

Suggestions of Gravity

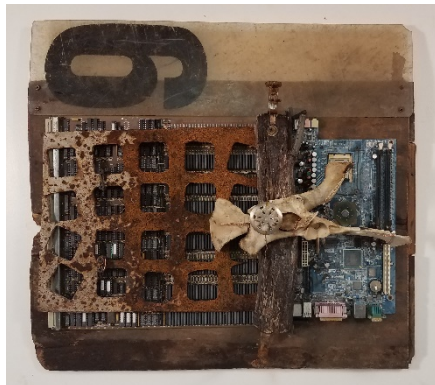
An exhibit of work by Doug DeWitt at Gallery Seven, Lockport, IL
Oct/Nov. 2020

Prior to a video interview with the gallery (<https://youtu.be/GF3PtJch4yQ>) I asked friends for questions regarding my work. Many of the questions were answered in the interview but in the interest of keeping the video brief many were left on the cutting room floor. Such is life. But all is not lost, and here I compile all the questions with my answers. Thank you for your questions and interest in my work.

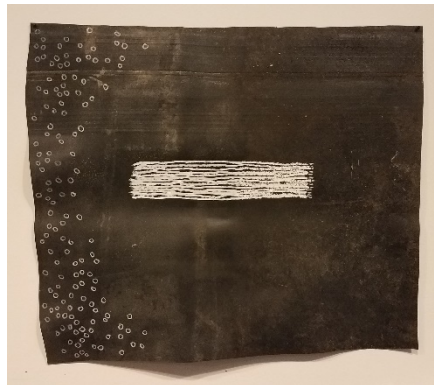
Q&A

Do you have an idea and then find objects to create it? Or do you get your ideas from the objects that you already have?

Most of the found object sculptures are created with no preconceived ideas. The drawings on rubber usually are made from an idea of the image(s). The "Route" drawings are abstract depictions of actual routes that I drive for my job as a restoration ecologist.



Across the Meridian



Data Set



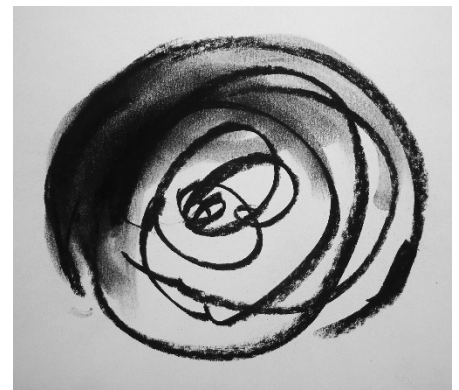
Route

Why rope?

I've been connecting and wrapping objects with string, wire and rope for years. I like the appearance and concept of the line that connects things, and the way the "bundle" of wrapped rope looks. My recent "tangle eye" drawings resemble two-dimensional depictions of string dropped on a surface. These might be some sort of self-portrait of bound, creative energy.



Rope Tree Wrap



Tangle Eye

When did you start working on natural sculptures? Did growing up by a creek and close to wooded areas influence your work?

As a kid in Ohio I spent many hours in the creek by my home. I also explored the buildings and rural landscape of my grandparent's farm. Both of those environments were a huge aesthetic

influence for me. I didn't start making sculptures until I was in graduate school, during which time I grew to realize that the objects I collected to draw and paint from were more interesting to me in and of themselves-- more so than any drawing or painting I could create. I gradually added physical objects into my two-dimensional work until I eventually abandoned drawing and painting altogether and, after 30 years, have only recently returned to two-dimensional work.

Are you ok with the viewer not seeing your specific vision or idea in your work?

Mostly, yes. One of my friends once told me that he tries to understand the messages of my work he just can't see them. I told him not to try so hard. Just look at the work. Like it, don't like it, think about it, or not. I don't make most of it with overt conceptual purpose that someone is supposed to "get". The work is more intuitive than that, and my own conceptual foundation for making it isn't intended to dominate the visual interaction. In fact, I'd rather that the work causes one to wonder rather than to know.

What is your favorite question asked by people viewing your art?

I like any thoughtful question that indicates that the viewer is actually looking at the work and wondering about it.

What is your least favorite question?

"How long did it take to do that?" The answer is irrelevant to me. I can make something in minutes that is the product of 30+ years of thinking about what I make and why I make it.



Deep
Sleep

Are you formally trained in art?

I have a BFA in Graphic Design from Bowling Green State University and an MA in Studio Arts from Illinois State University.

Do you challenge yourself to make art out of things you find, or do you get the inspiration when you see them initially?

Mostly the inspiration comes from the materials themselves. When it's most successful I feel like I'm just there to help the work make itself.



Events of Doubtful Outcome

What is it that influences the inspiration for your unique ideas?

With the found object work the objects themselves provide the inspiration as I combine the materials. As for the drawings on rubber, the first one I made was one I dreamt about-- a very rare occurrence for me. The other drawings and the land art works develop out of visual ideas that pop into my head, often without any particular reason that I'm aware of. Most of those inspirational ideas change as I make the work.

What were your previous studies? What brought you to these pieces?

I informally explored nature, decay, texture and structure in the landscapes of my childhood, studied art and design in college and graduate school, and learned much from the scientists and exhibit developers at the Field Museum and Shedd Aquarium where I was an exhibit designer. My current ecological career continues to inform my artwork.

I'd like to know if you ever go through "dry" periods, where you just don't feel like your art is fulfilling you. What do you do then?

Oh boy. My torments seem to be the opposite of "dry" periods. Usually, all I need to do is show up in my studio and I make things. Even when I can't make things physically (like when I'm driving or otherwise away from my studio) I do so in my head. I can't even clean up my studio because within minutes I start making sculptures.



Tangle Eye



Little Tornado

But dry periods and feelings of unfulfillment are two different things for me. My most challenging times with my art have been more as a resentment of the compulsion to keep making things, even though I enjoy the process of being creative in and of itself when it's going smoothly. Recently my artwork has been changing and I didn't recognize what was happening. That frustration resulted in the first drawings on rubber, the "tangle-eye" drawings (some of which are shown on my website) and some of the more intense rope wrapping works-- in particular, the rope sculptures that resemble cocoons. The rope sculptures were not made with the intention of being cocoons, but that's the form they took naturally. It wasn't until I'd made many of them that I realized what seems so obvious now: a cocoon is a symbol for change... metamorphosis. If I'd set out to make "*Symbols of Change*" and settled on making "*Cocoons*" I would have discarded the whole idea as ridiculously cliché. But the way they came into being was not purposeful. This is why I mentioned (in answer to another question) that these rope sculptures may be self-portraits.

Regarding the drawings on rubber, I was dismissive of them at first. They seemed too simple in execution and subject matter. But with each one I made I began to realize the depth of what they represent which is ancient, archetypal symbols, energy and mark-making that have survived through generations. I made the first of these drawings after it appeared to me in a dream. An archetypal image appeared to me in a dream. How could I dismiss that?

The work is still changing but has "broken through" to the point where now I'm making abstract two-dimensional work to complement my ongoing found object sculpture and land art.

During dry periods and times of change the challenge is to be gentle on yourself as you work through it, something which I have found difficult.

Where do you find most of your items?

I find things when walking around outside for my job, garage (and similar) sales, construction sites and dumpsters. I find interesting things almost everywhere.



I Did Not Know Marissa (detail)



This Is Not a Garden

Do you have a favorite?

From this show I have more than one favorite. "In Dreaming", the "Situations", the drawing on rubber called "A Clearly Defined Season" and the rope sculpture called "Tipping Points", because I love how the two objects interact.



In Dreaming



Situations



A Clearly Defined Season



Tipping Points (detail)

Talk about those hanging sculpture pieces that look like pods!

See above for more info. Those are made entirely of rope wrapped around itself. The pod-like form is inherent to the way the rope curls from its own weight as I make them. When finished I dip them in shellac, which hardens and prevents the rope from unwinding. I use shellac because, although the fumes are quite toxic, it is a natural substance. In fact, it's made by an insect, which adds unintended, self-referential content to them.



Premonition

Is there anything that you have found while looking for materials which was either too disgusting to use or just too perfected by nature that you just could not bring yourself to use or disturb?

Yes, indeed. Years ago my dad and I were walking around my grandparents property (back 'the creek) and we found the whole skeleton of a deer in the tall grasses. Usually a dead animal is either all bones and scattered around the area or is in a gross and gooey state of decay. This one was still all connected but was well decayed-- just bones. I was almost overwhelmed by wanting to collect it, so I picked it up and walked about 20 steps with it when I realized I was carrying the body of something the size of a human. I put it down under a tree and my dad and I continued on our way without it.

Have you ever come across something that was just too remote or out of reach that still to this day you kick yourself for not picking up?

Yes. On a construction site I found a rusty, dented chunk of metal that was the size of a reclining elephant. I took photos of it and spent a few weeks wondering if I could haul it to my house somehow, but before I'd worked out the logistics it disappeared. Whew.

Your mark making is very minimal, even in the rubber drawings. Very elemental. Do you battle with yourself to keep your "handwriting" from overshadowing the nature of the found objects?

Yes I do. I don't obsess about it but I'm interested in making things that look like they exist for some reason other than that I made them. I'd prefer they look accidental, or like they are the result of processes and situations that have nothing to do with me—a combination of randomness

and deliberate decisions. However, I also love the line that my hand draws, and some of the other autobiographical components that can be found in the work.

If you could own an artwork by any artist from the 19th, 20th, or 21st c. that is not a personal friend, and money is no object, which artist would you pick?... and does this artist's work relate to your own? If so how?

I've given this some thought and have no single answer. I'm inspired by the work of many artists but haven't settled on just one that would answer this question. Candidates include, in no particular order, Rauschenberg (a combine), Joseph Cornell (a box of treasure), Motherwell, Smithson (mirror displacements), Van Gogh (sunflowers), Diebenkorn, Chamberlain's crushed car balls, and others. What I really want is the Venus of Willendorf or a chunk of a cave painting, but those are older than what was asked in the question.



Route

I wonder how you assemble your found objects into an assemblage that represents a native prairie?

With the found objects I do so in the abstract. The objects are *from* the landscape, not depictions *of* the landscape, and as such I could argue that the work is more *realistic* of a place than is an illusionistic representation of a particular scene. As for the land art prairie restoration work, the acts and processes of ecological restoration are simultaneously works of art for me-- painting, drawing, additive and subtractive sculpture, performance, happenings, concept, process, etc.-- natural processes manipulated by me.



Thicket



Portrait of the Artist with a Drip Torch



Just a Dream #2

Is your work always personal or does it always have a message in it?

It's always personal and always suggests a message, but rarely do I want that message to be obvious. I don't want to dictate what you are supposed to see in my work. I make it for myself using objects and symbols that suggest relationships and conditions that I hope will make you consider what meaning there may be.

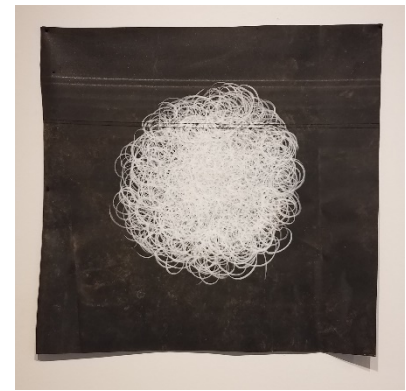
Explain the title of the exhibit.

"Suggestions of Gravity" is a direct reference to the Earth and the invisible forces that hold it all together (not just gravity). Also, synonyms for "gravity" include "serious", "important", "profound" and "consequential". I don't know if my work is any of those to the viewer,

but I want to suggest the possibility that I'm referring to things much larger than the works themselves. This is also true of the titles of individual pieces.

The fusion of Nature and Culture and/or where the boundaries exist between the two are a raw subject matter chased by many disciplines. The primary or general direction of art during the last 100 years or so has included some experiments like yours but not many. Your work appears to me to tinker with visualizations of genesis (birth or emergence) evolutions (change and/or metamorphosis) and death (decay and resolution) I am curious what was your inspiration in the beginning and what you've gained along the way that have pushed you to investigate things further.

I like your interpretation very much. I especially like your word "tinker" because these are weighty subjects and I don't want them to overwhelm the sense that I'm just playing around with materials and nature as if I were a child catching crawdads in a creek. The ideas of emergence, metamorphosis and decay have informed my work from the beginning. Besides nature itself-- and old farm equipment-- perhaps the most profound early influence on my work is the movie *The Planet of the Apes* which I saw as a young child. The realization at the end of that movie is still awe-inspiring to me. My early works may have been more whimsical or playful, as noted below by another friend, but for some reason in the past 5 years I've felt an urgency to make my art like I've never felt before. When younger I thought I'd be immune from a mid-life crisis as long as I knew myself and what I was doing. I've learned that mid-life *itself* can be the cause of a mid-life crisis even if all else is well, and this may be at least one of the reasons for the sense of urgency.



Primordial Element



Continuum Anomaly

First, -"why"- you make choices in your art. Is there a meaning to an individual aspect or is a preference for certain aspects or techniques? Second, what are the boundary's shaping your art? This might be color or materials.

I try to make my work intuitively. In truth, I have to let intuition in while also making choices along the way in order to find out what the work wants to be. It's a dialog. I have trouble making abstract drawings completely intuitively, which is why I used maps of my daily journeys as a starting point for the Routes series. There are meanings to many, but not all of the materials and images I use, or at least I want to imply there are such meanings. As for boundaries, I like to think I don't set any, but that's not the case. I almost always try to juxtapose various kinds of decayed natural and manufactured objects together in the sculptures. Color is not high on my list of things I typically think about.

Why not color?

Color confuses and overly dominates my thought process when I deliberately use it in my work. I'm slightly colorblind. It's minor, but enough to cause me doubt in what I see. I studied color theory in graduate school so I could better understand it, but that knowledge doesn't help me to actually see color. Textures, shapes and patterns are as important and interesting to me as color may be to others because I don't doubt them. Besides, browns and grays are colors too.



Life Cycle

Consistently, your work invokes Darwinian wondering of our own fragile existence... I've always appreciated your expressions, both transient and yet hopeful. However, I'm sensing more controlled tension in your recent works... Somewhat morbid even... You are obviously older and matured, since I last saw you... Having children and the family life, fundamentally changes you and me... And of course, we live in very tense times... So, I ask you, how do you reconcile your reality and your dreams? Do you fight or 'amor fati' (love one's fate)?

You do, indeed, see what I see. I would say I fight, hopefully with the acceptance that I can't control everything. I believe many aspects of our fate are not predetermined and that every moment can be altered by our actions and decisions and by those of others. I have felt this illustrated to me as I make my artwork and I try to apply it to my daily life. I need to be present, open and responsive to what is happening but not overly controlling. An example is the Route series, based on maps of my daily work routes. I make a plan for the day but things happen that are outside my control and I react to them. The map is important but doesn't guarantee anything. Ultimately, I'm able to do what I need to do, but often not according to plan. The drawings are not the maps they're based on. They're more like the reality.



Route

I just realized that I didn't respond properly... I didn't mean you should or not rely on your fate... Of course you should seek your destiny in your own terms... I just thought that your poetic expressions through nature in the past were quite innocent and serendipitous... As I watched the film of Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson the other day, let me ponder about the vastness of our universe and the awesome power of nature... Imagine the sculpture built of mud, salt crystals, and basalt rocks can be seen and sometimes submerged depending on the water level is just dazzling... So, my assumption on amor fati was not that one should abandon oneself to fate but rather to appreciate and embrace the unknowable, leaving it to chance, discovering the truth and meaning through the divine cosmos, beyond our banalities. Perhaps, my question should have been, what is your quest in your expressions, since you're older and more experienced... How are you articulating your profound insight? Proverbially, what's your beef on your worldview?

What is my quest, how am I articulating it, and what's my worldview? Largely, those questions are the reason I make art, I suppose. Art is a way to explore potential answers to those questions. The awesome power of nature, the balance of destiny and choice, the vastness of the universe, embracing the unknowable.... I'm talking about the same stuff I've always wanted to talk about-- finding balance, beauty and harmony between humans and the rest of nature, made visible through the decay of manufactured materials as they're reabsorbed by nature, physically and metaphorically. I think so much is hidden, but just barely so, and if I let myself, I get a glimpse now and then. But if I try too hard, I can't see past myself.



Situation