Title
A conversation about my work with my partner, John Brady on the highway heading from San Diego, California to St. George, Utah to attend the Brookes Family Reunion

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A conversation about my work with my partner, John Brady on the highway heading from San Diego, California to St. George, Utah to attend the Brookes Family Reunion

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Joseph Michael Yorty

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2013
The thesis of Joseph Yorty is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

Chair

University of California, San Diego
2013
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A conversation about my work with my partner, John Brady on the highway heading from San Diego, California to St. George, Utah to attend the Brookes Family Reunion

by

Joseph Michael Yorty

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Anya Gallaccio, Chair

A conversation was conducted between Joseph Yorty and his domestic partner John Brady on May 24th, 2012 during a road trip between San Diego, CA and St. George, UT on the way to the Brookes Family Reunion. The conversation was recorded and later transcribed and edited. The text in this thesis is that edited conversation.
JOHN BRADY: Let's start by talking about the work you're planning to include in your show next week. Which works are you putting in the show, and how do those works create a cohesive exhibition of your most recent work?

JOE YORTY: I'll be building the show from a lot of the work that I've made over the last year. The oldest piece that might find its way through the editing process is about a year and a half old. All the work that I'm taking into the gallery fits neatly into my interests in both Minimalism and domestic space. I'm starting the installation with a wall-to-wall carpet collage using second-hand carpet I've collected from flooring stores. I haven't yet settled on the exact form of the collage. It will echo the forms that occur in the more geometric work that I'm including in the show. I see the carpet collage not as a singular piece, but a way in which to create a more immersive installation of work. The conceptual framework of all the art I make begins with the domestic space and to have the work sit upon a typical domestic floor treatment will direct the audience to immediately read the work in relationship to the domestic.

The main work of the show will consist of a combination of collages and sculptures. I haven't yet developed a very tight plan of how the show will come together. During the past year or so I've committed to making work that finds itself nicely positioned under the topic of the domestic. While each piece or series of pieces works on its own I see the show coming together as an installation rather than a show of labeled individual works. I want the show to function much the same way the furnishings and decoration
of the home might. The arrangement of the works on the carpet, while not easy to confuse with home furnishings, will echo the shapes, colors and textures of the home.

The projects that will make up the show will be arranged in the space in order to create dialogue amongst them. The relationships the works have with one another are critical to me. While the works can operate autonomously this show is an opportunity to explore the relationships of the works and how intersection plays a role in my practice. The arrangement of the pieces within the space and with respect to one another will largely define the show and how the audience will read it.

JB: There seems to be this tension of texture in your work you plan to include in the show - either soft or hard?

JY: It’s an issue of sculpture. It’s part of my exploration of domestic stuff as sculpture material. The "soft" kind of came in a while back when I was looking at overstuffed furniture, looking at bean bags, and to me the softness is associated with ideas of comfort which, in American culture I associate with laziness. I think leisure and lazy are often the same thing. The overstuffed La-Z-Boy, the beanbag and the husband pillow – that is my reference point for "soft." Of course, I look to Claes Oldenberg. He was making work alongside the New York Minimalists. In fact, Judd writes about Oldenburg in *Specific Objects* and directly contrasts his work to those of the Minimalists. Judd liked Oldenburg’s work and I like Judd more because of that.

Oldenberg’s work is actually quite direct in its mimicking of the objects of the domestic space. Also, I don’t think you can’t disassociate soft sculpture from the domestic. Anyone that finds themselves making soft sculpture has to wrestle with that. So I use it
in that way. I think of "soft" as domestic. And then there’s the “hard” - the forms the
Untitled collage series make direct reference to the construction trade, with that work
I’m thinking about the construction of the home – joinery and materials.

JB: How do you think of gender as it relates to ideas of the domestic, and more
specifically this soft/hard binary?

JY: I don’t always make considerations of gender when I’m making new work, but I
think all art is gendered – everything is made by either a man or a woman, gay, straight
or trans. I think that my sexual orientation can also be important to the reading of my
work. Traditionally, the male/female binary is compared to other binaries –
outside/inside, public/private, hard/soft. Domestic space (as it is inside, private and
contains lots of soft things) is generally tied to the female. I’ve never been interested in
a direct exploration of that. I think my approach is a male experience and relationship
to domestic space, and that experience is informed mainly by my mother, but also my
sisters. I like to think about my father’s experience of the home as well and to think
more generally about the man’s role in the space of the home.

Currently, we don’t live with any women and it’s been a long time since either of us
has. We can think about gender in relation to our current home and how the influence
of culture and family forces it to maintain a female gender. I suppose it might have
something to do with our sexual orientation, but I think it has everything to do with the
fact that we learned to exist in the home by our mothers.

We can also talk sex and domestic space – the phallus in the collages and the plinths
or the strapped husband pillows. I think the work is mildly transgressive in it’s subtle
reference to sex (and violence). It gets complicated when I bring our own relationship into this conversation because if we’re going to talk about sex with this work we can’t pretend that we’re talking about our sex – this has more to do with conservative and traditional ideas of sex and domestic space. The idea of generalized dominance is removed from the conversation about gay sex – there is no difference in gender that automatically sets up this situation. If we’re going to talk about sex with this work I think we cannot separate it from the male/female.

JB: What role do modes of display play into your work? Specifically with the Avon bottle pieces and the mirrorshelf pieces.

JY: For me, this is the major challenge of found-object art I make. A sculptural or spatial transformation has to happen. The husband pillows are easier to use because of their malleability and color and their inherent anthropomorphic nature. The Avon cologne bottles have been the most challenging found object thus far for me. I've been wrestling with the Avon bottles for a couple of years now without having ever been fully satisfied with the results. The solution I've settled on for God Made Mondays is the strongest so far. I think a lot about Haim Steinbach when I work with the Avon bottles. In fact, he spent time in my studio playing with those bottles. He pointed me in some directions that brought the project to where it is now. For this show I’ve grouped the Avon bottles by color and will select only two or three of each color to display on a total of three museum pedestal all painted a similar shade of the bottles – blue, green and brown. I’ll use the large pool of each group of bottles to build cultural and sculptural associations and tensions atop the pedestals. The bottle, along with the pedestal is the sculpture. There is this peculiar relationship between the geometric
form of the museum pedestal and the kitsch nature of the Avon cologne bottle that I’m interested in.

Another project that I’m including in the show is the series *Untitled (mirrorshelf collection)*. In contrast with the Avon collection, this piece started as a collection of display objects – rejected wood shop projects that all share certain traits in common.

Each object frames a mirror and has a shelf attached to it just beneath the mirror. I was initially drawn to these objects because of the mysterious origins of this genre of shop project. What does one display on this shelf? Is the mirror intended to reflect the object displayed? With this collection I was faced with the opposite problem of the Avon bottles. Rather than resolving how material transformation would occur through the displaying of a found object I was challenged to transform these mirrorshelves through the selection or crafting of objects to display on the found object. Through a process of minimal effort and cost I created knick-knacks out of Quikcrete and found paint – small piles and cast cardboard tubes each painted with a single color are arranged on each shelf as stand-ins for what may have once existed.

JB: Do you see this project as a collaboration with the makers of the mirrorshelves?

JY: Yes, I think that adds to the complexity of the work. In terms of the crafting of each piece, my hand was involved on a very minimal level. The makers of the mirrorshelves, most likely middle or high school wood shop students were, in fact, involved in the crafting of the work more than myself. That relationship, along with the narrative of rejection and revival is an important element of this project. There’s a sense of sadness attached to the journey of those objects. As an artist I’m drawn to
addressing that sadness inherent in the rejection of what once was likely a cherished object.

JB: Most of your work seems to address issues of class and taste. How do you think our inclination for modern architecture and modern furniture design relates to the work you're making now?

JY: Having grown up in an American blue-collar household and its contrast to the life I live now creates a tension that allows me to reflect on the objects and spaces of a certain lifestyle. Along with the tastes I've developed as an adult are shifts in my values in politics and religion – these fuel that tension. Almost everything about the life I live is at odds with the values and ideology of my upbringing. I choose to address that tension through the objects and materials associated with a culture that is completely opposite than my lifestyle. I look to the patterns (gingham, floral wallpaper, faux wood grain), the colors, and the things that fill the homes of the American middle-class as raw material for my work. I'm drawn to these things because they contain a sense of nostalgia for a time and place that exists in a mythological account of the past. For example, the sprawling tract home developments that house many American middle-class families are historicized versions of Mediterranean or Tuscan inspired architecture except that they're enormous and are cheaply built. That lack of design integrity is symptomatic of larger problems that interest me in my art practice.

Getting back to your question about modern architecture and design, I think that we understand and appreciate it for its pragmatism and for the ideologies attached to it. Something I find interesting about the relationship between modern design and class is the misinterpretation (or complete lack of knowledge) of its associations with
Marxism. The Bauhaus, Rudolph Schindler, the Eames, Bertoia – much of their design philosophy was born in Utopian ideology. Buckminster Fuller wrote in *Critical Path*, "We are blessed with technology that would be indescribable to our forefathers. We have the wherewithal, the know-it-all to feed everybody, clothe everybody, and give every human on Earth a chance. We know now what we could never have known before -- that we now have the option for all humanity to make it successfully on this planet in this lifetime." While Buckminster Fuller was much more than just a designer his approach to design was that of solving problems such as poor city planning, poverty and rapid urban growth.

The furniture and architecture of early modern designers has come to symbolize a certain class. Middle-class Americans have opted for the Tuscan track home and the La-Z-Boy recliner while modern design is reserved for those who both know what it is and can afford it. Except that much of these designers’ intentions have been lost on those that now purchase their furniture. The modern concrete skyscraper and the knock-off Eames shell chair are good enough because, from a distance, it looks exactly like what it tries to copy. Forget that the rooms inside the building function no better than a run-of-the-mill apartment and that the chair was built of cheap materials in a Chinese sweatshop. Most seem to only look at what modern design can offer them in terms of fashion rather than the philosophical nature of the initial intentions of that design.

**JB:** You talk a lot about Minimalism and modernism in art and design. How does this manifest in your work? Does this have any relationship to your family and the culture in which you were raised?
JY: I was always drawn to the Minimalist artists' use of materials and form, but it was only recently that I really started digging into its history and writings. In terms of the work that I'm making now it goes back to the same things I was saying about modernism in architecture and furniture. I think that there's this sort of stripped down quality to that type of architecture and design that I'm drawn to, and I think the same thing happens with my inclination for Minimalism. The reason I started addressing it and actually started very literally making these sorts of Minimalist works or these ideas that come out of those specific ideas of Minimalism is because of its attachment to ideas of class and taste. I think Minimalist sculpture is commonly understood as strictly academic - that one cannot enter a museum and understand what a Donald Judd sculpture means without a degree in art history. It's not the case. There's a lot of misinterpretation of Minimalism. While so much of the work exists in the similarities of geometric abstraction and industrial materials they all speak very differently about the work they've made. They all came out of a tradition of abstraction before them – Mondrian, Rothko, Malevich, David Smith - the artists that were already engaged in geometric abstraction near the turn of the 20th century - they were looking at that work. But I think they took it further and the abstraction became more rigid and they looked to the materials of post World War II industry for their work.

The way that I address it in my own work is through the lens of class. The work of these artists has largely been misread as esoteric and therefore avoided because of an inability to “understand it”. I use this as a tactic in my own work to create stripped down forms and images that make direct reference to Minimalism. Specifically, the work in this show recalls that of John McCracken, Dan Flavin and Robert Morris’s Green Gallery show of 1963. And I try to not be purely ironic- I don't want the show to read as a "one-liner" critique of modern art. I hope that my audience reads the tension
between the textures and the colors that I use to make the sculptures and the ideology of Minimalist form.

JB: So we’re headed to St. George to see your family. How do you think about your work in relationship to your family and your upbringing?

JY: I’ve thought about my family a lot in relationship to my work for several years now. It’s actually been most recently that I made a conscious decision to really look into the world in which I was raised which. During the past few years I’ve seen my work as a sort of triangulation of defining that culture. I don’t like it when groups of people from a specific geographic region are stereotyped. My family is different than the family that lived next door. One might generalize those two families having lived within a specific town or state. I spent my childhood in two very different cultural landscapes. When I was nine or ten years old my family moved to Southern California. The cultural climates of those two places are vastly different from one another. I’ve come to generalize my upbringing, for the purposes of my career, as American blue-collar. My mother is a Pentecostal Christian while my father isn’t religious at all. That starts to become very specific to my family, but there is a more general theme I try to address with the art that I make. In a sense, with every project I make and within my artistic practice as a whole I attempt to define that world with which I identify. I’ve already realized that I’ll never entirely define it, but that is my attempt. I’ve built my practice around an investigation of the objects and spaces with which I associate with my upbringing and the memories tied to those objects and spaces. When I started making art in college this idea of looking to the things of my childhood was unconscious. My father is a carpenter and at a young age he began teaching me the trade so in the beginning I was drawn to a more constructive way of making art – dimensional lumber
and plywood. Before I was an artist I was already engaged in the processes of woodworking. When I first started making this work I didn’t correlate the process with a specific culture critique or even a critique of the process itself. It wasn’t until later when I became aware of the work of Joseph Beuys that material could function as metaphor and that what I was doing might have value as an exploration of a critique of all things that have a relationship to a craft or a trade. The construction trades are deeply connected to everything that is American blue-collar and that, for me, opens up a vast array of possibilities for investigation, mainly the tension between labor and leisure and its ties to the objects that fill the domestic space of that world I’m looking to.

JB: So do you see your dad as an influential figure in your growth as an artist? Through his love of building and use of materials it seems that he might be someone you see as important to you as an artist.

JY: My father is a creative person, but he’s never considered himself an artist. I think we both possess that urge to create. I see the same excitement within him when he gets an idea for a project and places himself in front of a pile of materials. He approaches it with the same excitement that I do and I think that’s where a lot of what I do comes from. Actually, it is the same exact thing. I’ve just found a different way to channel that energy as an artist rather than a builder. I believe the urge to create is something that is common to all mankind. So many people never explore that part of their humanity. I can say that much of the joy I glean from the experience of engaging with a project is not the academic part of that process but more the part of just building stuff. I think it is a primal urge to create and build.
JB: Do you think that your upbringing and family is important for your audience to understand your work?

JY: Like I said before, all of my work comes from that, but a lot of the work is not tied so specifically to my family. I don’t think it is critical for my audience to have any knowledge of my background to understand my work. I hope the work doesn’t need the foundation of that story and that it can stand on its own. I think there is enough within the work for viewers to start to see that it all comes from a very specific place. The objects and materials I use and the objects and places I photograph have a quality of familiarity that avoids a sense of mystery in terms of the place from where the work generates. For example, through the use of faux wood grain and the textures and patterns I choose most people will begin to understand that the work generates from the domestic space and will then see some of the intentions of my efforts. I hope that when time is spent with the work that my audience starts to make connections amongst the works or within specific elements of the pieces. Of course there are depths to the work that no one will ever know, but I hope that those that look at my work interpret it in a way that connects my intentions to specific associations or memories they might have. I approach my entire practice through a very idiosyncratic experience of a culture with which I am intimately familiar. Others will attach their own meaning to the work and I think that makes the work more meaningful and complex for them and for me. I find it interesting to hear what others have to say about my work. I don’t worry about “misinterpretation”.

Of course you can reach a deeper understanding of an artist’s work when you become more familiar with her or his background, but I don’t think that it should be a necessary. I find that I am less drawn to art that requires me to be familiar with an
artist’s biography or even with their body of work to even begin to enter into an understanding of that work. I don’t want to have to read a book in order to get anything out of an exhibition or work of art.

JB: One thing I really like about the art you make is the way in which you take familiar objects and materials and make them into something new.

JY: More often than not the materials and objects I collect to use in my projects don’t have any direct relation to personal memory. Take for example the wallpaper that shows up in a lot of my recent work. None of it has any direct connection to a memory of a familiar place of the past for me. It is, in fact, more important to me that the wallpaper is associated with the domestic and that it is likely left over from a wallpapering project that might still exist. That wallpaper pattern is tied to the memories of the members of a specific family and their friends. I don’t think anyone that views those works will be completely unaware of the cultural ties to that wallpaper, whether or not it conjures specific memories of a place for them. There is a universal understanding of the material I choose to work with as one that is explicitly domestic and that leads the viewer to associate the work with ideas of home. I’m very careful in my selection of objects and materials. I want there to always be the element of familiarity that allows my audience to make even a small personal connection to my art.

JB: When we’re out thrifting or hitting the garage sales and estate sales there is this moment when we happen upon these object that I think is related to what you’re attempting in your work.
JY: Yeah – there’s this history that is attached to these things that we can only invent for ourselves. This whole idea of memory is not something that I’m always thinking about in terms of my work, but I think it is something that can’t be avoided when one chooses to make art this way. I’m not trying to avoid it – it’s something that I think is interesting as it operates on a certain level in my practice. I don’t attempt to insert any specific narrative to the objects and materials. I can only place importance in the possibility that those narratives do, in fact, exist. I had an experience recently where a friend was in my studio and she recognized a specific wallpaper I had used in a collage. It was a really nice moment for me. I can’t remember if she said that the same wallpaper was used in her mother’s or her grandmother’s home, but she was drawn to that specific collage because of its direct associations to memories she had as a child. I’m not holding out for those moments with my audience, but it’s great that the possibility exists.

JB: How do you think the notion of collecting fits into your work? It seems to be more than just a means to an end.

JY: I think collecting is a strange phenomenon and I’m still wrestling with it. I place myself within that group of people that loves to collect. Now I’ve found, since I’ve been an artist and since I sort of use a lot of these objects in my work, I satisfy that urge by collecting things with which to make art. But I guess if I wasn’t an artist my house would just be filled with cologne bottles and I’d have no idea what to do with them. I think it’s a primal urge to hoard objects. When you can channel it through a collection of stamps or coins or guns or bottles, it satisfies that primal urge. Also, I’m interested in collecting as an American phenomenon. Many of us live in large homes that can house our collections. And then there are the sprawling storage unit complexes that fill
our collections that no longer fit in our huge houses. I think about how collecting relates to ideas of obsession and desire.

The objects I collect, though, have always been collected by another person. Every object I pull into my work has already been cherished to some degree and is already filled with an invisible history. The only times I’ve stopped to consider the attached narrative is when I’ve purchased the object out of an estate sale in which I find the object in its native environment amongst the carpet and wallpaper and smells and other objects. I get a lot of context without ever meeting the object’s most recent owner. The things I pick up at thrift stores and yard sales I always presume are discarded rather than left behind by a dead person. Either way, all the objects arrive at my doorstep with the baggage of having been treasured by at least one other person.

In relationship to how I use these objects in my work I’m concerned with a more general approach to narrative – how the phenomenon of collecting certain objects can be used to measure cultural climate.

JB: We’re almost to Vegas. Want to hit some thrift stores?

JY: Yes.