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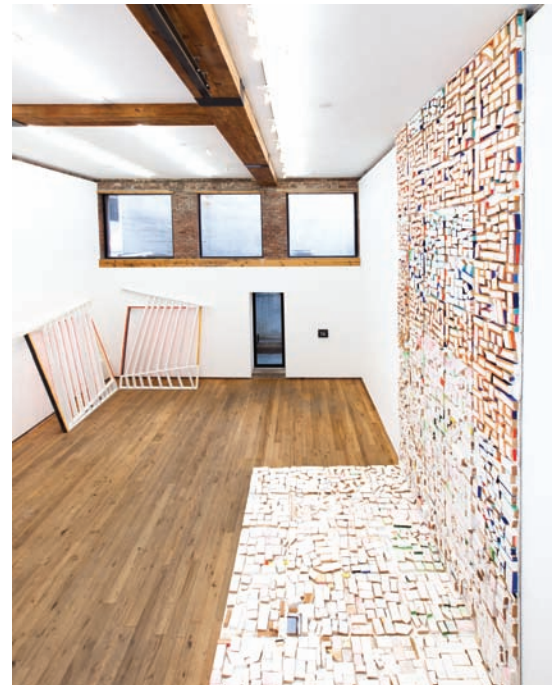
A CONVERSATION: CORDY RYMAN

by Arthur Peña

I recently saw my first Ryman pieces in person at the Dallas Art Fair. Dodge Gallery had a piece made of 2 x 4's, painted and hanging on the wall. There was also a corner piece comprised of stacked 2x4's painted with soft, shiny colors. Upon closer inspection of the corner piece I noticed hand writing that indicated some sort of possible measurement. I couldn't tell because Ryman had cut the wood off before the information could be fully retained. But the markings were just enough to show his hand. I mean this in both that it injected the work with a very direct connection to the artist in what could otherwise be mistaken to be a minimalist corner sculpture and it also showed his hand in the sense of a "reveal", exposing the transparency of the process of making that Ryman is so willing to offer. After mounting his first solo show with Dodge Gallery, Adaptive Radiation, and just finishing up a public commission at Michigan State University, Ryman and I had a conversation. - Arthur Peña, Dallas Contributor

Arthur Peña: Can you talk about the "life" of the materials you use? Everything seems to play a specific role in your work.

Cordy Ryman: The materials are all from my studio: either chopped up pieces of returned installations, cast offs that were produced as a result of making specific installations, parts of works that were removed for whatever reason or lumber used as saw horses and the like. I love materials and I save everything. The pieces and the wood are all recycled but not recycled in the conventional sense where the materials are broken down, homogenized and reformed as new. These pieces are reused and reassembled but retain their own individuality and material integrity so to speak. Once assembled they are then re-painted and tweaked to help build a new viable entity, I hope. I'm not saving and recycling as a part of any ecological manifesto. Though I'm not opposed to any of that but it's not really why it came to be.



Cordy Ryman | Adaptive Radiation, 2013, installation view

In the 90's I used to work with a lot of found materials and was a big dumpster diver type. I would drag a bunch of stuff in off the street then tried to make art out of it. Over time and as I worked and produced more stuff I slowly started re-using the materials that were spun out of my own working process and then later started recycling my own older works at times.

The main practical seed to all this being that for me, my process has usually been sparked by "reacting" and used materials with a built in history always seemed more interesting and richer. They have a life and vitality already built in. Starting a piece from a clean stretched canvas has always been daunting and difficult. If the canvas already has some scratches or marks it was easier for me to "start."

AP: B. Wurtz told me once that Tuttle had once told him that if you give respect to an object, it will return it tenfold. Romantic, I know but there's something to that, right?

CR: I had not heard the Tuttle quote, but it makes sense and I agree in spirit.

AP: I think maybe that this respect has to do with recognizing the integrity of a material/object. You do this very well. We can call it generosity I suppose but I just think you don't pull any punches. Your work doesn't hide how it was made.

CR: I usually don't hide how something is made but that being said I don't have any hard rules so I might from time to time.

AP: What do you think someone who sees your work can get out of your approach to making? Do you want there to be a difference between how one might experience a painting versus a site specific piece like your corner pieces?

CR: I don't really think of it in terms of what the viewer should get out of it. Each piece is a bit different but my overall goal isn't viewer centric. I do hope that they are enjoyed and experienced in some way. I want the piece to feel like its own unique entity, hopefully one that has maybe more than one aspect and is there for someone to look and think



May 1, 2013

about for more than a few seconds. I hope that each piece can somehow manage to have a life of its own in a way and spark different experiences at different times. Often when I rework, take apart, reassemble or recycle a piece it's because the original piece has somehow lost its life force in a way and it becomes clear to me that it won't in fact have that life, so it needs to be revived. Don't get me wrong, I know they are not living things but to me they feel alive when they "work" and they feel like magical little things that somehow will have a life if someone hangs it and looks at it casually day after day.

When I approach a unique space it's more about what can survive or flourish here or what will react in an interesting way. If that works than the viewer by default will get something from it if they are into that sort of thing. If they like paintings of sunsets then they probably won't be too interested, which is fine.

AP: Do you find it more challenging for a work to have a "life force" of its own when it's done on a large scale?

CR: The larger works seem to have that force when installed. But once they return and they are leaned, stacked and or wrapped for storage I don't feel that. That's when they usually get chopped up and recycled. The smaller works when returned wrapped and stored usually remain more safely cocooned but these can get redone at times as well.

AP: Do you think the frame of the stretcher that resides within the smaller work has something to do with them retaining their force?

CR: I don't think its framing as much as scale and structural elements. Smaller works tend to be single, rectangular or square-ish units and therefore self-contained. The larger and architectural works tend to be made up of components that are assembled on site to make a viable whole. Once disassembled and/or removed from the space that they react to, like a corner or whatever, they no longer have the same feel and become fair game for reassembling/reworking/reviving.

AP: In your current show, Adaptive Radiation at Dodge Gallery, is "Clacker clacker!" made of previous works?

CR: No. It was made for that show. I didn't know how I would use it exactly. It can go tight stacked up sort of so that the lines connect and make a cool pattern or unfold to any length sort of like those old style wooden rulers. I knew it was going to bridge the two spaces and be a visual transition between the two areas.

AP: Do you approach paint and the act of painting in that same way? The way you used paint in Adaptive Radiation seems so meditative and purposeful. I'm thinking of "7 at hand" and "Tired fingers" specifically. The paint seems like it was used for the purpose of filling space similar to the way you explained how "Clacker clacker!" could expand into the space of the gallery.

CR: I think I approach painting in a number of different ways. I almost always work on multiple things at once so nothing gets too precious. I'll generally have 2-3 paintings going that are somehow related to each other or rather I start 1 then 2 more spin off. Since I'm always afraid I'm going to pigeon hole myself or fall too in love with a certain thing I'll start working on 1-2 things that are totally different or opposite almost just to reassure myself I can go back if I want.

For example, I'll work on a few very loose things that are almost improvised stream of consciousness type paintings then be freaked out and have to start something more ridged and planned. Then I'll sort of bounce between the 2-5 paintings based on my mood and often will make decisions on painting #1 out of the corner of my eye while working on painting #2.

Some paintings work out and resolve quickly and almost seem like gifts while others get worked on over and over.

AP: What have you learned from making your work?

CR: I can say that I'm aware that I'm working with a certain visual language which is shared and not mine exclusively. As I've used this language over the last 20 years or so I've been amazed that this language has a sort of innate flexibility and infinite scope. It can fit any mood, time, and place and always find its own honest cords without being overly contrived.

Over time my own personal vocabulary within that language continues to expand. I've gotten technically better at some things, probably. My comfort zone shifts from time to time and I get seduced periodically by certain solutions which is always a danger if I stay too long. But as I continue, more and more solutions come up leaving me with a deeper bag of tricks so to speak. Some moves are like old friends and will ALWAYS look and feel right to me. Other moves are like exciting new acquaintances which I want to see again but don't know exactly what I think of yet. I think I'm learning all the time. I'm not changing the world but I am involved with a deep dialogue with myself, maybe with history and maybe with others that share a connection to this weird language that I'm working with. Over time I think my vocabulary/proficiency has increased and my confidence has increased which enables me to do more interesting works than I could have done in 1993. But at same time I wouldn't be shocked if some of the 1993 works have a quality that I cannot duplicate the same way.

"Adaptive Radiation" is on view through May 12 at Dodge Gallery in New York City.

Arthur Peña is an artist, writer and professor living and working in Dallas, TX.