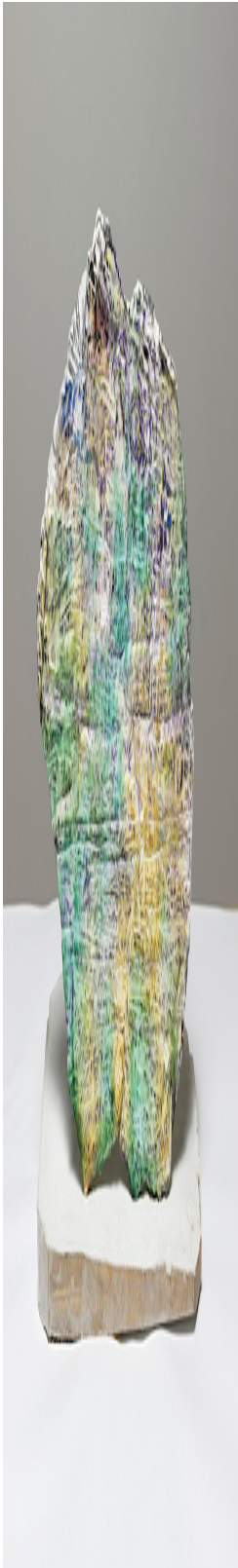
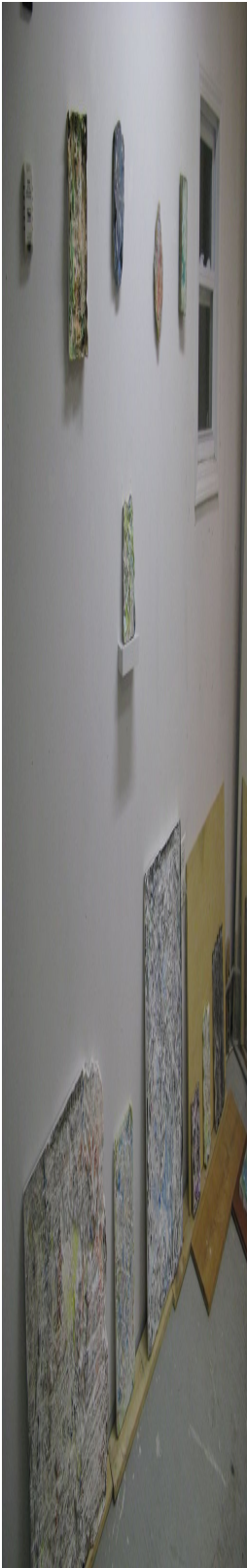


HUNTED
PROJECTS

Scott Wolniak



**The
Ratio of
Effort to
Effect**
1 minute 15
seconds,
2010

**Square Vs
Rectangle**

HUNTED PROJECTS presents Chicago based artist Scott Wolniak.

Scott is currently a tutor within the Visual Arts department of the University of Chicago, where his multi disciplinary practice expands upon the realms of installation, painting, sculpture and video. With references to both destruction and humor, his past experience of being an art handler shines through with sculptural and painterly works that suggest the purposeful mishandling of materials. This being made particularly clear through his video work *The Ratio of Effort to Effect* (2010), which in a tongue in cheek manner, explores the ever so common mishandling of art work, done in a manner that hints at Wolniak's appreciation of the absurdist comedy of Steve Martin. In all, Wolniak's rounded practice explores the cockamamie, poking fun through the purposeful use of humble materials, whilst simultaneously rationalising conscious bad craftsmanship as a by product of expressionism.

Can you tell HUNTED PROJECTS about yourself and your creative background?

SW: I am a multidisciplinary artist based in Chicago. I studied Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and did my MFA in Studio Art at the University of Illinois at Chicago. After finishing my BFA in 1995 I spent five years working as a truck driving art handler, which introduced me to important social and logistical aspects of the art world. I opened an alternative exhibition space in my garage called Sutable Gallery in '99, which was in operation for 5 years. It was a positive experience; we did many great shows with great artists. My studio is now in this same finished and heated garage that used to be Sutable. After completing my MFA in 2002, I began part time teaching at SAIC and, in 2007, began my current full time teaching appointment in the Department of Visual Art at the University of Chicago. Teaching is a really important part of my practice and helps me to constantly reconsider my relationship to visual art.

When did your interest within the arts begin?

SW: As a kid, art was a natural form of entertainment and escape. It was always frustrating but endlessly engaging... same as now. I shield away from formal instruction and traditional techniques in favor of cartoons, material experiments and made-up imagery. I used to steal techniques and styles from classmates in elementary school. Some of my early influences were Shel Silverstein, B. Kliban and LeRoy Nieman. As a teenager I was nourished by music and record cover art. I also loved comedy, especially ridiculous, physical stuff like early Steve Martin. I decided to go to art school because nothing else really made sense... and I liked the idea of making a life doing what I was already doing anyway. I knew nothing of art history before I began school at SAIC. My 1st life-changing encounter with Art was the work of the Abstract Expressionists. I spent hours looking at DeKooning's *Excavation* at the Art Institute.

Can you discuss your day-to-day creative process?

SW: My studio is in my backyard. Convenience is really important to me because I like being able go to my studio any time, for any length of time, even if just to glance at something. I am in my studio every day, so the work is a constant. I have a hectic daily routine, which has required me to compartmentalize in order to sustain my practice. Nights have always been a haven of

undisturbed studio time for me. Ideas come from everywhere. My work typically involves combinations of everyday life and abstract systems, explored through labor-intensive processes with humble materials. I tend to work on several things at once, shifting between conceptual projects that are primarily about planning and process-based pieces that are heavy on labor. My labor-intensive projects are probably the most enjoyable. I like to see things accumulate and transform over time. I can drop into the studio for 15 minutes or 5 hours; either is productive since it is always moving toward the same end point. As with meditation or exercise, small efforts conducted with great regularity do add up.

I listen to tons of music while working, as inspiration and background noise. I often smoke marijuana in order to trick myself perceptually.

Do you tend to only use materials that you are comfortable with, or are you interested to explore what a new material may offer?

SW: For a while I seemed to be constantly trying new materials, to figure out what would best serve an idea. Whatever the idea called for, or what material might work best for a desired effect, or conceptual relationship, I would try to learn how to use. I still do that sometimes but I have developed enough of a back catalog that I tend to sample from things I already know. I feel that the ideas that brought me to particular techniques and materials are embedded in those methods.

Due to working on several projects or works at once, do you find it difficult to correctly balance your concentration and time so works are completed to a quality that satisfies you?

SW: There's just never enough time to make all the work that I want to make, but if a project is worth doing, it will get done. The fact that I often have two or three things going at once is just a strategy for providing variety in the studio. I can toil at something for weeks and, if I hit a wall with it, I can step across the studio and do something else for a night or a few days. It really just comes down to pacing. Usually there will be one project that emerges as most pressing, either because I'm excited about it or if there's a deadline. In the best cases though, works feed one another- through technical or conceptual cross-pollination, or just some energy relationship.

In which formats do you document the development stages of your projects?

SW: I shoot iPhone pics through the making of any piece. I find that the distancing I get from a picture, even if only viewed small, on my phone, can give me useful perspective on a piece... like what it might look like to someone else or from across a large room. It's also just nice to see the history of a piece. When work is done, I shoot it with high res digital camera, and once a year, or at shows, I like to hire a photographer to get professional documentation.

Both destruction and humor are evident traits within your work, and portrayed clearly within your filmed performance work The Ratio of Effort to Effect. The performance shows the purposeful mishandling of an over sized canvas being forced into the smaller scaled doorway of Green Gallery, Milwaukee. I am interested; to what extent does this performance both comment upon and reflect your approach to creating your work?

SW: That piece was an idea that I thought about for a long time and finally was able to make. It is based on life experience as a former art handler, as well as my long-standing interests in both physical comedy and visceral art process. It does comment on impatience and wrong techniques, which have been formative to my studio work. These tendencies have contributed to the tone of my art over the years. For example, I would often jump into a project without the correct tools or much of a plan in place. I have rationalized poor craftsmanship as connected to expressionism and do-it-yourself ethics. As I got older and gained perspective on my process, I began to transform my bad habits into more conceptually layered, self-aware strategies. I realize that impulsiveness and mistakes can make for bad art, but can also allow for happy accidents and interesting instability. I am always interested in aesthetics that seem bad or wrong at first, but then reveal themselves to be perfect on its own terms.

Are you conscious of the intricacies in your work that may lead to an interpretation of your work as being poorly crafted, for this would in your judgment, categorize your works as being expressionistic?

SW: Intricacy is something I desire in my work, on a formal level. It is through this that I think a deeper experience can happen for a viewer. But personally, I can be obstructed from having a real experience with an artwork by an over-powering artistic hand. I have struggled to locate a means for achieving visual intricacy that doesn't rely on my own hand in a heavily stylistic way. I try to deploy poor craftsmanship through intentionally spastic or automatic techniques so that my "style" is minimized and compositional complexity exists in layers of semi-accidental relationships.

There is a dichotomy between planned destruction and accidental damage; where between these points do you feel most comfortable in regards to the possibility of an unpremeditated outcome? For you, is there much leniency between control and chance?

SW: There is a lot of slippage between control and chance for me, and I think that they depend on one another to a great extent. An ebb and flow between brash acts of disruption and my responses to the effects of those actions forms the crux of my process. My process is essentially one of action and reaction, like I am always cleaning up my own messes. I try to operate impulsively and automatically in order to achieve the greatest formal energy, and to create phenomenal foundations to build upon. Artwork that is contrived always seems dead or just boring to me. Yet I can obsess endlessly over a piece, to the point of total naval-gazing. I try to disrupt my own obsessiveness by literally breaking things, or building obstructions directly into my process. John Cage's theory of indeterminacy has been influential. Chance is a catalyst for formal transformation. It makes a thing real, even if the underlying situation is artificial.

This sense of destruction, and constant re-working of a work, suggests a control mechanism that some could consider as being a contrived process of working as it could eradicate the potential for spontaneity. Do you consider your conscious self-reactionary approach to an unsatisfactory result as being the most productive process of working? What do you find are the main dangers of working in this way?

SW: I come to points with every piece where I think, "This could be done NOW... if I were a different artist, this would be done." There is a danger in going too far because I risk losing the work- literally just working it to death. This mode may have grown out of a combination of curiosity (wondering what might happen if I try...), impulsiveness and intense self-consciousness about the work. But ultimately I think that taking these chances, over and over again, is what pushes the pieces to surprising places, while also alluding to philosophical and political concerns that weigh on me all the time, such as sustainability, breaking points, decay, etc. but which I would never want to address directly in my work.

Square vs Rectangle is an interesting work of yours that again explores the destruction of a canvas work. The oversized canvas is presented as sitting destroyed through itself being forced into a space too small for its scale. I am particularly interested in how this particular work would continue to exist once out of the space? Do you consider the canvas work as disposable?

SW: This piece essentially exists as a photograph. It is actually not oversized, but rather a site-specific work for the John Riepenhoff Experience- a miniature exhibition space that is installed at Pepin-Moore Gallery in LA. John (who also runs the Green Gallery in Milwaukee, where the Ratio video was shot) curates artists and projects into the space, not as a model, but as a small-but-real gallery, where work is presented. So the Square vs Rectangle painting is only 20 x 20". I forced it into the space the same way I would have done in an actual gallery. The forced entry created the piece. I did it again at New Capital in Chicago. In the video, as well as these two recent performance-installations, it is all about the gesture, which is also a joke. The paintings are basically props and discarded or stripped for materials afterwards.

The backstory of these performance-works is based on the series of broken and warped canvases that I presented at 65Grand Gallery, Chicago, in early 2010. I returned to painting after 10 years (of not making paintings) with that series. I was interested in heroic and romantic clichés of studio art... like when a painter pushes a work too far and ruins it, or becomes frustrated and smashes a piece on the floor. This began as a satirical metaphor for wrestling with materials, but I found myself genuinely engaged in these exact formal problems. They transcended the idea and really surprised me.

I would begin by building a canvas then smashing it- breaking the stretcher bars with acts of mock aggression. The damage would happen quickly, producing a mangled canvas to respond to. I would then stabilize the canvas, crafting a warped embodiment of transformation and trauma. The canvases are always white so as to represent formal content in relation to external forces. Objects are attached or embedded to suggest narratives of impact, violence or decay. The Ratio of Effort to Effect video and subsequent performances furthered the idea of narrative, chance and the symbolic gesture by enacting it in relation to the gallery.

Your work crosses many mediums: drawing & painting, sculpture and video. I am intrigued as to where you most naturally position yourself as an artist due to the diversity of styles and materials explored within your oeuvre?

SW: I have always considered my practice to be exploratory and project oriented. I often think about context and what kind of work makes sense for particular spaces. As a grad student at UIC, I became interested in conceptual art and video and started developing work based on ideas rather than personal style. This was hugely important for me in regard to expanding the framework of my practice and connecting studio art with history and real life. I love process and labor, but without a conceptual framework, work can easily become arbitrary, self-indulgent or purely aesthetic. I am at a point now where I have a number of ways of engaging with the world and with my art practice, and a good deal of cross pollination occurs therein. One project or material discovery always leads to another. I might try something for a project that never goes anywhere, only to revisit it years later in a new context. I feel that there is a philosophical sensibility that runs through all of my work, but I do worry a bit that others might not see the thread of continuity, instead seeing my work as restless or capricious. I am slowing down recently and going deeper into projects. I love labor, but the work must also be critical, funny or strange. I am happiest when the structure of a project has been established and I can simply spend my time working on it.

Can you discuss the artworks that you are currently working on in your studio?

SW: I am currently working on series a carved plaster tablet-paintings and a series of intricate graphite drawings. The tablets have been really exciting and feel like I am breaking new ground. They are directly connected to a progression of previous projects and experiments. In 2010 I began making cast plaster simulacra of found objects like bricks, rocks, sticks and nuts. The models were low, worthless things that appealed to me because of their degraded condition... material evidence of time and natural forces. Through mold-making, plaster casting, carving and painting, I would replicate these things as closely as possible to the original. This was to memorialize them, but also because I thought it was interesting and absurd to laboriously remake a worthless thing.

Through this process, my interest shifted to the material potential of plaster, carving and staining. The techniques that had served my goal of realism were redirected in order to generate painterly effects and optical spaces. Plaster tablets are cast from found, ready-made molds like cardboard boxes or old desk-drawers, then stained with ink and watercolor, etched and carved with hand tools. Drawing methods are utilized as a process of removal, excavating line from stratified colors within the material slab. I have always been suspicious of surface. This technique allows for composition and pictorial space to be revealed within the body of the painting. The pieces are made quickly and organically, with chance operations accumulating in a dense material. These are essentially solid-state paintings.

The new drawings are like a reaction to the speed and fragility of the tablet paintings. They take forever and provide me with a meditative focus as I build etherial space over time with simple drawing tools. I had made work in this vein a number of years ago but moved away from it due to the painstaking labor. But the presence of drawing-like qualities in the plaster tablets led me back to this method. They are loosely based on photographic images taken by me, that convey a sense of contemplative space. Imagery in these drawings has includes a field of blowing grass, an ash pit, the sun and a blank sky through a dirty window. I have not yet decided if the drawings can or should be shown with the plaster works, or if they are just too different.

When I look at these tablet works, they remind me of vandalized walls within abandoned warehouses where the wall-based graffiti has been scratched away. Were you considering plaster as a susceptible interior building material that is prone to wear-and-tear?


SW: I do like that association and I have thought the same thing with certain pieces. I always enjoy discovering artifacts in the world or in my building that reveal layers of time or some site-specific history. There is a visceral, formal connection to degradation in urban environments that is apparent in architectural surfaces and infrastructure, and because it is so immersive, it affects our psychology. I have always been inspired by this stuff- I connect with it on a romantic “beautiful decay” level, but also in a deep philosophical way, as an embodiment of time. When a thing has served its purpose and is at the end of the line of use value in human terms, it shifts into ephemerality and pure aesthetics. The precarious balance between the concrete and the ephemeral is very interesting to me; it is what I try to mine in the tablet works. I originally selected plaster because it’s cheap and versatile, and was the right material for casting the found objects that I mentioned earlier. Plaster forms a solid body that can be stained and carved, creating beautiful and unexpected relationships between positive and negative, surface and interior. The tablets seem to identify with walls, “the cosmos” and geologic spaces, depending on how color has been applied and the different ways that my carving reveals the hidden interior.

Can you tell HUNTED PROJECTS what you have planned for 2013?

SW: 2012 was a very busy year with solo shows in Chicago, Portland OR and Raleigh NC, group shows and curatorial projects. I was constantly working toward deadlines. The new work is shaping up nicely and I am quite excited about it. At the moment, I have no idea where or when my next show will be. I have been inviting people over for regular studio visits.

Scott Wolniak (<http://scottwolniak.com>)

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