BORDER CROSSINGS

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AND ARTISTS IN THIS TIME OF CLIMATE CHANGE

GEDI SIBONY

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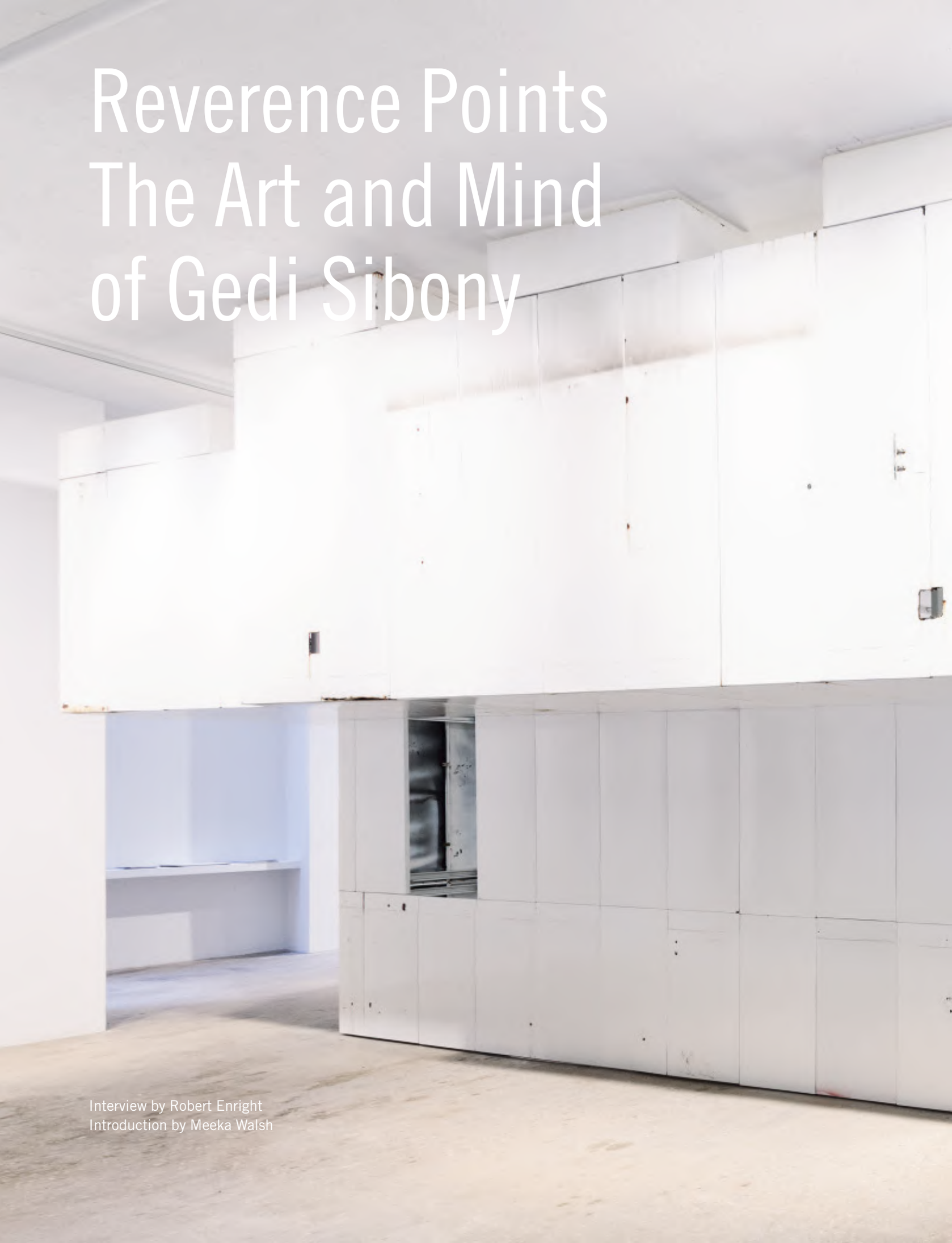
Reverence Points The Art and Mind of Gedi Sibony



Interview by Robert Enright
Introduction by Meeka Walsh

A piece of used carpeting measuring 100 by 74 inches, with white paint or primer on the surface, doesn't add up to much unless you read the marks and find there a representation of the Annunciation in one of its many iterations. Think of 14th- and 15th-century paintings by Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci. Two figures in profile, the angel, often on the left, carrying the divine message, and on the right, the humbled, astonished recipient, seated or kneeling. Separating them, there is always a space to carry the import, the meaning, to designate the distance between the divine and the mortal, now drawn proximate through the fateful event that must be realized—but not ever touching. This is Gedi Sibony's work, *In the Great Flare Up*, 2007, his Annunciation painting. In talking about Annunciation paintings with *Border Crossings*, he calls our attention to what he describes as the short three-dimensional extensions of the space he sees when he finds the paintings in churches, for example. I'm suggesting that short, charged three-dimensional space is sculptural.

He says he sees the paintings and that space as a "point of focus that was so well-transitioned … you could feather out that point of concentration in all directions." Now it has volume, is what I am understanding. Gedi Sibony goes on, "But the point is the empty space between the two … isn't filled with words—it's not filled with anything—in the middle of all that energy." He says that what he is doing with his work is "concentrically framing with a symbolic order and ultimately it's toward the transference of that unnameable emptiness."

I'm thinking here that his artmaking—his work in the studio and in galleries—is his framing with a symbolic order through making, and then installing, which is toward the transference of that unnameable emptiness, that annunciatory, charged, empty space. What he is after is making manifest the presence of that absence. A spiritual sensibility, developed as a child, made him receptive and perhaps inclined to recreate a setting, a theatre of spiritual possibility.

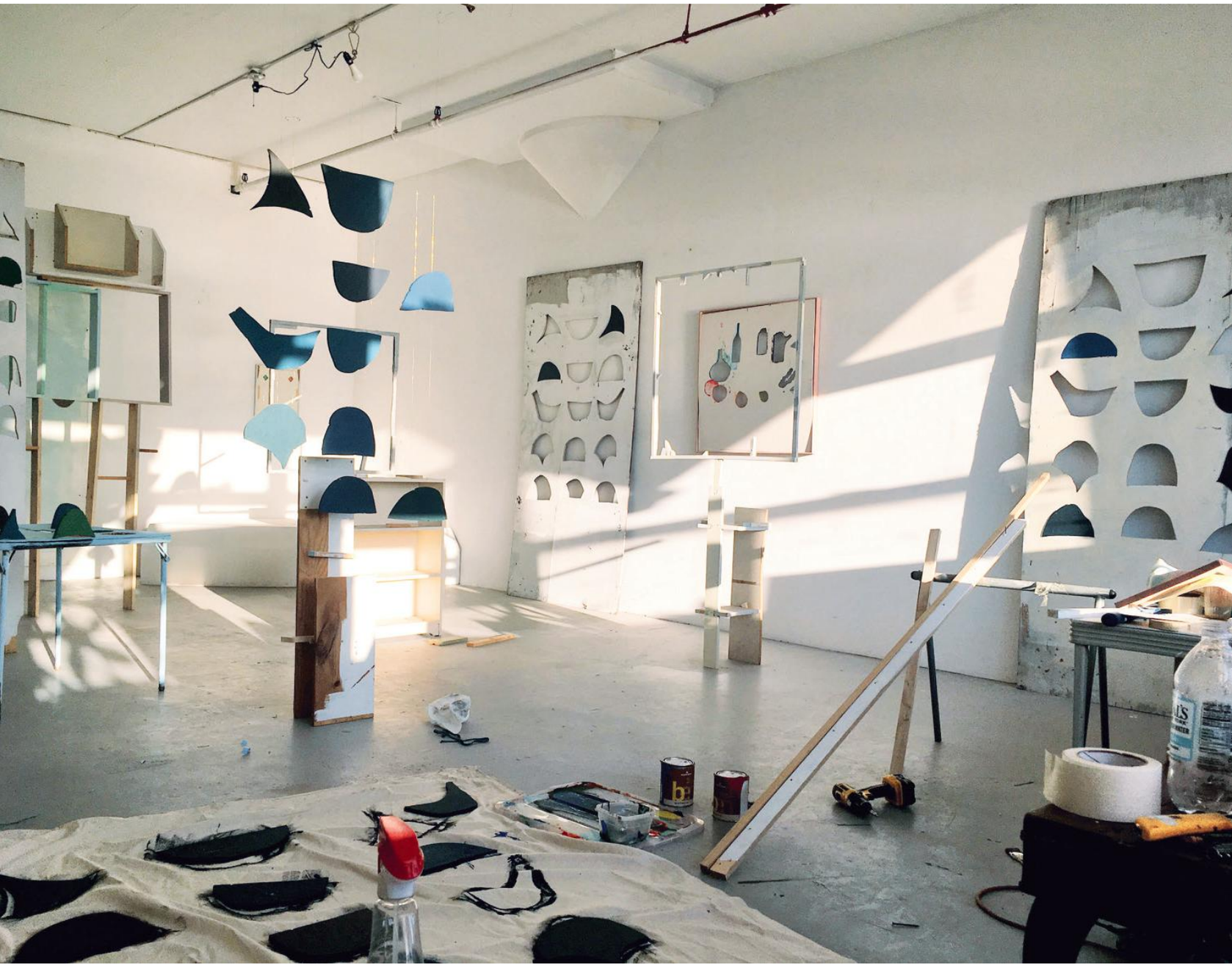
Childhood is an ever-replenishing source, a suspended place that shapes us and to which we return often, dipping like swallows to sip and restore ourselves. Gedi Sibony speaks with pride, a word he used with intention twice when responding to our question about his choice of materials. His interest in not producing things, in not using resources, in not spending money came directly from his childhood and the ethics of his upbringing. His father, one of eight children, grew up in Tangier, in a single room where everything, as sparse as it was, was shared. When his father emigrated to New York, his work was renovating apartments. Anything useful that he removed he brought home to their apartment to be used again. He was proud of what he was able to do; his resourcefulness served his family well, and in turn, Gedi said he was proud, liked the idea. If you visit his filled studio and when you look at his work, you see evidence of his fine lineage.

There would have been many formational elements in his childhood, but the one that recurs through this conversation, and seems most evident, is spirituality. The desired state of reverence was queried and the answer: "I think as a child I achieved reverence, out-of-body experience, in a religious setting—group chanting and praying and fasting." He adds surfing as a subsequent adult occasion for an out-of-body experience. He also achieves this in rare moments in the studio, he says.

Art is likely, usually material, some material; it manifests itself, for the most part, in some physical way even when it is largely conceptual. Even when minimalist or spare, there is sufficient body to leave a trace. So it is interesting, very interesting to look at and think about Gedi Sibony's work, where what is not there is as resonant as what you can measure or weigh or rub or move with an exhalation of breath. Because in his work it's the spaces between, it's the linking ellipses, it's the um while you are thinking. It's the space before and after that you know must have been there and continues to be there in that same way. It is implied space, and you are implicated in its having been there at some point and your being aware of such. It is anomalous: ethereal and sculptural. Sculptural, which suggests volume, a ground or base or platform even if hanging. Ethereal like ether, a gas, and transitory.

Here is William Carlos Williams with his epic poem *Paterson* from 1927 and his saying, "No ideas but in things," to be economical with words, the conviction that only things can create visual images for us. I apply this to what happens in the pared works and installations of Gedi Sibony—that space he gives and leaves for sensibility, thought and reverence. Reverence and a state of immanence and the artist speaking about entering a gallery and crossing a threshold. He identifies that transit as "an opportunity to immediately wash my memory of whatever I was doing before," and he goes on, extending that moment to others, "then I get to keep people in a state where they don't have to remember things again until they leave."

This implies, for me, a sanctuary, and I think of works like *I Stay Joined/We Approve*, 1991–2007, where three thin pipes suspended over a free-standing door make an altar and sunlight streams in. Where *We Approve*, 2007, and *Untitled*, 2007, installed in the same space, collaborate with an angled architectural ceiling element and the light through a narrow rectangle of a window becomes a chapel. Or *Ultimately*



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Gedi Sibony, *The King and the Corpse*, 2018, portable porcelain-steel façade, steel, bolts, screws, wood, c-clamps, dimensions variable. Photo: Elisabeth Berstein. All images courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

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Studio, Gedi Sibony, November 2019. Photo: Gedi Sibony.

Even This Will Disappear, 2007, where a piece of carpet with its two far corners lightly lifted like eyebrows asking a question, a Plexiglas frame standing and a spotlight trained in a small, soft flare on the floor are a space for soulful contemplation. Transcendence, out of body, a state of reverie. Being aware of the simple gesture of crossing a threshold: one foot over, one foot back in an hypnotic prayer-like sway.

The provisional quality of these physically spare, evocatively rich works calls forth a sense of poignancy, so tentative but with a productive bifurcation—his self-identified knowing body and the moving-faster-than-thinking body, both acting. Tentative in the sense of a gentle delicacy or discretion and always leaving open the possibility of something else—a veiled delicacy, that is, with the delicacy of a veil, and wrists and ankles available to the wind.

Robert Enright said, "You know, you are a cardboard and carpet mystic. I mean that as a compliment." Gedi Sibony said, "You are a great interviewer." (And then they embraced.)

This interview is a composite of two separate conversations. The first followed Gedi Sibony's lecture for "Dialogues in Art," a collaboration between *Border Crossings* and the School of Art at the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, on November 21, 2019; and the second was a telephone conversation to his studio on December 30, 2019.

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BORDER CROSSINGS: Did you at any point make the determination that you wanted to be an artist and if you did, when did it happen?

GEDI SIBONY: It happened when I was living in San Francisco trying to be an artist and I found the Bruce Nauman *catalogue raisonné*. I hadn't had much exposure to his work, but as soon as I opened the book I saw that art could carry everything. Before that I thought I wanted to be an artist, but I didn't think that it could have everything in it that I wanted to say, which was a combination of so many blurry things. But everything changed when I knew that it was doable in that form and in no other. On the first page of the *catalogue raisonné* there is an early piece that is a kind of painting, it's very vertical and curves a little at the top, and inside is a shape, a sort of three-dimensional side of a cube, that mimics the shape of the canvas. As a kid I loved going to museums and loved the way that culture and civilizations were presented architecturally. So I was connected to looking at paintings, but I guess with that work there was a vulnerability, an encapsulation of some degree of humanness that I was better able to see because it was abstracted. Not cleaned, not pure. It felt like all the theorizing around art from my academic background didn't apply. It was much simpler than that. Difficult but also simple. This happened a couple of years after I had graduated from college and before I went back to Columbia. I was still sorting everything out.

Was the recognition of what Nauman had done generative for you when you went to Columbia for your MFA? Did you set about to apply some of the knowledge you had obtained in the Naumanesque experience?

No, I was continuing to be a little bit in the dark in my own investigations. I just knew that art could be dynamic and deep enough that whatever it was that I needed to say could find a form. It did take years after that to find a proper form. But as I think about it, I did go through a period of time where I was doing performances and videos of myself doing performances. I probably was trying to be Nauman.

Your work is materially so rich that what I want to do is get inside your creative process to figure out how you actually make the things you make and why they work so well.

I think the problem is that it takes a lot of time. Not so much gets done, but it takes a lot of trial and error and there is a lot of failure.

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1. *I Stay Joined/We Approve*, 1991/2007, carpet, door, pipes, 39.8 x 118.5 inches (carpet), 20.8 x 86.6 x 1.8 inches (door), 82.6 x 74.8 x 82.6 inches (pipes). Installation view, "If Surrounded by Foxes," 2007, Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Switzerland.

2. *We Approve*, 2007, door, 82 x 23.6 inches; and *Untitled*, 2007, carpet, 84.6 x 52 inches. Installation view, "If Surrounded by Foxes," 2008, FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

3. *The Middle of the World*, 2008, vertical blinds, 36 x 89.5 x 5 centimetres. Photo: Gil Blank.

All that's left is the part that distinguishes the failures from the successes, and what determines that? I mean, people tend to agree on the better things, so there is something semi-common about the recognition of that process. My process is scattershot, and if I were to think about what I am capturing, I would recognize that there is a preliminary stage when the objects are offering a state of future culmination. It is a relationship between things that offer interpretations that don't land comfortably. It's like putting words together until there is nothing opposite; they're in a state where they don't have an opposite. Maybe that's an enriching place; maybe that's an accurate depiction.

You name your paper on Nauman "Against Opposites." You're the opposite of a Cartesian; you're always in the slipstream between things, where one thing becomes another. Is your job as an artist, then, to find those connections between things, to elevate the quotidian to something we would call art? What makes your work artful as opposed to that of a guy who gathers the throw-aways of industrial America?

That's a great question. I mean, what is the difference? Is it the language that makes it different? Maybe because I want something out of it beyond the facts of what it is or how it got there.

Your artmaking process seems to be one of being in the studio where you're discovering the imminent possibility, but then comes the question of what happens to it when it is put into another space, like a gallery. Does it become a different work or is it evidence of the ongoing refinement that made it in the first place?

Originally, I felt that every time I went into a gallery, I crossed some threshold, and it was an opportunity to immediately wash my memory of whatever I was doing before. If I do that, then I get to keep people in a state where they don't have to remember things again until they leave.

You said in an earlier interview that in this society you are "forcefully removed from reverence." So is that state where you want to be and is art the way you might possibly get there? It's almost a question about an old-fashioned spirituality. Removed from reverence by advertising, tricked out of a daydream state by a frantic state of desire.

I think as a child I achieved reverence, out-of-body experience, in a religious setting—group chanting and praying and fasting, and later while surfing, particularly in conditions where it's hard to see; consciousness splits away from the physical body to an outside perspective. So to have those experiences and then to enter an academic setting where we're told unmediated experience is impossible.... But it is a positive state, achievable during rare moments in the studio. In terms of art, music, literature and poetry, and in theatre, I think something else happens. You can relate to the human condition as it's being described abstractly, or through relationships, and you become hyper-aware. In both the out-of-body experience and the hyper-aware experience, time slows way down or the brain opens way up, or something, but they are very different. In hyper-awareness, you are your struggle and you see that others are, too, and you're glad about it. In out-of-body, none of that matters. You just can't believe that your body can keep doing something while you fly away. I don't know what the formula is to activate that, but some things help visually: the incorporation of visual relationships into space, of architecture into the pictorial, and also integrating them into the sculptural. That has been done for thousands

of years because there are ways to do it that have effects. There is probably some science to it, but my proccess is intuitive.

One of the ironies is that the artist is in the studio alone and negotiates time and space without anyone else around. There is no communal chanting and praying. Is one of the reasons why exhibiting is important to you because the gallery experience opens up the possibility of finding that lost reverence?
Those are two different things. In the studio alone without anyone watching, the hope is that anything can or can't happen. Then there is a totally separate part, the editing and organization into a show. And that part depends on the encounter. Or it depends on an anticipation of the encounter.

Do you think that's one of the reasons why your sculptures seem like imaginary people inside the spaces in which you place them? In your work there tends to be a drift towards the anthropomorphic. It's as if you have the urge to somehow embody the material you use in a personality, a character that becomes human.
I notice that all the time, a quality that is a character. Getting something to stand up without a clear plan. Even if it's closer to furniture, to architecture. I guess I'm responding to the presentative aspect of objects. Being greeted by the things presenting themselves doesn't feel like being accompanied by other people, but it does feel like something is happening. So I can go to my studio because something is happening there. I mean, this is the last straw in terms of real, accompanied activity.

I agree that your work can touch on furniture and architecture and the anthropomorphic, but what interests me is whether the material is telling you what it wants to be, or is that you playing a subtle Svengali and shaping the material to have a certain presence? It's a question of how much agency you have in the process.
Well, I want all of the agency and none of the agency but not some of it. With the frames and then the trailer pieces, I could change nothing. The artwork was already done. Then I had to go get it, cut it out, hang it on the wall. The paintings, too. I had no say in designing the space, the curtain or the table, but then once it's mine, I can take out the bottles and fruit or whatever. Then I want to make a good table to work on the paintings that I can move around and the table becomes a sculpture. In a way that's no agency to all agency in one moment. I was making a table, and then made a decision. There are greyer areas, too, and sometimes that process leads to something. But that's the quagmire of some agency.

You have said that you realized you've become really good at certain moves. Am I sensing in that recognition a nervousness about being too good? Can you know too much about the moves you are making and does that remove the risk you feel is necessary to make art?
There are only so many moves you can make to avoid yourself and once you've made them all, you start to avoid yourself again. Then you have to fight off the voice that is saying, "You know you're trying to avoid yourself again," and it's kind of up for grabs. You can beat it sometimes.

And sometimes it beats you?
Yeah, sometimes it beats you right there in your tracks.

Can you always put yourself in risky situations? Is it even possible to do that?
I don't know, but risk doesn't seem as exciting as it used to. There's a little bit of delusion with risk taking, with extreme risk taking. But the thing is, if the stakes are low, you can experiment and if you pull it off, then the rewards are high. But I don't know if the draw of risk taking is as appealing as the draw of the compelling thing, right now.

Are you talking about personal risk or risk in a large cultural context? Is it wisdom or fatigue that determines that risk isn't the same issue it was when you felt that an engagement with it was absolutely necessary?
Well, it totally comes from the context. As a young artist I knew I was right, and I wasn't having exhibition opportunities and I was bucking the system and generating energies from being against it. Then you get pulled into the system and you think, I was just against the system and now I'm accepting it, and then you have to ask: What are you against now? My last show, "The King and the Corpse," centred on a White Castle restaurant building facade being rebuilt inside the gallery. Maybe that was the biggest risk in the sense that it cost money and all the other things that I have done have basically been free. It cost labour to put that up. Maybe more than a risk, it was the challenge of seeing what the castle would look like inside the cube.

When you talk about building a vertical piece and you keep adding another piece of wood to the point where it could fall over, I think of what Lucio Fontana was doing with his cut paintings. One more inch in either direction and the painting collapses. That is real risk.
I'm so happy you brought up the example of Fontana because I've always looked at those cuts and thought, how do you keep the structure so perfectly; how did the cuts only spread this much? If it was more of a cut than I thought would be acceptable—only that much of a departure from the middle—would it work? In other words, there is only one way that it is going to work, and if the cut is a little bit longer than you think it should be to work, then it creates a feeling like: How is this working? So there is no too small; everything fails if it is overbuilt or overstable because it doesn't enter the space where there is that feeling of something happening that shouldn't quite be working like that. Maybe it is putting me on some sort of alert to not breathe too hard or change my relationship to it.

Of course, we didn't get to see the Fontanas that didn't work, anymore than we get to see your vertical sculptures that are overbuilt and collapse. The proof that they worked is that they're being shown in a gallery. There probably were a number that weren't successful.
Clunky ones. Clunky, too clunky, too clunky. And then the falling over, falling over, falling over. They fall over when they get shown sometimes, too.

Kissing Carpets, 2005, carpet, 7 x 50 x 54 inches.

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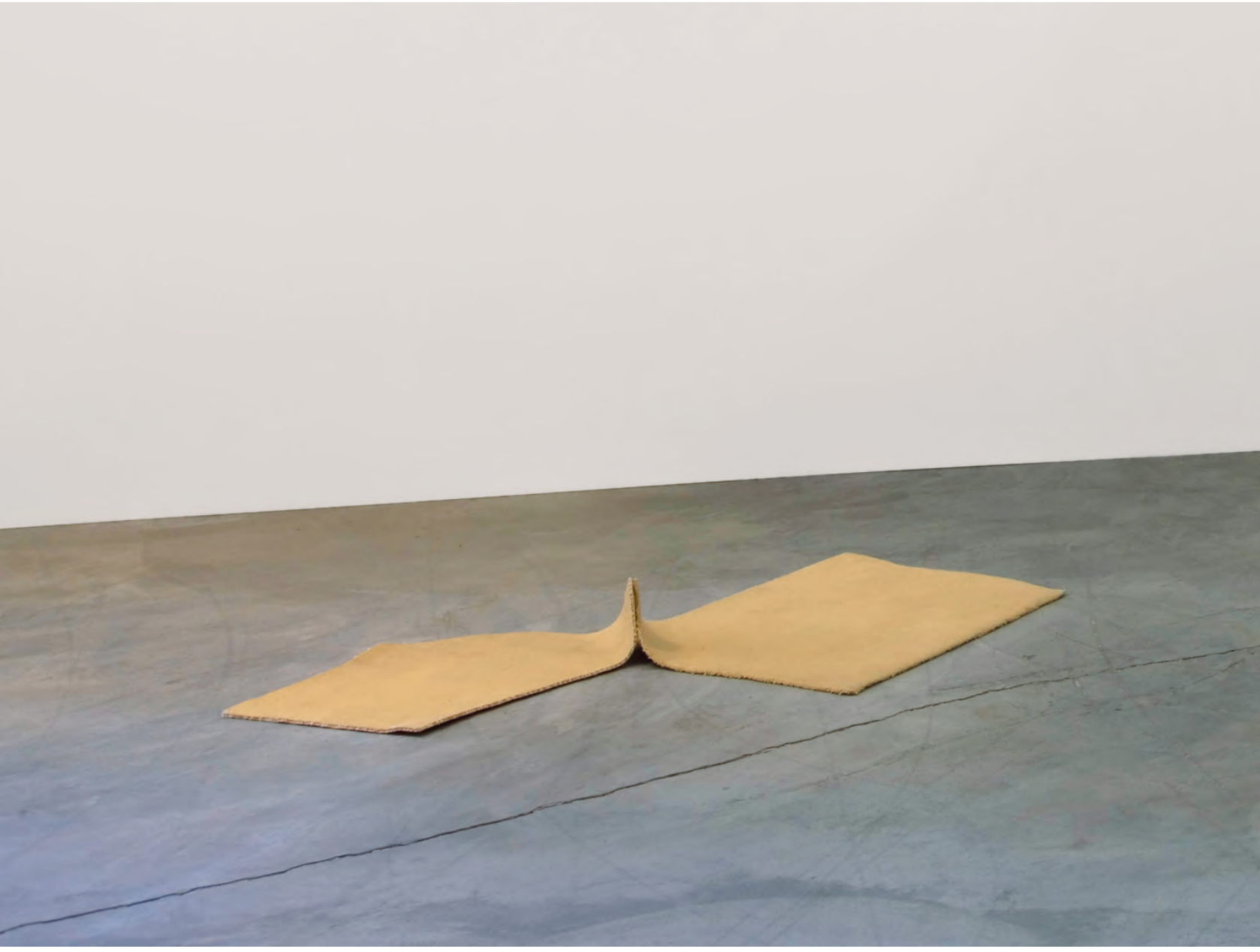
The Brighter Grows the Lantern, 2010, vinyl, nails, light, room, 137 x 313 x 133.5 inches. Photo: John Berens.

But doing things over and over again is a reiteration of failure, and when it doesn't fail, it becomes successful. So it's the necessity of failure that allows the thing to move forward. That's the way it works in both art and life.

Yeah, it's really unfortunate because there's so much planning that goes on and then things happen. I think risk happens when there's urgency. I step into action when there's a big problem that needs to be solved. If everything is running smoothly, it doesn't give much rise to extreme decision making.

Is your overall approach to discarded material a combination of practicality, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics? What was your initial attraction to material that was not valued?

I guess it comes from realizing that with lots of things, the solutions are closer than I think. I guess I was discovering in my early practice of being an artist that I was looking for things, looking for things, looking for things, and being frustrated in not finding what I wanted. You know, you kick a rock against the wall and *bam*, it was right there the whole time. But my interest in not producing things, not using resources and not spending money comes from my childhood and the ethics of my upbringing. My father was one of eight children from the old city of Tangier. The family all lived in one room without running water, there was a communal kitchen and everybody shared clothes and schoolbooks, and there wasn't anywhere to hide any money if you got some. So when he moved to New York he was renovating apartments, and everything that came into our apartment was



things he had pulled out of other apartments. And he was very proud because it was nice stuff and he could hook it all up and adapt it and make it work. If you want something done right, you do it yourself. I was proud and liked the idea. To me, this was the American Dream and beating the system at the same time.

Then that way of gathering becomes an aesthetic? It may start out being pragmatic, but it very quickly becomes aesthetic. In 1969 Douglas Huebler makes his famous declaration that "the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." Are you also Huebleresque?
Yeah.

When you add objects to the world's inventory, you make sure that they fall on the interesting side of the ledger. Do you have an inclination to see that the things you make are as attractive as possible?
It's a common reaction to want to save a beautiful thing you find in nature. As it gets processed with individuality, it becomes more, what? I suppose the word for that could be "beautiful," but more that it becomes something being stimulating in a positive way that makes me decipher some visual puzzle or activity that is completely unresolvable or un-totally knowable and that reveals things over time.

I've read all the criticism about your work and the words that often come up are descriptions like "inscrutable" and "enigmatic." You have used the word "mystery." Is that a by-product of what you use to make art, or is that something you want?
What is exciting for me comes from my experience with artworks that present enigmatic properties that are not pinned down in knowing what they're supposed to be doing. I'm interested in them and I spend more time with them, and it's gotten to the point where artworks that are pinning things down not only work in different ways, but they seem like different categories.

The way you are most comfortable in talking about your work is through questions. Your work has a strong visual presence, but then you seem to undermine that by your doubtful naming of the pieces. The names of your pieces are like Alfred Jarry crossed with Francis Picabia. They don't give you the answer to the piece; they raise a question about the piece.
The few titles that are really good and that work well don't give you the answer; they just present a similar problem. You know, the coloured light piece on the plywood frame that has a curve like a shadow on the wall is *Its Origins Justify its Oranges*. That is a true statement and it is as factual as the piece itself.

But it is the oral pun that draws our attention. It's philosophical slapstick.
That's an easier way to get humour than with sculpture. It's hard to get humour out of sculpture. Part of the charge of the thing is a combination of beauty and humour and also swiftness and sometimes nuance.

I'm surprised to hear you say that it's hard to get humour out of sculpture because what you seem to be good at is getting a sense of precarity or vulnerability. They make you kind of love them, or want to look after them. Do you feel the same way? Are they an extension of your family?
I put as much time into them as I did the kids, so they better be.

One of your pieces has the title *Predicament*. Is that what art is?
Life and who we are and where we are and who we're with are the predicament, what's around and what we're doing. It's such a crazy thing. You wake up and you see yourself in this predicament and that is the task you have to do. It's the process of taking the emotional landscape of real life and bringing it into a kind of neutral environment surrounded by all the stuff that is left over from art.

You have said you "can't go straight to what is essential." Why are the circumlocutions necessary? If life is a predicament, why not seek out the quick route, the shortcut that you talked about earlier to get to the essential quality?
Because I'm not very good. I don't have that ability. To go directly to the thing for me isn't possible because I don't know what that would be. I want to. I want to find a system so that I could come into the studio and know what has to be done to what with what. So I walk around and move stuff. Honestly, I wish there was a more direct way. If you can see one from the outside and I'm totally missing it, let me know.

Why is the whole idea of the Annunciation such a significant moment for you? It falls into the language of James Joyce in that it seems an epiphany. The Annunciation is a moment that recognizes the sudden significance of something.
In the paintings in the churches and the architecture and the short, three-dimensional extensions of the space, a lot of the times all that energy, especially in the Annunciation, is focused on this one bit of space in-between the two figures. It's incredible to me that you could have a point of focus that was so well transitioned, there was nothing abrupt, and then you could feather out that point of concentration in all directions. But the point is the empty space between the two, you know, the non-communication, the untouchability between the human and the angelic and the acknowledgement that space isn't filled with words—it's not filled with anything—in the middle of all that energy. So what you're doing is concentrically framing, with a symbolic order, and ultimately it's towards the transference of that unnameable emptiness.

You know, you're a cardboard and carpet mystic. I mean that as a compliment.
You are a great interviewer.

I love the fact that in 2011 when they returned your piece from the "New Sculpture" exhibition in London, they folded your woven grey carpet into a cardboard box, and you kidnapped the cardboard box and nominated it as sculpture as well. As a process for artmaking, that strikes me as perfect.
Well, that's the constant battle between myself and what just is. My feeling is I'm not as good when I'm carefully focusing my attention on doing something as I am when I am just getting it out of the way. When I am getting it out of the way, I am doing it

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1. *Of Names and the Formulated*, 1999/2014, MDF, paint, metal, 71 x 33 x 30 inches. Photo: Jason Mandella.

2. *The Shivered*, 2015, birdcage, wire, 34 x 26 x 12 inches. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

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1. *The Give*, 2018, painted wood, nails, 71 x 24 x 20 inches. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

2. *The Serpentine Force*, 2006–2018, painted wood, nails, 88 x 30 x 9 inches. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

3. *Set Into Motion*, 2010, wood, screws, paint, 106 x 176 x 36.5 inches. Photo: John Berens.

4. *The Second Innermost Adornment*, 2012, drop cloth, wood, 110.25 x 59.125 x 39.375 inches. Photo: Julia Spicker.

in a way that is really me, but when I'm putting all my attention into it, then I'm really trying to be something. So then I have to look at those two things every day. I have to look at the me who is really trying so hard to be something and the me who is just getting it done, in my way. I look at both those things and it is an ego slam all the time. It's like saying, I basically suck if I'm trying. It's an ego slam because when I spend all my time trying, I really can't get anywhere. Then once in a while I get somewhere that I didn't even try, and it's like: What's the point of it? It's a learning process.

Do you enjoy going into the studio as much as you did? Is it still a mix between a laboratory, a theatre of ideas and a playground?

Well, not always. But especially with a show coming up. I do feel that the more I'm working, the more often I can have nice moments. It's an enjoyable process when there's a reporting back, when there's progress, when I get to talk about it, engage with people. Then it really is fun.

Are you after elegance? Is that a desirable effect?

I was thinking that elegance isn't really a thing; it's a way that you can get something. You know, when you're talking about someone being beautiful, the beauty is in how they get from point A to point B—that's where the elegance comes in. The elegance is in doing something basic and in doing it right, doing it efficiently.

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Elegance needs someone to understand that something is elegant. It's a reciprocal relationship of the doer, of the person moving through space, of the woman putting on lipstick in a certain way, or the way a dancer will move. Someone has to recognize that.
Definitely.

I find your work excruciatingly beautiful and tonally almost pitch-perfect. And even when you play Jim Shaw and go out and find ready-made work, they exist within a colour register that is muted and close-valued. Is that an aspect of your sensibility? Do you consciously look for that kind of work without being aware of it?
The objects have to work together, and if the tonal palette is reduced, then it is easier for them to do that. Also the colour problem doesn't have to get solved in one place, it can be a little bit of blue with a little bit of yellow over there. You know that if the room needs more yellow, that has to come from something that is yellow. But colour is really an unknown area. There is no answer to that. There is no formula behind colour choices, beyond what looks good.

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You say that what gets depicted in art is the unanswerable question, so in some sense your practice seems to be the posing of a series of questions without answers and, as a result, you find yourself in a quandary.
Well, the question has an answer and the answer is, "Ah, ha!"

***Border Crossings* has done a lot of studio visits over the last number of years, but I don't think we've ever been in one like yours. It was like walking into a space where there were separate visual pods or spaces, all of which were in the process of being made. As you are working with the material and objects and moving them around the studio, are things constantly evolving?**
Yes. I think that in the making process it is really easy to go past the point where it was good. So I'm working at the point that it's good for a long time and then I continue to work past the point that it is good. Then attention is taken up with something that is unimportant or that exists peripherally on the side and is unconsciously negotiated. During a break from this thing, something I mentioned earlier happens physically, which I want to describe because it is really cool. The knowing body that is focused on that activity says, "Okay, go ahead," and at that point the moving-faster-than-thinking, maybe devious, body escapes and does something to the thing while the conscious observer stays separated from the event. In that space there's a kind of knowing that that's right. That is the great moment and it doesn't happen very often, but when it does, I've got to the point where I don't exert any control over that.

Critics have described you as a minimalist because of your use of material, but in some ways, I think of you as a literalist.
I feel the isms are traps, I guess because I try to do as little as possible, or leave space to the viewer or the materials to speak for themselves, or use what is right in front of me. Those traps are distracting for me, but I see why they can get stickered on for context.

The other word you use a lot is "theatricality." You talk about protagonists. The language around your making and objects is the language of theatre and presentation.
I think it's because I'm alone in a room every day and years go by and I'm in some kind of exchange with a thing that has all these

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1. *The Great Abundance*, 2014, decommissioned aluminium semi-trailer, 95.125 x 89.875 inches. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

2. *The Other Great Abundance*, 2014, decommissioned aluminium semi-trailer, 96.25 x 75 inches. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

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The Undecided World is Made of Worlds, with The Clockmaker (detail), 2011, spray paint on eight canvas drop cloths, digital prints, bookshelf, Ferris wheel toys, motors, transmitter, motion sensor, dimensions variable.

components of having a separateness, or a thing that needs you. Anyway, I don't want the artworks to be; I want them to be doing something together. Maybe a better word is "narrative."

Are you a kind of object ontologist? These objects speak to you. I think this is where critics focus in on the anthropomorphic nature of your work.
I try to think analytically about how to describe them in a way that the objects are not talking to me, but there is something in them that is recognized as having some aspect of personality that produces a kind of empathy, which we naturally want to feel towards an object that is roughly the size and shape of a person. At the moment they trigger empathy, they become active, not because they are living and breathing but because we have perceived them as an active thing.

In your approach to material you recognize the vulnerability of what you have made. That shelf you built looks like it could collapse at any moment. Do you want that quality in the work?
No. I think it goes back to efficiency. I want to hold the things that I'm going to store on that shelf with as little wood as possible because I don't want to invest myself in the idea that there is going to be a permanent shelf there. I want to be able to put up the shelf and store the things on it with the least amount of work, and then I realize there is less work that I could have done, which is not have the walls at all and not have it be a shelf. That backwards invitation into it is exciting. You know, it's all me; it's all happening inside my head. The question comes up: Are you advancing this thing towards art or are you just continuing to ruin everything?

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At one point in your talk in Winnipeg you showed one of the semi-trailer panels with a cowboy. I thought you were showing a Richard Prince piece and I wondered how he got into your work. It made me realize that in your obliteration of either the logo or the information, you could begin to be really tasty about your selection, not formally but through content.
Right. The information has already been obliterated. That's why they look like paintings. And paint over graphics, and graphics as painting, and bad Photoshop, and the Richard Prince cowboy, and then breaking through the canvas.

In *Kissing Carpets* (2005) you have two pieces of carpet meeting. That encounter creates a dimensionality, but it also made me think of Brancusi's *Kiss*. Then when I looked at the hanging piece with the drop cloth, I thought of Robert Morris. Are you consciously playing inside the territory of the already made? Is that something that interests you or are those just accidental echoes of other art?
It's not conscious, it is the echo of being inside museums in high school, especially the Met. The game I would play after school was trying to get lost, loving the feeling of travelling through dynasties of objects, getting to the contemporary wing and feeling like I ended up in the dreaded dingy corner. Was it carpeted? I feel like it was.

It is interesting that you mention play because in your Bruce Nauman piece you talk about Winnicott, the psychologist, and play is essential to his understanding of how children function. Is the being childlike part of the territory in which you want to operate and then does play also become work? If that happens, is it problematic?
I think that what happens is either the undying focus and attention and immersion in the activity

that is being done versus the self-consciousness that casts a shadow down on this that says, "You have to think about what you're doing because it has to be right, or it has to be a certain way." The intrusion of that is the interruption of the play, not to say that that consciousness or overview doesn't need to happen down the road, but in the play that Winnicott is talking about, the requirement is that safety and protection exist somewhere outside of the field of view, like the mother who's not in the room. The activity of capoeira is called "play." You learn the basic structure, get the moves ingrained in your body, and then when you are in the circle, at play, you are responding and reacting and moving with another person, not in a set way but within the parameters. You want to maintain eye contact, and the closer you are the safer you are.

I'm interested in getting a fuller sense of how generative the studio is for you. When you take the work out of that space and put it in the exhibition space, what is the nature of that difference?
For one thing, I don't really like to look at it in that way. I like to not organize all the pieces in the way that they're going to be shown because there's an excitement in anticipating a piece, having never seen it before, picking out from the mess of things these four things with those two things over there. Seeing it for the first time when the show is set up makes the show fun and worth it. Plus there isn't really room in my studio to do that. And then in the space it could be totally different. I don't think there's one best way to do it. Making the show is the most fun part and it's different every time.

Lucio Fontana said that he didn't make paintings as much as he opened up the possibilities of space, which makes me wonder what you do with objects in space. Are you making sculptures or paintings or objects that you then put into a space, or is it the space that you're designing by moving the objects into it?
It's a practical question, but it's a question about the idea of space. If you have an empty room, you perceive the space in a certain way, and if you put in a couple of things that break up that room and multiply it, you can increase the perceived size of the space. Empty space looks so small. You can have an experience from one side of the room that is different from the experience on the other side of the room, so one room can become complicated. I think all art naturally shows how you have a certain experience when you first walk in and you see the work and you can guide people through the space. That is what a lot of sculpture does. It wants to get people from point A to point B so that they check it out from that vantage point, which is a different thing. I think you can make something look better if you create a pathway to it. Sometimes what happens in my studio is that I do feel some things are really good and some things are kind-of-good. So the kind-of-good things don't have to be the focus; they just frame the good things. It means that there are certain pieces that are better in certain spots.

So what are the criteria that you would use to determine that you have made a good piece as opposed to one that is less good? I'm asking you to be your own Immanuel Kant for a moment. You talk about making beautiful objects. How do you determine that?
I don't know, but for some reason that question makes me think about Doc Ellis talking about throwing a no-hitter on acid. I've never done acid, but he said sometimes the ball was really big, sometimes it was really small, which is how he saw Jimi Hendrix swinging a guitar. I guess, for me, if the thing is better than I was thinking, if it alludes to something, or lets my brain inject some surrealism into it, then it generates.

I've noticed that you also use the word "fantasy" a lot, as if there is a story that you tell yourself in making your world.
I think that what is interesting is to put it in the framework of some kind of archetype or some prism of order that comes from different things with different values that are all playing their part in our own internal selves. We are not puppets of those things, and what is being played out is not dependent and not necessarily us, but there are forces that we are contending with. So the relief of a good work of art, for me, and the relationships produced in it have some relationship to feeling that that internal space is being articulated.

Why do you want to be an artist?
Sometimes I'm not sure that I want to be one. But you're given an empty room and you can do whatever you want in it and there are no rules, but somehow you have to compete with every other filled empty room, too, and there are no rules for them either. I guess that was an exciting challenge and also that the language of art is something that I feel really comfortable with, I loved going to museums and I loved looking at art. There are secrets built into paintings and there are attitudes built into paintings and there's emotional information about the maker that the maker isn't even aware is coming through. It's a good way to read someone's inner life.

There's an idea from Tennyson that goes, "words ... half reveal / and half conceal the soul within." The notion is that all making is revelation at the same time that it might be concealment. You talk about the personality of your work, so can we read a lot about you from its language?
What you just said about the written words being revealing and concealing—is it automatically concealing because it takes place in language, or is there a reflex in the writer to conceal because too much has been revealed? You want to find a comfortable balance in there. Of course, part of making art is some kind of desperate attempt to be known and be heard in a way.

The other side is TS Eliot's attitude that art is an escape from personality, not an indulgence in it.
Well, that's the beauty of it. The beauty of good art is that it's an escape from the limits of oneself. ∎