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CRUSH

FANZINE

TOM BURR INTERVIEW BY ALISSA BENNETT

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A:

I know that this is a well trodden path, and I think that people constantly ask you about Proust, but I think the logic behind the connection is pretty clear. There is an element to your work that examines how things that are public (space, landscapes, cities, music) and things that initially posit themselves as neutral or benign (furniture, lengths of board) can be transformed into souvenirs. Can you tell me how memory informs your work? What is the process of taking something that defies the idea of physical ownership and turning it into something that reflects ideas that are deeply personal?

TB:

Well, the exhibition I am working on right now might be a good place to start, since I am consumed by it at the moment, but also because I think it does toy with some of these things you

are asking me. The show is called "deep wood drive," and that title has a couple of functions as a place to launch from. It is the name of a road I knew well while growing up, our house backed up to the woods referred to in the street name, and it was my playground and scene of adventures. It was one of those college town streets where everyone was a philosopher or a psychoanalyst or a playwright, and the houses were either old and dark and vine covered, or modern, glass and transparent. That dichotomy interested me. In this exhibition I am grappling with how subjectivity, my subjectivity in this case, and the gestures and objects I create, are generated out of the memories associated with a particular place. I specifically wanted to think about how both trauma and ecstasy are born of particular physical places and constellations of experience. I remember feeling both in relation to Deepwood Drive, the road, and so wanted to transform that physical place, with these traumas and ecstasies and complicated half-remembered, half-forgotten sensations, into deep wood drive, where the psychological dimension that drives my work now, might become the subject. (my mother used to make Madeleines as well, I remember, but that's just coincidence).

A:

Somehow I am picturing the campus and house from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf!* If I remember correctly, you grew up in New England. I'm from Rhode Island, and I have a lot of similar relationships to my childhood memories, most of which are bound to this weird, ultra rural area that I grew up in. I have spoken to other artists from Connecticut and Massachusetts, and whenever I hear stories about where they grew up, I always feel like I can basically see the location somehow; it is always September in my New England fantasies! Do you feel like the landscape of your childhood (and its attendant psychology) informs your work? I think there is a kind of tension between the past and the present that New Englanders intuitively feel and understand.

A:

I think that physical and psychological landscape does frame and also fill out my work. I think maybe it always did but at some point I made the choice to heighten and somewhat de-naturalize it, even stylize it a bit. It's made more relevant or present because I still live half of the time a few hours north of the city, and the farmhouse that I live in there has cast off bits of itself into my work. In this exhibition a group of wood shutters that no longer hang on the house are grouped together, clustered on a base creating a sort of imploded or condensed closed up moment. I've also made a work out of an old 19th century outhouse, a recreation of an old '3-holer' that I called *Split* because it was sliced down the middle into two distinct sections and painted entirely in a neurotic Hopper-esque white. There's a dynamic that is palpable in New England, equal parts

forward thinking and backwards leaning. I don't pretend to entirely understand it but I do know it, and respond to it as a sort of core layer to an increasingly complex and contradictory American psyche.

A:

Do you believe in ghosts?

TB:

Strangely, I've been asked this question before. I'm not sure. I'm fairly certain that my eyes can't see everything that is out there. I know that objects retain the stain of people and that our memory can be physically located out of longing or grief. But I don't have anything like a "belief" in relation to this idea. And I'm pretty much devoid of religious inclinations, although that is on my list of things to reconsider lately. When I think of Deepwood Drive, I think of the soap opera Dark Shadows, which I was too young to watch but did sometimes, somehow. We want to think about ghosts, I know that much, and it has a political dimension, and what it means is culturally specific and embedded in how we view our very different lives.

A:

I love the Beard Board pieces; I am constantly seeing faces in marble floors and tree trunks and things. I always think it's such a funny thing when you cannot un-see a face or a set of eyes once you've noticed it. I love the idea that these pieces are kind of about longing and about how you find traces of the people you desire in benign or banal objects. Can you tell me about this series a little bit?

TB:

I like all kinds of plywood, I always have I think, the process of making it and its standards and its ability to have grades, to be very common or plain, or to be special. I like that it does the job of other wood, as a building material, and is completely 20th century, still holding on to the 19th century on the one hand but the product of standardization. But within that standardization I love where the wood exceeds the format, where it blurts out with swirls and stains and patterns, and where it has to be filled in with little eyes and other patches. There's a psychedelic aspect to it, to looking at plywood, where you start to trip out and see things in there, full faces, or profiles, or just eyes or nipples... little instances of biomorphism within the grain. That's how the beards started. I was also involved in the idea of beards generally, that they simultaneously seem to stand for both naturalism and cultivation. And they hide things, obscure what is underneath and provide some protection in that sense. It seemed logical to impose them

on to the plywood. Some of the beards are famous, like Charles Manson, Walt Whitman or Toulouse Lautrec. Others are people I know personally and others I don't know at all. Your suggestion of finding traces of people in objects is nice, and gets close to some of my thinking, considering all surfaces to be mirrored in some way, whether they are in fact or not. That surfaces can be read in many different ways, and that desire both shadows and illuminates them differently all the time.

A:

I think that these traces that we discuss above are kind of what I meant when I asked you about a hauntings and ghosts- the trace is an excess, it's an element of the wood that is superfluous, but it also acts as an index of something material that is missing. Can you explain to me how you use objects as stand-ins in your work?

TB:

I like this phrase: *an index of something material that is missing*. This seems to pave the way for the idea of something being there and not being there, of the imagination and of fantasies about place and about objects. I made the decision, more or less consciously years ago, that I wasn't interested in picturing things in the photographic sense, or in a pictorial way. And oddly at the same time, I've, less intentionally, made work that can be difficult to photograph. It can have too many facets or sides, and be rendered flat and ... lifeless. Audience and viewing is difficult to photograph or document, and yet it is part of my working. A painting can slip seamlessly from the wall to the photograph without notice, with the viewer standing in more or less the same place, directly in front. But the three dimensions can be clumsy and awkward in this regard, and when I look at images of some of my pieces, its the viewers that seem to be absent, not any 'body' as a subject within a piece. Maybe, then, objects stand in for lived experience, in my work. For durational and spatial existence. There's metaphor operating, of course, but hopefully something uncanny too.

A:

How would you define a haunting?

TB:

Insomnia. Claustrophobia, all forms of fear... Psychological states that I can't seem to conquer and which feel as if they are acting on me, as opposed to emanating from me. There is a large cage piece in the exhibition that is meant to mean several different things at once. First it is meant to be imposingly physical, both defining a space and creating a frame for the other works. But it's

also generated from a self conscious revisiting of a memory, of being young and being locked in a dog cage by older kids. I don't know how old I was. I screamed until my mother came through the woods to find me and get someone to break open the lock on the cage. I think about it periodically and I think of it with humor and horror. It haunts me but intrigues me. I wanted to make this piece as an acknowledgment of that event, an event that is as significant in my "development" as an artist as my BFA, or any other biographical fact. But at the same time it isn't special exactly, its mundane and usual, the sort of thing that happens to people. Where it becomes interesting is how it amplified in my memory and how it lingers, still, and how it still is productive. I am still producing emotions, ideas and objects from that experience.

A:

The other thing is that the memory is constantly changing and degrading- do these experiences (and the cage memory specifically) feel fluid? Does the experience feel like it shifts the more you examine it, or does it stay steady?

TB:

It does shift, specifically because I am elaborating on it, and ignoring its past tense status, and wrenching it into the present. It also goes through the filter of object making, exhibition making, where it almost becomes a cartoon, (in the best sense), of itself, and opens itself up as a more public state, open to others. It gets repeated but it becomes changed and altered by being staged differently, rescripted in a sense, recast even. Maybe I should set it to music...?

A:

A lot of your work seems to examine how even though space and objects are subject to material devastation, they are still able to retain both meaning and memory. Is rupture (physical, social or conceptual) an important element in your work? Do objects and places that remain static hold the same kind of psychic charge as those that are subject to ruin?

TB:

All objects and places are subject to ruin, it's only in the realm of art with its various life support techniques practiced by institutions -restorers and archivists- that it may appear to be kept at bay. But the psychic charge is a subjective one I think, and I try to posit a view where all 'things' are aging, all walls crumbling, all faces wrinkling, all ideas changing, whether they appear to be or not. We all know that even the best plastic surgery doesn't look like our youthful selves, but we want to believe in it anyway, as a return, when in fact at best its a prettier form of decay. That said, I am, as you said, interested in finding moments of rupture, ways into the process of time

that reveal conditions below the surface... or maybe more importantly, on the surface. And I'm also better able to see things clearly when they are in an obvious state of passing, when they express and perform their demise.

A:

Have you watched *Pet Semetary* recently? Somehow, I feel like it addresses a lot of the elements that we are discussing- this need to recuperate things from the past and the expectation that they will come back to us in familiar ways... It's a much more elegant film than you remember!

TB:

Not for a very long time, but you make me want to! I'll have to get back to you on that.

A:

Are there any memories or events that you find yourself returning to repeatedly?

TB:

I've outed my claustrophobic self with my dog cage story before, but I can elaborate with this question. An aspect of making art that intrigues me in relation to memory is repetition, repeating a gesture, repeating a work even. Instead of simply considering that as the formal structure of a practice, of a career, I like to think of the nervous ticks that fuel an artist's work as a sort of aesthetic stutter. It often gets cleaned up and legitimized over time, but the motivations for certain gestures and for making work can be enormously complex and multi-leveled. I use repetition as a mechanism of self-consciousness and of reiteration, of speaking out loud over and over, and repetition as a way to make things more rather than less, strange. I repeat certain works I've made in a sense, though nuanced differently as I find myself in a different place wanting to convey different things, but a kind of repeating nonetheless. So the memory of certain works I've made at particular times in my life becomes fodder for new works, which creates an accumulation more interesting to me than any singular work.

A:

I am really interested in this idea that resuscitation and evacuation are endemic to an act of repetitive remembering. Is there pleasure to be found in the lack of conclusion? Is the beauty of memory couched in its inevitable failure?

TB:

This is hard for me to answer somehow. Maybe it's the pleasure I do find in all 'lacks of

conclusion," ... but what it does trigger for me is the connectedness of memory, personal subjective memories, to a larger social field. Sometimes I think I may be using the language and the trappings of 'an individual' speaking, just to gain the attention that garners, and then attempting to transition that to a broader frame of reference, and a wider sense of relevance. Specific individual memories can be situated to reflect social conditions, my dog cage is only one attempt. I like that my filmic rendering of my Deepwood Drive into *deep wood drive* makes you think in the plural sense, of multiple sites, both physical and mental. This template is both highly specific and grossly generic I think. I'm not exactly sure. But something else is compelling to me and has implications beyond my advancing claustrophobia, and that is the relationship, the similarities and the differences, between remembering and repeating, repeating and remembering. That seems to be the crux of something...