

ARTLOG

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Interview: Fragments of a Worldview

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Bo Joseph's work confronts you with the process that produced it. The paper is frayed, patched together, the drawings a dense accumulation of marks that seem to have been deposited by successive generations of human habitation. Scrutinize them long enough and outlines of artifacts, ceremonial objects, and sculptures emerge. It might be a Roman helmet, a bull, a seated figure, but usually it's just the intimation of a form that doesn't quite come into focus. Joseph's upcoming exhibition, *Fragments of a Worldview*, shores together its materials and source images into a contingent sense of reality. In an interview, Joseph discusses his unusual working methods, "un-collage," scavenging African mask photographs from auction catalogs, and his exhibition of new works on paper, opening February 23 at Sears-Peyton Gallery.

You have a pretty idiosyncratic process that you've been developing for a while.

It's a process I came up with through experimentation, accident, frustration, and just messing with materials way back when. It's based on oil being water-resistant. I do the initial drawing with oil pastel, cover it with water-based tempera, let it dry, and then I scrape it with a razor blade and the tempera flakes off the oil pastel. I coat that with an acrylic-based ink, let it dry, and rinse it in a big slop-sink.

When I do the initial drawings, they're pinned up in a haphazard patchwork that goes up very intuitively. They're all in separate pieces until the last stage when I reassemble the whole thing and often rework the drawing, add elements, articulate things.

What about the sources of the imagery? Doesn't your work draw on appropriated images?

As long as I can remember I've been interested in objects from other cultures, whether ritual objects from tribal Africa, Sufi pottery, or mandala paintings. I don't know if it came from having an eclectic upbringing, folks that were basically hippies, and looking to other parts of the world for a new way of looking at things, but I've had that appetite all my life. Over time I discovered so many commonalities in things that were seemingly disparate, whether historically disparate or disparate in terms of worldviews, belief systems, etc.

The commonalities could be attributed to how the worldview or belief system was manifest through the maker's process. That's part of my process mentality in the studio. At the same time, it's me trying to get to the bottom of how an African figure, removed from its shrine in some dark hut in Congo by a missionary, brought to the Metropolitan Museum, displayed in this glass case, stripped of all the accoutrements and so forth, still has this amazing charge, even though I have no concept of how it was actually used, it's intended place in some ritual, etc. Outside of its formal traits, why would it have any charge for me, or anybody else for that matter, without knowing its ritual significance, without knowing that you're supposed to shield your eyes from it because it's too powerful for most people to look at? Some of that charge endures all those contextual shifts.

These are things that became intriguing to me as I was developing as an artist. I put all these disparate sources into a space where the playing field is leveled and the scale changes. They are stripped for a moment of their original significance and charge, but then they take on a new kind of charge in those contextual shifts. That's where the appropriation comes in.

It doesn't sound like you're as interested in the consumer or advertising imagery sometimes associated with appropriation.

It's an overlap actually. A lot of the images come from auction catalogues, so it's the height of consumerism, maybe the most elite consumerism. But it's a form of consumerism that commodifies these ritual objects, works of art, etc.

In part, I use auction catalogs because they're on one subject, they're dense, and they're disposable. But part of what I'm interested in is the contextual shift. I'm scavenging a photograph taken by somebody else who decided to light it a certain way, scale it a certain way, chose a certain angle, and when I cut it out, whether it's to create a stencil or to transcribe a silhouette, it becomes an abstraction. So there is an element of that consumer aspect to the term appropriation in my case, but it's less the subject and more one of the subtexts.

At one point I accumulated all of these clippings from auction catalogs and encyclopedias and books because I was trying to create stencils with the negative shapes. I ended up with hundreds of leftover clippings, so I fit them all together in such a way that I could see every single one on a white background. I traced around them, and that group of drawings is a cascade of these objects, almost like they're now in a junk bin at a flea market. But these are all objects like highly prized Roman bronzes and African masks that are in museum collections, so there is this aspect of the spoils of consumerism, spoils of collecting, spoils of accumulation and materialism that is a facet of it, but I wouldn't say it's the focus.

The process seems to distance you from it.

I feel like art-making can become very self-conscious and full of pretense very quickly, and I have found that a lot of the work out there that I respond to the most has this balance between form and content or process and content, where the artist appears and disappears in the work, and in some cases the work almost fights back and asserts itself. It's a way to thwart your own ego so that you can

witness what's happening as much as you assert what's happening.

Which artists achieve that for you?

Oddly enough, Duchamp, even though stylistically it might not make sense. With the *Standard Stoppages*, the idea that he's dropping these cords that are all one meter long but they're falling and being cut into three different meter lengths, that's simultaneously questioning how we define reality and how we define a measure. A measure can be subjective even though we all call it a meter, and I relate to that aspect of it. I also relate to the chance operation. There are times when I'll drop things onto a sheet, and where they land is where they end up in the composition.

Joseph Beuys talked about how a revolution is a private act, and I always took that to mean that challenging your assumptions, challenging your perceptions and your definitions, is integral to making a work of art. When I look at a lot of his really rich drawings, I feel like there's a willingness to let the material engage with the process in a way that's very open, even though he has a vocabulary that's very much his own and he has forms that he returns to. There's an open-minded meandering going on, a willingness to interject something potentially unexpected, and to watch disparate things come together.

How does the exhibition title, *Fragments of a Worldview*, describe what you're trying to achieve?

I did a show last year called *Attempts at a Unified Theory*, which is just a phrase borrowed from science. *Fragments of a Worldview* is similar in that I'm always trying to figure out what I know, and usually I figure out more what I don't know than what I do know. The process of making the work is a way of visually asking that question for myself, looking at the world and trying to figure out my worldview. All of these pieces are fragments of a worldview I can't quite articulate, dots that somehow get connected intuitively. It's like fragments of an incomplete sentence you can't fully sound out, but when you hear the words something feels complete about it. The objects themselves are fragmentary, the source imagery is fragmentary, and they're about me trying to intuit a worldview, how I have come to understand "reality."

It seems like a much more active process than just collecting fragments.

Right. It gets very physical. It gets very exasperating. But simultaneously, the paper I use is very delicate, which is deliberate. It's important to me that they are physically at risk throughout most of the process. It's another aspect of keeping me on my toes and keeping me with it. It heightens the experience for me. They're soaking wet at a certain point, and they often break apart as I'm handling them. You'll see holes and tears and things that are patched back together. It's evidence of a procedure, or byproduct of a procedure.

So if something breaks, you just patch it back together and keep going?

Yes. It's all a patchwork anyway. Once there was a leak in my studio that left a big brown puddle in the middle of a drawing, and I totally wiggled out. But then I realized the whole thing is made of little sections anyway, so I just cut that section out, redrew it, put it back in, and continued with the drawing. There was something satisfying about that. It was as if the work could somehow assimilate virtually anything.

It's like collage, but you're collaging elements of your own process.

Right. A friend of mine calls it un-collage because I do everything a collage artist does except glue down the found images. I'm always looking for an alternative strategy, a foil. You're headed in one direction and take a right turn. I started out making collage, and I would cut these things out, throw the negative shape aside, cut another thing out. Then I noticed that the absences are more interesting. They allude to something as opposed to being the thing, and that was much more intriguing to me.

It sounds like collage would be too literal. You need something to push against.

De Kooning talked a lot about being off-kilter. When he was a little off-kilter, it was always better; there was some point of engagement that was more intense. If he was too level, there was no energy in the process for him, nothing unexpected. He called himself a "slipping glimpser." He liked it when he was slipping around and sliding around and catching glimpses, as opposed to staring straight on with both feet on the ground. I really relate to that. These funny, weird difficulties that I create for myself, obstacles that I put in my own path, are similar.