Spring 5-21-2018

Ruin Runes

Justin Cloud

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Ruin Runes

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture, Hunter College, The City University of New York

2018

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My work theatrically probes market driven stereotypes and masculine fetishization around vehicles, competition, and survivalism through sculptural intervention of industrial material. Using sculpture as an invasion of normal circumstance, it mimetically functions as a character in a larger matrix of a market post-collapse. As discreet works of art each piece reflects an aura of nostalgia, do-it-yourself utilitarianism, and escapism. A goal in my work is to address the implication of market driven lifestyles specifically pertaining to gendered notions of the male ego. Vehicles, sneakers, sculptural arrangements and survival gear all function as manifestations of masculine forms reconstructed and reassessed. A cultural identity and political narrative reside in the objects I make. It is within this space of self-examination through broader cultural cues that I find meaningful material to make work that is both personal and universal.

Growing up in the post-industrial landscapes of America where industry rose, fell, and abandoned their structures has significantly shaped my experience of pop culture. Melancholic brutalism resides in the sublime ugliness of industrial ruin scattered throughout middle-America and the west. Enigmatic machinery, rotting interiors, tubes and piping permeate their skeletons calling to mind uncanny images of Frankensteinian monsters. I grew up playing and exploring these ruins of oil refineries and cement plants. As an adult I found myself working in such an establishment as a Ford mechanic, and later as an equipment operator for an aluminum can manufacturer alongside my brother and father. When the stock market crashed in 2008, I became
unemployed and personally experienced the fall of industrial based economy and the rise of an information economy.

Fig. 1 Justin Cloud, *Photo of abandoned cement plant in Laramie, WY.* 2013
Paradigm shifts like these send ripples through the fabric of culture, as lived experience of economic and industrial ruin cast visions of the apocalypse into collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs, French philosopher and sociologist known for developing
the concept of collective memory, suggests a fusion between identity and the built and lived environment.

“Halbwachs suspected that urban groups may actually enact or be, rather than merely inhabit, the built urban environment. In other words, buildings are not expressions, symbols, or repositories of collective memory, but the latter’s physical process. The stones of the city are therefore not allegories for the stability of an urban populations’ shared identity, they simply are that identity. This implies that buildings, as cases for memory, don’t merely preserve collective memory for the series of organisms that are encased in them, rather the buildings are those memories.” (Pensky 66)

Through this framework, the scattered and abandoned industrial zones I grew up around embody my identity as an individual and demographic. This concept is reflected throughout pop culture, and the respective narratives recycled between media. For example, Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* are written 75 years apart. The narratives take place hundreds of years apart, but both are essentially the story of a male’s changing identity with the land as he is forced to pick up his family and move to survive. This example provides an instance of the recycling and reinforcing of nomadic hunter-gatherer male stereotypes, and also sheds light on the use of ruin and objects as memetic code for living.

“As the ruin symbolizes the transience and temporality of building and living, it both threatens and offers significance as a meditational object-lesson on the relation between social life and physical life. The ruin, to put it probably too preciously, is rune: a cipher or mark whose very enigmatic character qualifies it both for occult significance and as a sign of the constant threat of an insignificant social world threatened at all moments with the omnipresence of guaranteed oblivion.” (Pensky 68)

The concept of ruin as rune is mirrored in our self perception as objects. Martin Heidegger suggested we often view works of art as “things” with aesthetic traits added on. Similarly, we view personality and our ‘self’ as a ‘personality structure’ or having
‘personality contents’, as if a person were a structure with parts, a container with things inside, or a subject bearing traits. (Heidegger 51-52, 39) This is telling of the importance we attach to possessions. By turning possessions into an integral part of one’s self-identity, what one has or consumes becomes part of one’s self-image (Belk, 1985). Within hyper materialist western culture, commodities are often marketed more as lifestyles and social symbols than objects. Gendered concepts and behavioral stereotypes are coded into the material resulting in the person accepting through market identity that this is “the right way to behave.” The possession becomes an extension of the person’s self. A recent study published in Journal of Psychology and Marketing found that people who behave aggressively on the road tend to perceive their car as an extension of their self-identity.

“The perception of a product as part of consumers’ self-identity affects their use of the product and the behaviors associated with it. In the case of aggressive driving, this negative behavior might reflect drivers’ tendency to protect their extended selves. It should be noted that consumers’ view of their car as an extension of their self-identity could potentially have either a positive or negative effect on aggressive driving. However, the findings suggest that the perception of the car as an extension of the self leads to more aggressive behavior on the road rather than increased driving cautiousness.” (Ruvio and Shoham p.1106)

This study not only provides an example of product perception affecting consumers’ self-identity but also echoes stereotypical male behavior in territorial disputes.

“Combined, these concepts suggest that individuals may view cars and the road space they occupy as their territory and will seek to maintain control over it and defend it as necessary. Individuals strive to preserve a sense of their territory, even in public settings (Pons, Laroche, & Mourali, 2006). When such territory, defined partially by materialism and a view of cars as extensions of the drivers’ selves, is threatened by other drivers, these drivers may feel that they are unable to maintain their control over their territory.” (Ruvio and Shoham p.1106)
Approaching my work, my idea was initially inspired from imagining how, at some point in the future, new fusions could exist between the mechanical, the handmade, and natural world. What would happen if people and machines continued to wander through the decaying landscape and meld together with nature? What form and function would the new unit adopt? Perhaps after the collapse, when future environmental calamity decimates any and all boundaries real or imagined, a new fusion might occur, a molecular intermingling of culture and nature; this could be a harbinger of hope in a world bereft of the hierarchical structures keeping the balance in an oppressing-oppressed world.

My thesis exhibition is organized into three units: the ‘bikes’, the tableaux and the shoes. The tableaux “Ezra” (entitled for it’s translation from Hebrew as ‘Help’, as well as the book of Ezra’s tale of rebuilding the destroyed world) harks back to 2003 while walking my dog, finding debris of the Space Shuttle Columbia amongst the green expanses of field in my backyard in Texas. Later the FBI would collect the debris and attempt to rebuild the ship piece by piece in NASA’s air hangar. Wreckage was brought in on pallets and sorted systematically the same way one might sort a human into parts. Researching the wreckage, I was moved by this massive attempt to rebuild the disaster in order to learn from it. In building Ezra, I set out to confront my anxiety around my precarious future and the disasters I had experienced in my life, both the Colombia and the 2008-2009 economic collapse that ended my career as a mechanic and bred a personal existential crisis.
Fig. 3 The left inboard main landing gear tire from STS-107. CAIB Photo no photographer listed, 2003

Ezra is an homage to the original technology of decomposition and decay. A thing committed to earth, coming back to earth. Using the interior carpet felt and foam lining of a Ford Focus, I folded it inside out and bound it together into a sarcophagus form, attaching thrusters from an aircraft to its base. The material is
defamiliarized and reconstructed as a craft body lying on a raft made of pallets, restaging the image of dread, mystery, and surrealism I experienced upon finding the shuttle debris in my yard. For me, making Ezra was in a sense creating a wake for my personal trauma, and reclaiming the body from stereotypical masculine ideals of success. This gesture led me to further consider vehicles and other forms tied to masculinity.
Male fetishization and identification with vehicle culture is heavily documented, and continues to be primarily a male dominated phenomenon. In motor sports all one has to do to observe this fact is count how many women drivers are in any given race. Coming from my background within this culture, I’ve thought often about these machines’ very form and function being determined by masculine idealization. Such was the case, when I came across a piece of farm equipment shaped exactly like a motorcycle. Could it be that in this culture so saturated by heteronormativity, all tools of industry become synonymous with masculinity so that a machine used to seed the
ground and impregnate the earth, resembles a motorcycle? At what point does conditioning take over and infect our collective consciousness so much so, that the link between masculinity and industry becomes conventional? This motivated me to build my own bikes out of industrial material, and strip from them all practical purpose and function. Their form is made of exhaust pipe hermetically sealed into a loop with cast resin joints and wheels constructed with foam, celluclay, felt, and foam rubber. This handmade construction and combination of material subverts traditional norms as the bikes take on characteristics of both the masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive, strong and fragile. The quality of these handmade objects was pertinent for further exploration as I continued to investigate other ways in which industrial normativity may be challenged in design.

While building Ezra, I noticed the same visual cues in the wreckage being utilized in deconstruction aesthetics within fashion and design. A kind of post-apocalyptic kitsch gripping popular culture and crossbreeding between media. Objects and products were being made with DIY aesthetics mirroring the survivalist culture I’d experienced while living in Wyoming. If people bought into these survivalist tropes, would they augment their behavior to coincide with the market lifestyle it brandishes to perceive everything and everyone a possible threat? These questions and observations led me to footwear and design. Presently, sneaker gear are produced to provide practical utility while simultaneously channeling the consumer’s identity into idealized forms and lifestyles. Whether you are a jogger, fashionista, hypebeast, or survivalist, there are complete footwear fictions and lifestyles marketed to you. Within American culture, these
products also reinforce gender binaries and class differentiation. Sneakers culture has completely ascended beyond that of practical footwear.

Fig. 6 Justin Cloud, *Hermes, Mixed Media, Size 9*  
Fig. 7 Justin Cloud, *Gladspec, Mixed Media, Size 9*

Approaching the sneaker as an elegy, how might future generations consider this phenomenon? Made with materials that might still be around after the fall of modern civilization (styrofoam, felt, webbing, metal, bullet lead), I imagined these sneakers completely shedding their practical use, becoming objects of fetish, symbolism, and contemplation; a collection mimicking a late stage capitalist machine cannibalizing itself for profit, but made entirely by hand. Maybe they would still be sold in stores on shelves the way they are sold today, but regarded in a different way, closer to that of relics from a problematic bygone era.

Presented in a gallery context, the culmination of works recall a commercial store display within an alternate reality, recovering from or persisting in collapse. Just as the scattered post industrial zones I grew up around embody my identity and demographic, so too does my work reflect this identity and condition of persisting among ruin. This
presents a mirror for me to analyze my own personal involvement and contribution as a caucasian straight-presenting male artist to complex societal problems. In my work, I imagine futures where the conception of masculinity has been reconstructed to perform not at the expense of others but in alliance. Within capitalism we buy into a feedback loop, and become trapped in our own fictionalized binaries acting out the same patterns of victimization, aggression, destruction, retaliation and survival. My work doesn’t break this cycle, but claims a space inside it for pleasure and the hope of new possibilities. Formalism and sculpture are tools I use to explore autobiographical themes and continuously question the complicated role our environment and commodities play in collective identity.
Bibliography.


Image List.

1. **Ezra**  
   Mixed Media Installation, Variable Dimensions

2. **Tuck**  
   Exhaust pipe, Paracord, Foam, Felt, Grommets, Foam rubber, Celluclay,  
   Variable Dimensions

3. **Thump**  
   Exhaust pipe, Paracord, Foam, Felt, Grommets, Foam rubber, Celluclay, Belt,  
   Variable Dimensions

4. **Klang**  
   Foam, Lead, Aluminum on Lead Shelf  
   Size 9

5. **Cloudburst**  
   Cast Foam, Foam, Fruit Foam, Nylon, Webbing, Felt, Eyelets on Lead Shelf  
   Size 9

6. **Hermes**  
   Cast Silicone, Silicone Sheet, Iridescent Film, Musical Steel, Nike Tongue  
   And Laces on Lead Shelf, Size 9

7. **Gladspec**  
   Foam, Silicone Tube, Ruck Sack, Grommets, Paracord, Cast Foam  
   On Lead Shelf, Size 9

8. **Club Foot**  
   Cast Lead, Foam rubber, Rubber, Grommets, Screws, Mesh, on Lead Shelf  
   Size 9

9. **Justin Cloud, Thesis Exhibition Installation View**

10. **Justin Cloud, Thesis Exhibition Installation View**
2.