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Imperfection, Wonder and Terror: An interview with David Richards

Bruce Thorn

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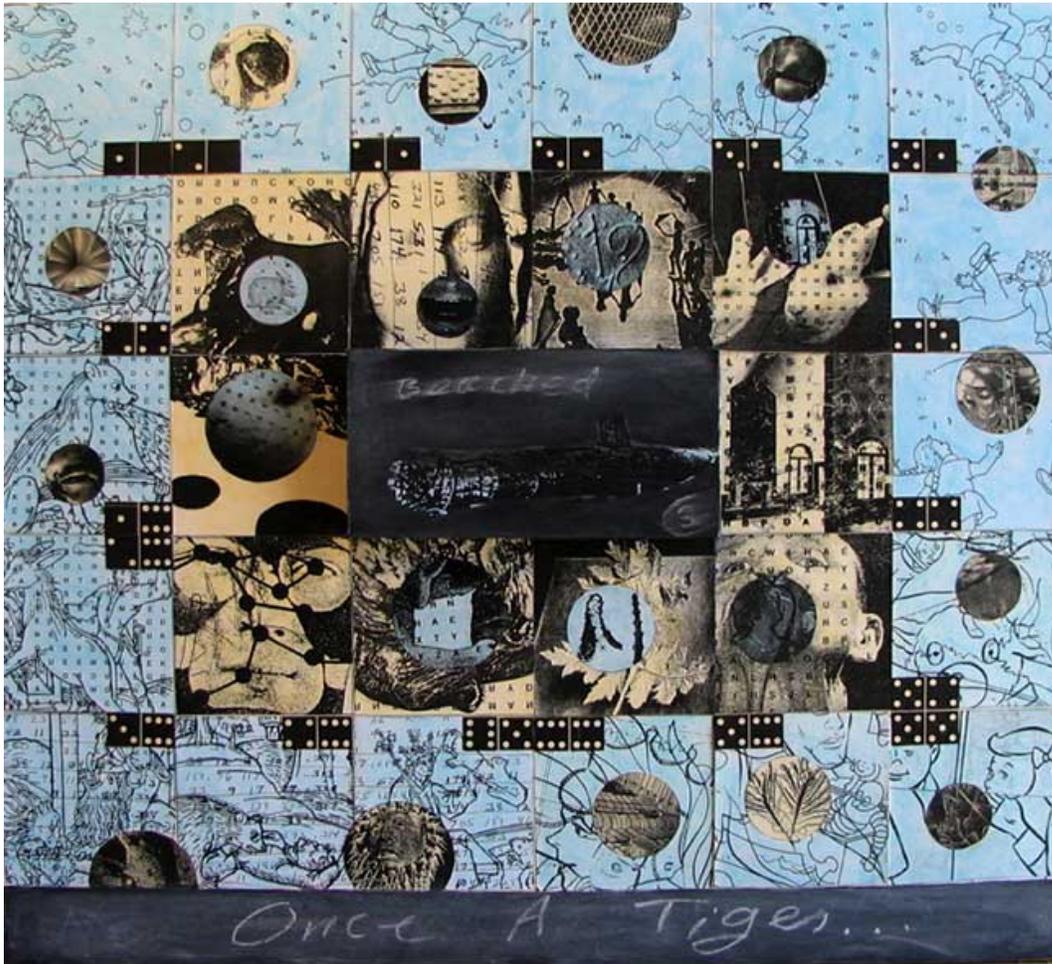
Bruce Thorn: David, how would you describe your work, in a couple of sentences, to someone who has never seen it?

David Richards: My work can be described as painted wall sculptures with some collage and drawn elements. They are mutants that combine organic, mechanical and geometric forms. They also reference games, toys and puzzles that have parts that fit in place, some of which may appear to be missing.

Bruce: There are different levels of ambiguity in your work. Is it sculpture or painting? Is it abstract or representational? Do the images, words and forms follow a narrative?

David: I like a certain degree of ambiguity, because it creates an opening for the viewer to enter and interact with the work. I don't necessarily consider the things you mention to be opposites. Some ancient Greek sculptures were originally painted and good representational artists seem to delight in unusual shapes, patterns and geometry.

Some of my earlier work and some more recent collages have narratives, in that there may be recurring images and "characters." The viewer can choose to view collaged pictures on a grid in a linear fashion, as if they were comic book panels, but the narrative is decipherable only in a general way. My intention is for the accumulated images to add up to an atmosphere or "feeling tone" that gives the viewer a sense of what the piece is about without getting too specific. It's more like interpreting a dream than reading a story.



*Beached*, 2008, collage, 21×24”

Bruce: David, you have a well written statement on the home page of your website that describes and articulates your work and interests in a straightforward manner. I'd like to ask about this part of your statement:

*“My intention is to use the worldview of a child as a symbol for the helplessness we often feel as adults in the face of the terrors and absurdities of the world:*

*historical, political and biological forces that are beyond our control.”*

Your goal seems to be more about a fostering a viewpoint or attitude, advocating an approach to life, rather than offering any conclusions or defining a particular identity. Your vision seems more complex than a child’s view, more methodical and measured. The level of playfulness is there, but not in a raw way like COBRA strived for.

David: My intention is not to be “child-like,” but rather to allude to childhood by using images from coloring books and by the game or toy-like aspect of some of my work. The wonder and the terror of childhood are things that interest me and I think that the children that we once were are embedded in us and are part of the continuity and history that help create the illusion of selfhood.

Also, I want to make work about the experience of disability without delving into identity politics. Everyone becomes disabled in one way or another if we live long enough. That’s why I like to make work with missing pieces, or maybe the whole thing is a part missing from some larger whole. I like the idea that a work of art has a history and even shows signs of wear. I love the Japanese idea of wabi-sabi, beauty that is “imperfect, impermanent and incomplete.”

Bruce: I like that you elevate the notion of identity-based art to a universal theme: “Everyone becomes disabled in one way or another if we live long enough.” It seems more engaging to leave this door of inclusion wide open.

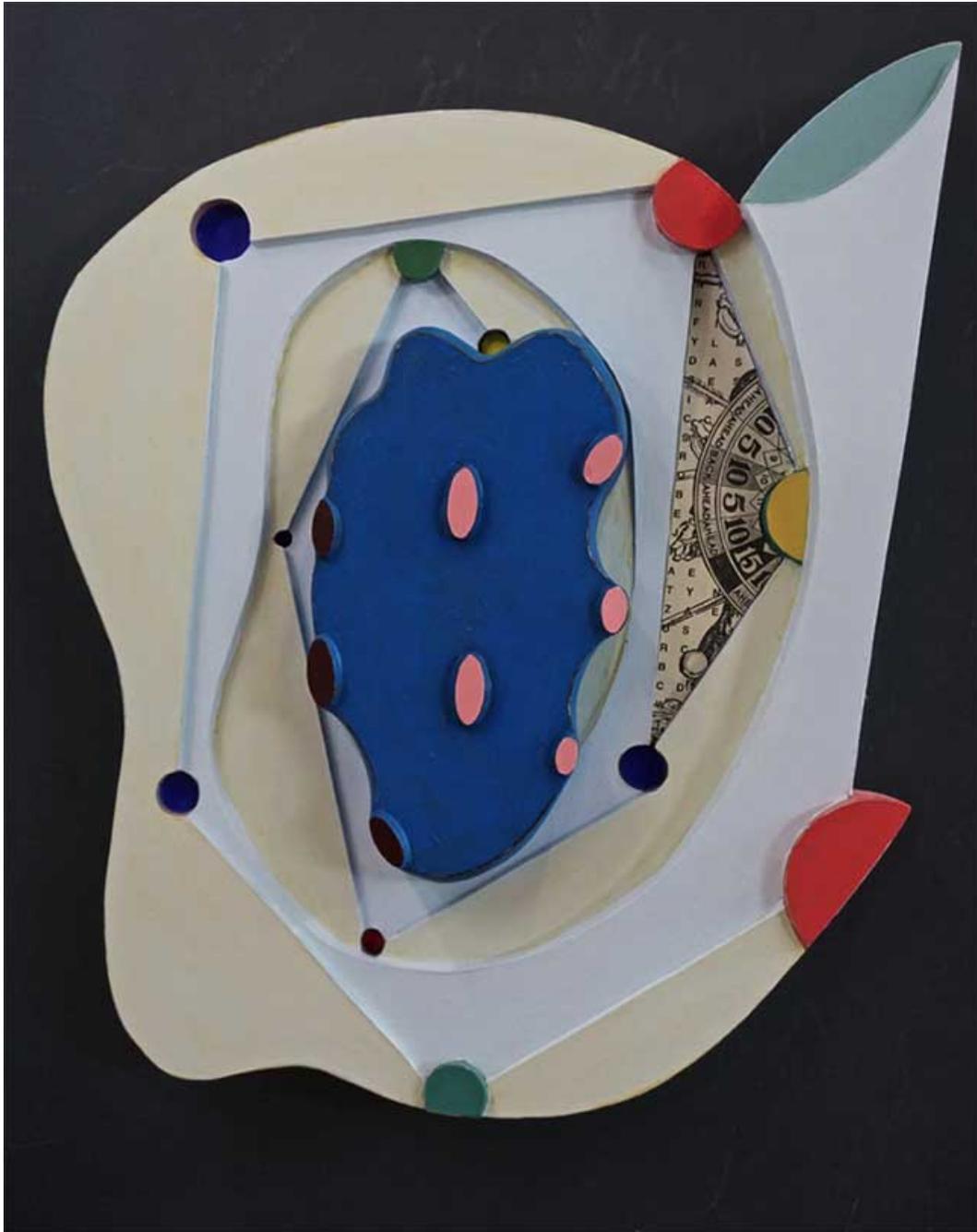
David: Something about identity politics always makes me uncomfortable, at least with regard to disability. It seems to me to be a wiser strategy to emphasize what we all share, rather than casting oneself as a member of a separate group (among many) demanding political action. Not to mention that it adds to the “tribalism” that seems to be infecting the whole world these days. Having said that, I don’t mean to disparage what disability activists are doing, and the A.D.A. to mention just one thing, was a great accomplishment. Also, I think my attitude is due in part to my age. In my generation, we were taught that if you’re different you needed to adapt in order to make your way in this world. I think that idea is at least half true. The world could also benefit from a few changes, more than a few, to make life a bit easier for all of us.

Bruce: Can you tell us a little bit about your own disability and how it enters the content and process of your work?

David: I was born with deformities to my spine, hips, legs and feet. My lower extremities were completely bowed and twisted around each other. Doctors at

Shriner's Hospital manipulated and straightened my legs when I was less than a year old. They did this incrementally, week by week, putting me in casts and eventually a "Dennis Brown" splint. I should mention the fact that in the 1950s doctors were reluctant to give anesthesia to infants. At one point the doctor broke my leg and I screamed so hard that I gave myself a hernia. I don't remember any of this of course, but it must have been tough on my mother. I am grateful to those doctors for making it possible for me to walk.

My work isn't exclusively about disability, but certain aspects of what I do are influenced by it, for example: the fact that some of the pieces appear to have parts missing as I previously mentioned. I sometimes think of my sculptures as monsters, things that are not beautiful in a traditional way, but that have qualities that I hope viewers will find interesting.



*Stump Nexus*, 2015, mixed media, 22x18x4.5"

Bruce: David, could you talk about your working methods, how you go about planning and constructing a new art work, and about the materials that you use? To what extent do you plan out each artwork? How

much do you depend upon drawing? I mean, the pieces have to physically fit together. Which part of your work process is the most intuitive and improvisational?

David: I do a lot of doodling in sketchbooks, inventing forms in an improvisational stream-of-consciousness manner. I often give the sketches playful titles, which sometimes helps me to figure out what they are “about” subjectively. Later I mine the sketchbooks for ideas. Some of the sketches are developed into larger drawings, where I experiment with changing the proportions of elements, sometimes adding or removing things.

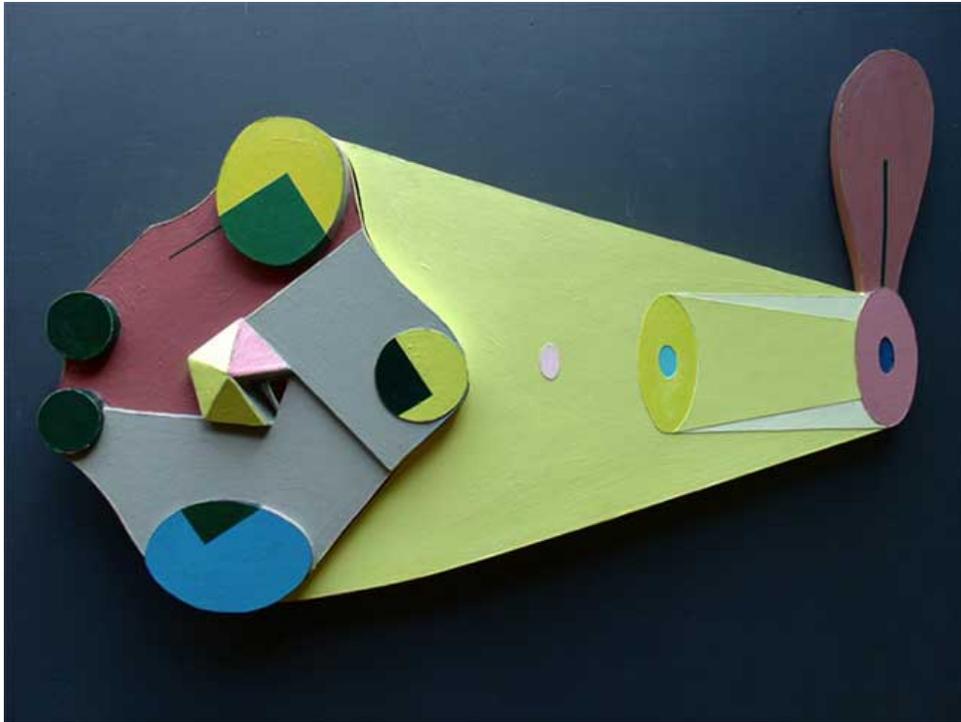
This part of the process is also about figuring out how to construct the piece. The drawing, when finished, becomes a template so that I can transfer the various parts onto pieces of foam board, which are then cut out and laminated.

The most intuitive part is obviously the original drawing, though there is a lot of experimentation and trial and error that goes into deciding on the final color combination. The pieces almost never work out the way I imagined, because giving them 3D mass changes them in varying degrees. I often have to mess around with them quite a bit to get them to “work” visually.

Bruce: One of the remarkable qualities of your work is the very sophisticated use of color. Can you talk us about your approach to the use of color?

David: When I was in graduate school I got very austere with color. I painted my sculptures with Rustoleum from the hardware store, mixing warm and cool grays and combining them with bright yellows or reds. One of my teachers called them “toolbox colors.” Later on, when my work got more game-like, I started adding “toy-box colors.” I would usually grey down my colors a lot by adding their opposite on the color wheel, or I would dirty them up with glazes of yellow ochre or black. Since I moved into my present studio, which has a lot of natural light, the color of my work has become a lot “cleaner.”

Deciding what color to paint something is usually a matter of trial and error. I will imagine it being one dominant color and then I’ll try out various combinations until I arrive at something that satisfies me as being appropriate for that particular piece. Often it’s a matter of making one part stand out more or less. I like contrast, but sometimes I need to make contrasting colors or shapes harmonize with the greater whole.



*Propper, 2014, mixed media, 13.5x25x4.5"*

Bruce: Which of the following sources of inspiration are most useful to you: Memory; literature; experience; dreams and reverie; other works and artists; current events?

David: Probably all of those things. I like to collect images from old Popular Science and Popular Mechanics magazines from the 30s, 40s and 50s. Images of machines, anatomical charts, pictures of exotic animals and plants and illustrations from old encyclopedias are some of the things that inspire me.

I have been influenced by many artists: Naum Gabo, Hans Arp, Elizabeth Murray, Eli Nadelman, Lee Bontecou, the Chicago Imagists and others too numerous to mention.

Bruce: Let's try to put your work into historical context. What other artists would you reference as working with notions similar or inspirational to your interests?

David: That's a tough one... I suppose I'm most connected to the Chicago Imagists, since many of them were my teachers: Ray Yoshida, Karl Wirsum, Phil Hanson, Christina Ramberg and Barbara Rossi. Ray Yoshida introduced me to self-taught and "outsider" artists and I continue to be inspired by people like Adolph Wolfli, Martin Ramirez and Henry Darger. Many of the Chicago Imagists collected this kind of material. Ray had a huge collection, as did Roger Brown.

I was in grad school in the early 1980s when Neo-expressionism was making a big splash and I was inspired by a lot of that work, even though what I do doesn't look like it at all. Maybe I'm a thwarted expressionist or a muted, low-key one.

Joseph Cornell was also a big influence in the game-like nature of his constructions and the sensitive way he combined elements. His world-view and mine are very different though. He was such a romantic. I'm much more cynical, though less so now than I used to be.



*Charlie-horse of the Chest*, 2014, mixed media, 11.5x30x3"

Bruce: In addition to the artists you mentioned, I feel some evolution from Marcel Duchamp and Stuart Davis.

David: I love Davis' work. He had a big influence on me when I was still in art school and making paintings on canvas. I also like the way Duchamp and Picabia were inspired by machines and the playful mythology of Duchamp's Large Glass. His "readymades" unleashed a horde of imitators.

Bruce: How does your work fit into today's canon of recognized art and artists?

David: First of all, I'm not recognized enough to be part of a canon. I feel that I'm working outside the mainstream of what is going on now. Though I wouldn't identify myself as "modernist," most of what's called post-modern leaves me cold.

The composer Morton Feldman wrote, back in 1966, about how most contemporary composers in America were associated with Universities and that there was now an "academic avant-garde." I think that to some extent this has also now happened in the visual arts. It's a lot easier to have radical ideas when you have a teaching job and don't have to rely on the public for support.



*Game*, 2015, mixed media

Bruce: What years did you teach at SAIC? What did you teach? Can you give an example of any radical ideas that were being tossed around at the time?

David: I think it was 1982 or 1983 when I began teaching. After graduation I was hired as Assistant Manager of the School Store, SAIC's art supply and

textbook store. Martin Prekop, the Dean, came in one night and asked me if I wanted to teach 3D Design. I was too flattered to say no, even though I had never taken either sculpture or education classes. I taught that basic, first-year class for about 20 years, along with an occasional drawing or collage class. After that, the first-year program was restructured and I was given a class called Research Studio.

There was a shift toward Conceptual Art in the early 2000s and I think Research Studio was part of an effort to make art into something more “rigorous” like science or math. We had students collecting things and creating archives of material to study and work from. There was also a big emphasis placed on collaboration. “Individualism” had become a bad thing. I did my best to adapt, but felt more and more out of place as the years wore on.

Bruce: David, you have made a lifelong commitment and contribution to the arts. What, if any advice, would you give to younger artists starting out?

David: Advice to younger artists, hmm. Keep an open mind, but at the same time, always be skeptical about what teachers tell you. Follow your own interests and have faith that you will find a way to make the work you need to make. Don't wait for inspiration, work every day and ideas will come to you just from the process making things. Keep looking at the world around you!

Having said that, a life in the arts is not for everyone.

Top Image: *Try*, 2014, mixed media, 26x29x5”