

Nathan Lynch Interview, v04 – Feb. 17, 2011

*[Steven Barich] Hello Nathan. Thank you for opening the door to your studio and giving me a chance to see a developing body of new work. Your new SF-based studio is just getting started (after having worked in Oakland for some time), so tell me what is on the agenda...are you planning on using the space to enlarge (size wise) your work, or does the new studio offer other options/opportunities?*

[Nathan Lynch] Hi Steven. Thanks for prompting our initial conversation. As the days have passed since then I have found certain phrases of our conversation echoing in my head.

I am very excited about the new studio because I will actually be able to back away from the work while it's still in progress and see things in a whole new way. The studio location does provide an opportunity to open the doors to the public—I may open some kind of dysfunctional dime store and invite people in to interpret the work.

So far I have used the extra space for seeing/looking more than making. I don't have specific plans to making something larger, though I suppose that is inevitable. The work is generally scaled to the human form, built to inspire/imply relationships to the hand, head, torso or figure. What is the largest (or smallest) object that has a functional relationship to your body?

*[SB] I've haven't previously focused on what object is relating to me physically, but I can say without a doubt what it is currently: the ruler. Come to think of it, I have a good collection of rulers of all types! I'm using rulers all the time in my own drawings, and moving around and relying on a 48 inch long by 2 inch wide metal ruler (and other even larger rulers) to determine the paper size, the image and to what extent I can attain an image...I just realized I'm constantly measuring a relationship between my arms and my drawing. I wonder if that use of a ruler has any lasting effects on perception?*

*I like how you bring up the need to take distance from artwork to view it, to see it as it shrinks/expands from a relationship to the body...is that also a unique function to visual art? In the sense that, for example, when on the computer we are in a fixed relationship to the screen, to the digital frame, and the inability to find a personal-physical relationship to the object (computer screen, Nathan Lynch sculpture, etc.) is the unspoken visceral lack that makes visual art compelling and necessary in the current digital/information age.*

[NL] I don't think visual art is by nature compelling or necessary. Certain objects/images are compelling, necessary, beautiful and critical but I don't like to think of art as something we need – that sounds like “eat your vegetables”, and I'd rather think about art like sex rather than vegetables.

Is visual art more necessary now that we have greater technological resources... is that the question? No, but people are making more things by hand at the moment – probably a reflection of general screen-interface-fatigue.

*[SB] I'd like to know more about your interest in the artworks relationship to the figure...do you limit yourself to creating work that can only be crafted/operated/experience by your own hands?*

[NL] No. But in the new work I imagine people using the objects, and so they are scaled to the body in that way. One doesn't imagine picking up one of Richard Serra's cor-ten arcs to use it for a washboard or a hammock. I don't think about the figure so much as the body. “Figure” sounds like a classical study or representation, while “body” sounds like my stomach, my foot... the actual, physical meat and bones of my body.

*[SB] When moving from physical space to new space, the transition can very literally bring about change in an artist's work and working process...do you feel that your current work is transitioning, either from your last body of work shown at Johansson Projects or other social practice projects?*

[NL] The work has certainly changed—perhaps the objects are moving towards the social projects, or at least an implied social narrative. The new work is based on human interaction with objects, tools, props so the idea for social exchange is presented as part of the understanding of the form, but not necessary completed or fulfilled by the installation. The work has been a slow accumulation of gestures - some arrived at by chance, others by looking at something for several years, all of it built without a specific sense of “finished”. I'm looking and looking again and remaking and looking again. Now that I have more space, I can see them together and build on the fundamentals of the visual language that I set up.

*[SB] While visiting your studio, we talked a lot about process—how to get things done over time—and materials, how much a material or the art object is "polished" in order to seem completed. Is this a new challenge you've set out for yourself, one in which you're open to levels of incompleteness or willful failure, in order to let the artwork surprise you?*

[NL] It's not something I set up as a specific goal, but I can imagine doing that. It's more that I want the work to look like it's used... and more incomplete than fulfilled. The ideas I'm after are centered on the improvised, three-sided and temporary gestures that happen every day at your average community theater. Sets built for the darkness of theater often fail or look undone in the light of day. And one lonely part of the set can look foreign without the environment of the theater to contextualize it. I worked at Woodminster Amphitheater in Oakland for five years as their prop-master and carpenter. The director had the smallest office, full of fake weapons. His desk was a shelf, nailed to the faux wood paneling and he always wanted to show me the popguns. He sat at the shelf that was only wide enough for a business-sized checkbook and I sat under the doorway, half in and half out of the office. If the work doesn't look too precious or too polished I think people will be more likely to imagine its history or function and how they might use it. And yes, I would prefer to be surprised by it.

We talked about finishing but we also talked about new work and old, which is a completely blurred line in my studio right now. In some cases I treat my own work like a found object. When George W. was elected I made him a potato-shaped, silver-leafed blimp called *Airforce Zero One* (roughly the size of an adult in the fetal position). I stored it for ten years and recently cut it up into three pieces, keeping one-third for a "new" project. Steven, while in my studio you pointed to one drawing on the wall and recognized it as a planning drawing: a preparatory sketch used for building a sculpture. The other drawing [you pointed out] you saw as an object drawing—meaning the drawing was the thing and it was being treated like a form rather than an image. I was impressed by the way you read that difference. The work is ricocheting off itself. They can communicate on their own, but the layers of meaning get amplified when they are seen as a group.

*[SB] There are a couple of connected threads that I'd like to attempt to focus on individually, namely remaking vs. the found object, and this new-to-our-conversation aspect embedded in your work, the gesture.*

*First, we discussed in your studio a possible "intermediary state" your current small-scale/wall sculptures are occupying—a place between earlier artworks now remade with new vision, and the found object...and how as a viewer, I couldn't certify whether any artwork was either/or, or both. Did it matter, would it matter for reasons of originality, or value? We discussed the merits of both the purposely-crafted object and the re-purposed object used within your recent body of work, and how that ambiguity somehow empowered the sculptures with something special, something elusive—an aspect I love to see in artwork—allowing the viewer to somehow complete the narrative. Maybe a good, new word for describing what you are doing with your latest sculpture is: re-functioning. What do you think?*

*Second, I think you opened a whole new door into your oeuvre for me by talking about gesture. One of the aspects that drew me to the small sculptures is that many have a look to them that implies usefulness, that they are actually real tools, of some odd sort used in a special way...used with a special gesture of the body powering them. Again, a blurring of the lines is occurring between the purposeless art object embedded with codes and meaning and the time-tested, perfectly shaped and informed-by-history-of-use tool...which I think many can attest to admiring old tools, for a host of reasons. Your sculptures aren't tools, but they desire to be...or maybe they once were functional, but have retired to become memories of a gesture. My mind immediately races to the drawings of tools by Jime Dine, and to the objects of early Claus Oldenburg...I'm sure I'm missing many more recent examples. Nonetheless, I want to ask you: is the sculpture/object the result of the gesture, your gesture as the artist, or are they to be used in combination with other individual's actual gestures/daily gestures?*

[NL] I'm excited about the confusion/ambiguity you describe between things made, found, altered or remade. In that ambiguity we come to questions of originality, use, and improvisation.

The current works in my studio are meant to imply a gesture, an activity: singular, repetitious, boring or subversive. Imagine how this particular thing "actions." All of the work in my studio was originally conceived with the idea that each sculpture would accompany a short story that I wrote—not to illustrate the story but to add a layer of meaning and extend the narrative in another direction.

*[SB] I'd like to end the interview on a practical note, but one that involves another narrative...namely, your post-MFA career narrative. Coincidentally, in the past months, a number of colleagues and I have been independently discussing methods for continuing our respective art practices outside the classic "gallery artist" role, either through a workshop-oriented model, or by finding a low-key but financially stable second job to making artwork, and simply proceeding into the future balancing the two. There was also much discussion on how to rise/create/succeed within small individual artistic communities here in the Bay Area. Can you layout and comment on how you built-up your own working practice, and what artists/communities you involved yourself with over the last 10 years in order to foster that practice? Have you noticed any particular influence on your art practice through your outside-the-studio projects? [Nathan— I guess I'm asking this in order to dispel the myth that somehow "making it" in the art world is all luck...instead, that working with other artists and orgs. is fundamental to individual satisfaction and progress.] And of course, please follow it up with any future planned projects, jobs or exhibitions.*

[NL] When I was an undergraduate, a professor in Los Angeles recommended that I never move to San Francisco because the community would not support an artist here. What he was referring to was the collecting and gallery community and I think he's right. But the *other* community, the one formed by friends, artist-run non-profit galleries, and any number of scrappy art ventures is endlessly supportive.

After grad school I went to several residencies – my schedule was flexible, I needed a studio and I wanted to see more of this country. That gave me a chance to build relationships with artists across the country and get involved in projects in Kansas City, Princeton, Long Island City and Boston.

It was at the first residency in Vermont that I started working outside the studio, on the streets. Dragging my sculpture around town was so much more interesting than leaving it in my studio. It had a much wider and much more diverse audience. And the magic of that method is that I didn't need to apply for anything, or gain permission to do it and I didn't need a studio. I could just walk around town all day, "performing." People would see the work and they might ignore me, harass me, adore me, abuse me or invite me home with them. But all of the above were more interesting than the rarified audience that encountered the work in my studio.

At Mills College I was involved in a lot of collaborative projects, especially with a few composers. That continued a few years after school and eventually formed into a studio collective at the Headlands Center for the Arts. This was a tremendously fertile time for me because the atmosphere at HCA is so conducive to sharing, working, experimenting.

I also joined the curatorial committee at Southern Exposure, another strong community for experimental projects and a San Francisco gem that is accessible to so many young artists.

I have mostly said yes when a project sounds interesting and while that does not lead to the most focused studio practice it does keep the practice evolving in unexpected ways. Now I tend to think of teaching [at CCA Ceramics Dept.] as another extension of my studio practice. It's not that we are making my work in class, but I am able to frame questions that I have, or present projects that are intellectually stimulating that I might never get to in my own studio work. In addition to the excitement of working with talented students I have the good fortune of working with some of the most interesting artists/teachers in the country and there is a great deal of collegiality at CCA. It is not as sweet as being at a residency, but it has become another community for experimentation, collaboration and support.