desk, signage).

Acknowledgments

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Phong Bui is an artist, writer, and independent curator. Bui publishes the monthly journal The Brooklyn Rail, which critiques the arts, politics, and culture in New York City. brooklynrail.org

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