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Interview with Ryan Taber

Ryan Taber is a Los Angeles-based artist whose sculptural installations, drawings and photographs combine a research and studio intensive practice that involves piecing together elements of landscape and history to reveal how both have been understood and appropriated by schools of thought and individuals with grand designs.

After two solo shows at the Mark Moore Gallery in Santa Monica, 'Transient Concretions' and 'A Rhetoric of Ills; The Ekologie of Ornament at the Causatum of Stillness', Taber has gone out into the 'field' to climb rocks and reconsider his own studio practice. His time outside has developed into a new project that presently exists as a living archive that documents the boulders geologic features that are actually used by rock climbers.

On a Sunday in early December, I was able to sit down with Ryan to discuss his work; past, present and future. The following interview was conducted by a series of electronic correspondences in December 2007.

-Nancy Lupo

Q: To begin with, I would like to ask you to talk about your interest in and practice of rock climbing?

RT: Sure. It's really neat as an experience, both socially and corporeally. It's also ethically complicated and problematic, both in its historicization and as a practice, which makes it interesting to me. But most importantly, it forces me as a practitioner to consider notions of aesthetics, ecology, and economy every day through a form that I always enjoy.

About a year and a half ago I got really sick from art related, but self-imposed stress, as well as exposure to chemicals during fabrication processes. As I started to recover, I decided to focus on trying to build a better life style and to find a healthier methodology for art making. Pretty soon I started climbing with the intention of balancing out my life and spending more time outside (the studio).

I'd been reading about the ways that 19th-century leisure-travel and romantic literature had informed early earth science, geology and fossilism. These disciplines, had in turn, been implemented by proponents of romantic nationalism in America and Europe as a means for establishing a provincial economic superiority based on natural resource.

At first I thought of climbing as an activity that would inform this research and what ever project that it lead to. I started traveling to different geographic regions where the types of rock and styles of climbing varied. The more time I spent outside, the more I became aware of the idiosyncrasies of the ideological, historic and economic positions that the practice, sport and community actuate. This led to the consideration of climbing as both an analogue for how I would like my work to function, and a discipline whose language could be employed as one formal element in the current project.

It also became a means for a very personal reconsideration of the relationship between the goals driving my practice and the content I've been interested in through the romanticized history of climbing as one of the oldest articulations of drop-out culture.

Q: How do you understand rock climbing in relation to your artistic practice? Is it a way for you to carry out 'field studies' in the way that the Romantic painters did plein-air paintings? Is it leisure? How does rock climbing inform your latest project?

RT: To some degree it functions similarly to other hobbyist languages I've appropriated in past projects like model making, suiseki, coleoptera etc... A similarity between all of them is the desire to collect/control and the appreciation of natural forms. The difference in this project is that climbing is helping me to reconsider my relationship to my practice as a whole. I thought of prior subjects as instances that reinforced some sort of praxis.

In regards to the field study question, I'd say there's definitely a reference to the history of landscape painting methodologies. The process that went into producing these images of The United States of America is thick. Its historical details are fascinating to me as metaphor, but also through their synchronic tie to the scientific specificities of flora, fauna, latitudinal light, and atmospheric conditions that facilitated the Romantics construction of a sublime narrative.

Since I started climbing, I've always taken my camera with me, obsessively shooting and cataloging the boulders and the geologic features used by climbers. These are becoming a sort of archive reminiscent of the early rock records of natural philosophy.

I guess all of this has informed the current project. Right now I've been working with a number of collaborators, most frequently artist and friend Ryan O'Toole, to establish climbing routes around Los Angeles. This has saved quite a bit on gas and slightly reduced the amount of damage I've contributed to the local rock spots. These new routes use features in deteriorating architecture, to create set lines. Some are bolted with climbing hardware for protection. Others are free climbs more similar to Bouldering problems that leave only chalk graffiti. Right now I've been focused on the faux rock walls that line the 110 at the Hill street exit.

In the studio I've been working on drawings and concept sketches for future

sculptures that incorporate intricately fabricated models of geologic features, including fossilized forms, with strata composed of recovered material from LA's downtown arts district. So far these are mostly just drawings and discrete piles of stuff on the floor...

Q: What is your understanding of the school of romantic landscape painting? Where does this historically begin and end? How has this understanding shaped your own work in regards to the landscape both real, academic and re-imagined?

RT: I got interested in Romantic landscape painting because I was curious about different movements in art history whose formal language engaged the viewer through an invitation to enter a perceived space, similarly to the phenomenology of minimalist objects. My understanding of this school is based in the pedagogical, political and economic relationships between the work of the Scandinavian painters and the Romantics in Germany, England and the U.S.

I believe it was an essay by Torsten Gunnarsson where I first found documentation tracing the dissemination of specific formal attributes of perspective, composition, etc... through a pedagogical lineage from JC Dahl to Frederick Edmond Church. These formal techniques were being used to render paintings in various countries where each respective government championed them as a visual articulation of national identity. This notion of landscape actually moving through different territories, and being encoded by shifting contexts, was a model that demonstrated something valuable when considering the history of the interdependence of aesthetics and economy (resource). I've looked at western works from 15th century Italy through the 20th century in the United States, from the romantic and the sublime to the picturesque and the folly. (Right now I'm really into the follies!)

In a very general sense this history has added to my understanding of the mutable factors that triangulate an individual's perception of self, their subscription to an ideology and the relationship to the territory or geographic region they inhabit or that is associated with their affiliated society. It's always interesting to me to hear the difference in tone when friends from New York and Los Angeles respectively talk about where they're from. There's a sense of place that's coded by so much more than geographic position.

Q: What are the social and political implications of scale that you have dealt with especially in some of your earlier works?

RT: Well, I guess there's always an inherent empowerment associated with the viewing of anything scaled down. There's a position of omnipresence or control, which is indicative of the essentialization associated with the logistics in the scaling down process. In other words, within miniaturization, decisions are made based on what is essential to retain. In terms of using scale languages of representation to render landscape, I'm primarily interested in foregrounding the history of a national agency that's built through pictorial naturalization. There's also the potential for the production of a model to suggest both future potential and commemoration of the past making their content temporally uncertain, and

inviting observers to implicate themselves by projecting both time and place into these tiny environments.

So, if there is a political implication in the work, it would be the attempt to provide some sort of shaky platform to watch the show from.

Q: When we met, you said that you were going to try to stay away from making three-dimensional objects for a time. When you said this, it reminded me of a fantasy that I have always had, a fantasy most succinctly put by the Italian architecture collective, Superstudio, that is 'A World Without Objects'. What is your relationship to three-dimensional objects? What is your rationale for ebbing away from three-dimensional objects? Should anyone really hold you to it?

RT: Yeah, I guess I asked for this one... I'm glad you brought up Superstudio. I definitely feel a connection between their position and many of my concerns, including: my work, gas mileage and what choices I have at Whole Foods for trail mix. (Cranberry Cashew Medley across the entire Muir Trail.) I only started looking at the firm about a year ago and got interested in their short run, disbanding and subsequent practices. It's nice to think about the collections their work informs -- knowing that they could live, in theory, without art.

Over the last year I've struggled quite a bit with understanding how fabrication functions in my practice. I went to high school in New Hampshire and have since realized a deep appreciation for the Shakers. For a long time I felt a real joy in making, in labor. At some point however I realized that I was putting hands to work and heart to... Hmm... I decided I'd better figure out exactly how fabrication correlated with my relationship to the historiographic content that I seemed to be interested in. I wanted to feel that this process was more than just my version of the compensatory hobbyist practices the work referenced, even if it isn't. So since then I've been making photographs and some drawings that were considering this climbing project, materiality, resource and consumption as I mentioned above.

In regards to making three dimensional objects, I've been feeling a bit better about the use of the "recycled" materials, but I'm still focused on figuring out the exact form this project will need to take so that I can be sure the labor will be enjoyable. Also, climbing has helped me to re-energize my interest in making objects. Ironically I turned to it as an alternative means for investigating the corporeal relation to material that wouldn't rely on building new forms.

Q: How do you see your work positioned in the blur between art practice and research practice? What does creativity matter?

RT: Well, I'm definitely not an academic but I've also never been that drawn to the production or conceptualization of forms that find their strength in formal originality or unique aesthetic character. I think that my practice functions much more through my desire to see an artifact of a pastiche or a creative formal

structure that finds a new use for sections of other conceptual frame works. It just so happens that history and narrative have the most solid material, or propose the most complete corpus of any episteme through finite events and temporality. I guess this is why I usually reference historical individuals and events in a work as a way of initially engaging a viewer.

Q: How does the diagram of references that are built into your sculptures, like, say, Charpentier's Music Stand, 1901 with Haeckel's DiscoMeduse, 1904 and D'Annunzio's SVA 9, 1918 function? Are you an expert of Charpentier? Are we supposed to think so? What is Liptus? How's it to carve? What did happen in 1904? 1918?

RT: I'm not an expert in anything that I'm aware of, although I'm getting pretty good at Backgammon (probably the worlds' oldest living tables game) and cooking Ital Curry, a traditional Rastafarian dish. (It's Vegan.) I have been hit with some rigorous questions about some of the objects of my research. In most cases I've somehow had the answer, but this is certainly no credential and has always sort of surprised me. When I'm researching something, I do tend to manage a rather intense focus. At the very least, I reach the point where I feel like I'm expert enough to write the titles for my sculptures. (Although, sometimes I just make these with cut and paste commands using the INTL worldwide chat net.)

In the case you've sited above, we're looking at references that include Alexander Carpenter's vine-like art nouveau music stand, Ernst Haeckel's Illustration of a hydrozoa and Gabriel D'Annunzio's WWI biplane. These three artists are brought together through formal vehicles that, when combined, become metonymic for their ideological positions.

In the case of D'Annunzio, we have the converted biplane that he used in 1918 to fly the longest, continuous strategic attack flight to that date. The mission took them 621 miles from Rome to Vienna in order to provide the great Italian poet and War hero an opportunity to drop copies of his newest stanzas, pamphlets describing what would happen if they returned carrying live munitions.

Haeckel's jellyfish is a recognizable plate from a coffee table book he released in 1904 called Artforms of Nature, whose wide distribution helped to naturalize his illustration of the evolution of species. This classificatory text, and his drawings that proposed a complete zoological order, with himself at the top, were a proponent for his amendment to Darwin's theory, stating that "Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny." The survival of these ideas through the popularity of his aesthetic, eventually lead to social Darwinism and the statement that "Politics is applied Biology."

Poor Charpentier, just got picked on because I needed an art nouveau object that had drawn on the formal language of Haeckel's illustration and had a tie to D'Annunzio's megalomaniacal music fixation.

Together, the content of each reference highlights the romantic essentialism of various movements, pitting them against each other with the understanding that the failure of symbiosis is inevitable. This slippery proposal of the artist's expertise is crucial within the work though and reflects prevailing conditions from foreign policy to historiography. Any viewer that finds the historical references in a sculpture engaging can write down the title, and have composed an entire Wikistory in 20 minutes.

Q: How do you see your work positioned in the scrape for revisionist histories? Is failure creative?

RT: I guess if I had to consider my interests in comparison to any historiographic subject, they would be closer to metahistorical romance than historical revisionism. I'm not that concerned with mending history. I am interested in isolating points where the semiotic meanings of signs shift in order to understand the conditions that contribute to this phenomenon, both as a formal mechanism to be employed in my art practice and as historiographic curiosity.

Q: Several of your works reference characters, Nero, Frank Lloyd Wright and Ernst Haeckel for example, that have a pronounced megalomaniacal vision of the world. How do you see such characters and their visions of the world function in your work? Is it parabolic or cautionary?

RT: As I mentioned before, I'm very much interested in the mutable traits of history and narrative. I think a jump to biography is only natural. It's easy to ask people to empathize with hating these protagonists but it also evokes an inevitable empathy or desire to relate to history, no matter how horrible it may have been, through some sort of diversion. Using these historical figures functions as a means for drawing attention to the cyclical conditions that have repeatedly left historicized individuals susceptible to their ambition while questioning whether it's an inherent flaw in humanity that produces these waves.