



The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

Robert Lazzarini: Guns and Knives

February 28 to September 13, 2009

Curator: Harry Philbrick

Conversation between Aldrich director Harry Philbrick and artist Robert Lazzarini in his New York City studio.

February 20, 2009

HP: Robert, why did you distort the walls of the gallery?

RL: One of the issues that I'm dealing with is the issue of perception. The works in and of themselves are dealing with issues of opticality and dislocation. So, this was a way for me to address my interest in figure/ground relationships, and also further pursue issues of dislocation. Dislocation, not only between the object and its ground, but with the perceptions that the viewer is going to have in front of the object.

HP: So the viewer walks into the room, the room is distorted, so their perception is off of what is normal?

RL: Yes. It's funny because even as you're saying the words, "The room is distorted," in my mind I'm thinking, yes, it is distorted, but more accurately, the walls are displaced. The sculptures themselves are distortions with algorithms running through them. The room is not a distortion of a room per se, it's more like the grounds are shifting . . .

HP: The wall's just tilted in . . .

RL: Yes, the walls are canted in, which is an additional dislocation.

HP: Talk to me about when you say that the objects, the guns and knives, have an algorithm running through them. What does that mean, in plain English?

RL: Well, you could think about distortion in several ways; as some sort of alteration of an original, for example. In terms of the visual arts, you could look at Surrealism and biomorphic distortions as one type of distortion—maybe Jean Arp, Salvador Dali, and that kind of free-form melting. I'm specifically dealing with mathematical distortions, wherein if you augment one part, you affect the whole.

It's an affectation over the whole, no matter how slight of a change to a part.

HP: When you are starting with an object and figuring out what that distortion will be, do you start with a visual idea or do you start with numbers and a formula?

RL: No, no. It's very visual..... and I would even back off of that. I would say it's more akin to having a non-verbal sense of something. I get a sense of something that's difficult to articulate. And that becomes the driving force behind the works, this sense of things that I haven't totally formulated. It takes a free form, but I have a very strong sense of it.

HP: Then in practical terms, to realize that visually, are you working with a computer program?

RL: Yes, when it comes to the physical, the digital manifestation of these objects, it's all run through computer design programs. I start off with a non-verbal sense of what something should be, and then I slowly start to shape it and it becomes more verbal and more numerical until it becomes the final design, which is made up of extremely specific numbers.

HP: So you start with a general sense and feeling of what you want, then perhaps working through sketches on paper . . .

RL: Yes, but rarely sketches, mostly notes. Then onto photo-based designs.

HP: . . . then into the computer program—then what happens, how does it get realized physically? Talk to me about the guns in particular.

RL: Of course every object is different, and part of the trajectory of its process relates to what the final material of the object is going to be once I leave design. When I design something—and people have pointed this out to me, namely my assistants who are my CAD modelers—the design is done without regard for how it's going to be made. We always have to backtrack, because when I design something, kind of anything goes..... and then we go back and figure it out . . .

HP: And are you trying to make the sculpture out of the same materials as the original?

RL: Yes. Not down to the molecular level, but the gun is made of carbon steel, as is the actual gun, that's what I can blue and get a convincing effect with. It speaks to issues of verisimilitude. Also, I really wanted to eliminate the notion of material specificity; having a sculptural material like bronze, marble, styrofoam or things like that. And for me that meant dealing directly with whatever material the original object was.

HP: So if you were going to work on a saddle, for example, you'd want to make it out of leather.

RL: Exactly right. It has to be that. I think that a typical sculptural transformation is in the material. And to me that is a completely outmoded way of making sculpture, among other things, and I wanted to eliminate that completely in my work. It's not about material transformation, the transformation resides somewhere else in the artwork. It resides in another place.

HP: So let's talk about that the relationship of the viewer to these particular objects is very much informed by their capacity for violence. Why guns and knives?

RL: I'm interested in violence. This work actually was a kind of reduction of a larger group of works that I originally had been thinking of quite a few years ago, about murderous objects. In thinking about this larger group of objects, I found myself always going back to the guns and the knives as a kind of proxy for shooting and stabbing. I think I was interested in the corporeal directness of actually holding the knife or gun in your hand. As a kind of extension to the body.

HP: Are you presenting these as a reflection of our larger culture, or are they issues separate from the larger culture?

RL: Well, I think it's impossible to separate things out from the larger culture, but that being said, it's certainly not a social commentary, I mean that's not what my work is about. It's about something else. In a way, I'd like to think of these as more documentary, just straightforward. But I would say that there's a subtext of fear, a kind of fear in the mind. You know that's an interesting question because these guns are not aimed out at the viewer. And that's very important for me, because I feel that's just too obvious and too easy. In a way it's kind of like how could I push these things back a little bit from what they actually are, while still maintaining a convincing presence?

HP: Well, that's what's fascinating about your work: on the one hand they are hyper-realistic, it's as close to a real gun as you are ever going to see, but it's completely distorted, so the dreamlike quality becomes very, very strong.

RL: Yes, and I think that speaks to one of the other subjects of the exhibition, the rational and irrational aspects of the subject matter and what's occurring in this installation. And we've spoken before about the one-to-one relationship between what's occurring in the walls and what's occurring in the guns. They are definitely related indirectly.

HP: So a gun in this exhibition could be displayed on a different wall?

RL: Absolutely. I guess I think about this work similarly to the way that I think about other installations that I've done, in that there's an ideal way that I'd like to show it—say in a museum with the lighting and other specific aspects—and then there's a lifespan that the work has beyond that. A single gun on a collector's wall is just fine, and hopefully the work still resonates.

HP: If you could take just one of these guns, just one singular gun, and place it in the Metropolitan Museum, what work of art would you want it to be near? Would it be in the Armory section, a trompe l'oeil painting, or where would it go?

RL: That's very funny that you said that for several reasons! First of all, I don't know if you know this, but my first mature sculpture—what I consider my first mature sculpture—was based on a Stradivarius violin that's in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Did you know that?

HP: I did not know that—I didn't mark it as your first, I know that piece . . .

RL: Yes, well, that's based on a Stradivarius that's in the Met, and I have a very long relationship with the Met, not only working there for many years but also growing up drawing in the arms and armor section. I still have drawings from when I was eight and nine drawing there. You know where I'd probably put it? In the medieval section, because it would be unexpected and I've spent a lot of time in the medieval section, a lot of time, and there's some great parallels there such as the violence of the times. Formally, the accelerated and de-accelerated perspective in the guns occurs in some of the bas reliefs there, in foreshortened tables of the Last Supper. There're some interesting relationships there that I think would be nice.

HP: I'd put it next to that Harnett painting of The Faithful Colt, you know the Colt?

RL: I sure do, it's funny that you said that because I grew up with a reproduction of a Harnett in my house, of The Old Violin. Growing up that's something that I would literally walk downstairs and see every morning at the bottom of our stairs, so these are all funny associations.

HP: One last question. Do you shoot?

RL: Do I shoot guns? I don't shoot and tell! [laughter] I'm kidding. No, I don't shoot. Do you mean like clay . . .

HP: Yes, do you own a gun?

RL: Well, I own that gun [the one reproduced in the artwork] the original, simply because that's my process, and I had to go through an FBI check and all that stuff, but I don't shoot, and it's not that I don't want to. I've been to a firing range in the city because one of my assistants was a gunsmith, and he worked at a firing range so I'd go there and shoot there. But it's really loud, even with ear protection on you're like "wow, that's loud!"

HP: So not your thing.

RL: I prefer stabbing.

The Artist:

Robert Lazzarini, born 1965 in New Jersey, received his BFA from the School of Visual Arts. He is primarily known for his sculptures and installations that alter perception and explore the relationship between image and object. His work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally in venues such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Tapei Museum of Contemporary Art, the Deste Foundation, and the Kunsthalle Berne. His work is in the permanent collections of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Milwaukee Art Museum; The Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; the Newark Museum, NJ; the Toledo Museum of Art, OH; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Davidson College, NC, among others. Lazzarini is currently a Visual Arts Fellow at the Neiman Center for Print Studies, Columbia University; he lives in New York and works in Brooklyn.

Guns and Knives will travel to Deitch Projects in November 2009 following its debut at The Aldrich.

Robert Lazzarini is represented by Deitch Projects, New York. The Museum wishes to thank Waqas Wajahat, New York, for his help in realizing this exhibition.

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