

Flash Art

Ry Rocklen
Interview with Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer
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A native of Los Angeles, Ry Rocklen has studied at most of the art schools in the area, from CalArts to UCLA to USC, from which he graduated in 2006. His lyrical and often funny sculptures are some of the most exciting additions to the thriving scene of sculptural production in the city. Rocklen, 29, is participating in the current Whitney Biennial. I visited him at his LA studio.

Ry Rocklen: I have some brand new stuff up. This one is done. You should walk around it. It's one of my patented two-sided objects. I went out and found these rocks, like on abandoned lots and stuff. And then I stacked them and re-lit them with different color lights and gels and shot it with a 4 x 5 camera, printed it out at actual size and then I poured expanding liquid foam on the back...

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer: You laid the print face-down surrounded by a mold and then poured foam over the back?

RR: And then carved and coated it with this plaster finish.

SLG: It looks like there is a face in the middle of the rock pile.

RR: Yeah, there's a god-given face. I didn't necessarily realize there was a face until after.

SLG: Until you were lighting it?

RR: Until I got the print, the actual flat image, because when the rocks are in their three-dimensional form it doesn't look like a face. The emergence of the face is part of the flattening into two-dimensions.

SLG: It seems in keeping with most of your work – a central light-heartedness.

RR: Something that happens with all my work is that the objects I work with feel alive and animate. I wasn't trying to make the rocks look like the figure of a person, but that's what happened. I think I used to consciously try to animate things. I remember in my first year in grad school at USC I even added eyes onto an assemblage sculpture, where I had placed a head-like beach ball on top of a curved piece of paper that looked a cape, and Lari Pittman pointed out that the eyes detracted and made the piece so literal. I was working then with deliberate assemblage of objects, fusing two or more different things into a new thing. And since then, especially as of my last solo show at Black Dragon Society in March 2007, I have become more interested in not combining things so much anymore. Now I am thinking more about skewing the object instead of synthesizing several objects. My new pieces are about taking a two-dimensional image and making it 3D. They are explicitly about aggrandizing the tiny margin and depth of so-called flat surfaces. I want to think about flat

surfaces as objects. And the newest pieces are kind of anomalous in relation to my other work because there are no found objects in the final piece.

SLG: In that way, the rock sculpture feels like something of a departure. Where it's not found objects, or even a found object that is then skewed, as you were saying, but the object deferred through representation into a flat image.

RR: But I feel like in a way when I got the flat print they were still objects... Even without found objects, this work still is rooted in a sense of the real. I guess with found objects what I really like is their patina of use, the aura of history embedded in the object and that history becomes part of the piece and integral to the piece. I think about that as the 'real life' of objects. This new work still has this relationship to the real, to history.

SLG: Doesn't the brightly saturated color of the rocks change the photographic relationship to the real in some way?

RR: You know, in a really lame way, those lights and colors are about desire. When I set out to light the rocks, I was like 'yes!' – I can use these gels and it was so instantly satisfying... I took it all the way. And I guess there is movie magic satisfaction embedded in that process. I hope there is poetry in there somewhere about Hollywood, cinematic desire, glamour... It's maybe unexpected to light a stack of rocks glamorously. There's a pun there: glam rock.

SLG: Yeah! The sculpture performs that pun. Looking at your stack of rocks, I also think of this Jewish custom of piling up small stones on graves or sites of remembrance. **RR:** Yeah, I am not surprised. What truly got me started on this piece is the stillness and ritual of stacking the stones. To take a moment and stack rocks you have to find balance. You really have to be present. The process is about meditative presence, like a prayer. Yeah, I hope it's not lost that these rocks were actually balanced on each other, as improbable as that looks.

SLG: There is an unassuming delicacy there.

RR: Yeah, my work is almost always a humbler undertaking. Very rarely do I ever make anything that I couldn't do by myself. So the biggest rock I used was the biggest rock I could lift myself. But that is not necessarily something I would stick to in the future. If I came up with an idea that I absolutely believed in that I needed an army to build, hopefully someday I could yield such a force.

SLG: Tell me about your work up now in the Whitney Biennial.

RR: Well, the works I did for the Whitney got me on this kick of giving depth to something flat. One of the pieces in the Whitney is called *Blue Moon*, made of all these pictures I found in the display window of the 99 Cents Store on Alvarado St. that had turned blue from sitting in the sun. I propped them up in this arc formation so that they stand up on their own, supported by cellulose on the back that keeps them together. I was thinking about how time is embedded in the object in that the pictures are aged by the sun, but at the same time, *Blue Moon* also ended up being about making something flat stand up. There is a formal dynamic that is generated by the two-dimensional image trying to stand up on its own. And, in order for that to happen, the image has to get warped, either literally in the curve of *Blue Moon*, or by exaggerated color with the rocks.

SLG: *Blue Moon* feels like a transition point between the work with found objects you are known for and your current interest in dealing with flatness, in that the found objects it uses

are simultaneously flat images.

RR: Right. It's a good bridge, but I also hope it stands on its own because when I bought the pictures, I felt like I found a treasure. The pictures came framed in these weird packs of three in protective cardboard casings, \$1.99 per set. You could buy them to hang in your home as art. They all have this strange reflective foil material...very spacey. But it's hard to find objects I want to work with. My selection process for what I pick up off the street is becoming more and more particular. Like, another piece in the Whitney is a bed piece, called *Refuge*, using a found mattress box spring, but there are so many mattresses lying around the city... choosing which one becomes important. I feel like my criteria for objects is becoming more refined.

SLG: This is true of all your pieces in the Whitney?

RR: Yes, my third piece in the Whitney – *Sunday Spire* – is made from a torn windsock I found in the street. I was super excited about finding it because it really fit the criteria that I have evolved which looks for something in the periphery of people's vision. You know, a windsock blowing in the wind is up on a pole, but you don't really look at it even though it's still kind of there, vibing. There's a sense of it being in the world for a long time, the wind flying through it. But I like also how a windsock is a magical thing, animated by the wind. It's seven-and-a-half feet tall. I stretched it over this huge tapered tube I tailor-made and suspended on a rack. I built an armature up onto the outside of the windsock and applied celluclay over it. Celluclay is like paper mache – it's paper ground into a pulp and I think mixed with some plaster and when you add water it turns into a thick material that sticks to things really well and also dries and shrivels in really peculiar ways, having a life of its own, an organic madness to it. I pressed sand into the celluclay. When I pulled out the tube, you could see through the tears and holes into the inside of the windsock, which is rainbow fabric. The whole piece has this janky feel, looking like bone in parts. There is sand missing from parts of the outside; I think it makes the material slightly more mysterious.

SLG: Like a damaged sand castle or ruin.

RR: This object in particular is really 'undead,' one of my most 'undead' sculptures. When I found it, the windsock was so tattered and so tired. And I brought it back.

SLG: Even the face-down vertical orientation conveys that.

RR: Like the wind of the underworld blowing up through it.

SLG: Do the three pieces in the Whitney – *Blue Moon*, the bed, and *Sunday Spire* – work as a group for you?

RR: I don't set out to make work that is narrative. Each object is independent.

SLG: You don't set up your pieces together as a diorama.

RR: Right, it's not a diorama, but it's nice that a narrative connection still happens between pieces. My works thrive on being around each other. I'm not a minimalist, so I do like that there is not only a formal relationship between the three pieces, but also a loose connective fantastical narrative about a mystical dreamer and moonbeams and these weird images. I feel a very strong relationship between the bed and *Blue Moon*, they have a similar scale, but the bed's almost flipped up on its side and that's *Blue Moon*. I'm not sure how *Sunday Spire* fits into the narrative – maybe it works as night and day, the morning after the dream. I think about a connection going from the bed to *Blue Moon* to *Sunday Spire*.