



Iowa Artists 2014

Mitchell Squire – I Like It Here!

Mitchell Squire’s artwork has haunted me since I first saw his large installation at Westbrook Artists’ Site several years ago. Mounted inside a granary structure near Winterset in rural Iowa, this work included a display of tortuous instruments. Upon close inspection, the viewer came to the harsh realization that the devices were used to restrain or alter the behavior of both animals and humans, in particular, slaves.

This re-consideration of history, including the African-American experience, often presented through the potency and magic carried by artifacts both old and new, runs throughout Squire’s art. *I Like It Here!*, his current project at the Art Center, is no exception. The results are poignant and timely, as debate continues to swirl around the motives for immigration and the reception of migrants in contemporary American society. But Squire’s art presents a distinctive relationship to the issue—in his hands migration can also be a mental activity that gives rise to creative impulses.

The Art Center is proud to continue its “Iowa Artists” series with Squire’s major one-person project. This ongoing series focuses on artists who live and work in our home state, and artists who are making significant contributions to the art of Iowa, the region, and the nation. Squire is on the faculty of the architecture department at Iowa State University and has been increasingly active in both the fine art and architecture fields, often merging the two. It is a privilege to share an artist of Squire’s intensity and complexity with our community through this grouping of works. The Art Center is grateful to Squire for working with us to present his art to broader audiences, and I am equally grateful for the efforts of Associate Curator Laura Burkhalter in initiating and bringing this project to fruition. In addition, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation for its financial support of this publication and its ongoing support of the “Iowa Artists” series.

Jeff Fleming, Director

Interview with Mitchell Squire

The panoramic vistas of the Canadian Rockies in Mitchell Squire’s selection of works for *I Like It Here!* struck me, at first glance, because they were so different from the previous work by the artist that I had seen. They could be straightforward contemporary photography, possibly intended in the strong line of romantic American landscape art that reaches back to the Hudson River School through Ansel Adams and Georgia O’Keeffe. But Squire’s art, while always visually compelling, is also a complicated exploration of history, identity, and perception. As aesthetically dramatic as the photos are on their own, they are also a starting point for themes presented in *I Like It Here!* Like many places wondrous to behold, the snowy mountains present a formidable challenge to anyone trying to actually live there. As is further delved into by the videos, drawings, and installation that make up this show, survival is work. The following interview discusses the myriad of questions raised by this exhibition, from confronting brutal facts of history to exploring the transformative possibilities of art making.

Laura Burkhalter, Associate Curator

The exhibition has its roots in a residency in Alberta, Canada. What effect did that landscape have on you?

The Banff Centre is situated in the Canadian Rockies, nestled quite spectacularly within the Banff National Park. I was pleased to be there during the winter season, and found it hard to imagine what it would be like in the summer. While I don’t want to sound all ‘John Muir’ here, I will say that I found the landscape spiritually settling and unsettling, very quiet and peaceful while at the same time powerful and on the brink of a potential shift of some kind. It was both comforting and haunting at the same time. This made for a landscape of great creative agency. I could see why the Centre is one of the most renowned on the planet. So, obviously, I’m an equaly grateful in the exhibition could have emerged in any other place than Banff. The videos, the photographs, the objects, and particularly the diagrams have Banff all over them. In that sense you could say that the work and the landscape are one. When it came to putting together the work for the show, you will recall I had planned to include highly material works that related conceptually to what was going on for me in Banff, but were made or were intended to be made here. My final decision to exclude those works had very much to do with wanting to create a critical portrayal of my time and thinking in a place other than here, as opposed to a survey of my practice.

So the title *I Like It Here!* has a dual meaning as it relates geographically to Banff, but also to any place in which such a phrase is uttered, including Iowa, the institution of the Des Moines Art Center, as well as a particular emotional and intellectual place.

You also mentioned Benjamin Drew’s 1856 “A North-Side View of Slavery…” as an inspiration. How did you become aware of this book, and how directly does it affect the work?

I’m not exactly sure how, but I think Terry Adkins (the late artist and art professor who died earlier this year from heart failure) had mentioned it on a Facebook post or in some interview I read, and I decided to take a look at it. Interestingly, a portion of his practice involved expeditions to the Arctic to study the life and experiences of Matthew Hanson, an African-American explorer and a relatively obscure associate of Robert Peary. So I imagine it was a resource he was greatly familiar with. But I suppose the text was valuable to me, as are any resources that sponsor a path of inquiry. What I took from it was not a focus on a specific individual or narrative but rather the notion of migration both

geographic and intellectual, and how it intersects conditions of physical labor at both ends of the journey, moving, as it were, from one system of labor to another.

How do you feel about merging your contemporary perspective with historical narrative? The pioneer story, and the whole “Western” genre for that matter, is one that just keeps getting revised and retold, particularly through points of view left out of the original, whitewashed versions. You used cowboy imagery in a previous exhibition, *Still Life w/ PEACHES (and a little black boy atop a spotted pony)*. Do you see elements of this show as dealing with the American mythology of the West and the “wild frontier,” or is the historical inspiration grounded more in the specific stories of Drew’s book?

No, not specifically. While cognizant of what you refer to as a “Western” genre and the mythologies of the West and the “wild frontier,” I don’t see this work tackling—or much less embracing—any of those in a direct and intentional way. While I appreciate greatly the work of artists who focus on specific legacies there and in this country. While I thought I might genuinely attempt to make work that was in part a fictive continuation of the narrative and that would also expand my interest in ‘migration’ geographically and intellectually framed, that initial romantic conceit was swiftly dealt with.

What I ended up doing, I believe, was far more

beneficial and complex, owing to the residency’s theme, *Our Literal Speed: Stuff Near Art That is Not Art, Which Is Treated As If It Were Art, Is Now The Substance of Most Serious Art*. You could say that my Plan-B move

was to spin around and capture things that inhabited my

peripheral vision but with which I had no initial

concern to engage as art—that being, the landscape as

image (which, again, intersects and merges with art

history and cultures that extend well beyond America’s

grand mythologies of the west) and the artifacts

common therein, and, what I would eventually learn

through the actual doing of the work was, a ritualistic

attempt to demonstrate—not just depict via graphic

diagram—a theory of the interior structure of the artifact.

If I may indulge myself, I know this is a long answer

to the question but here we are, there are things that

should be said. The body of work I’ve chosen for the

Iowa Artists show may seem a departure from my most

recent works of assemblage and previous works of

site-specific installations with found objects. Those

works reference various institutions, practices, and

personalities having great creative agency in the

construction of American culture. However, what might

not be fully recognized is that my art practice actually

was initiated in photography. An interest in perceptual

acuity has underwritten all aspects of my work from the

beginning, and photography was the medium that

revealed that interest (and others) most clearly. Issues of

race, identity, politics, sexuality, and culture were

everyday modes of thinking for my teachers and I in the

90’s. But these new and recent works move beyond

critique of culture and questions of race to expand into a

more nuanced query on the broad spectrum of human

perception and projection, to a space on the other side

of issues of representation. As such, this work is less a

departure and more an expansion that I hope lends

greater breadth to my practice.

Let me explain.

For this exhibition I’m offering a set of intimate and

personal videos that I never intended initially to make

public. They document exercises in philosophical

vulnerability that occurred through the physical act of

swinging a 3.5 lb., 23” Gränfors Bruk splitting axe to the

point of exhaustion. These were the things operating

with literal speed—that is, “stuff” near art that is not art,

which if treated as if it were art could somehow become

substantial and serious art”—made with absolutely no

intention to exhibit. They were simply for my own

exercise, intellectual and physical. But what I learned

from them was that, as routines, they record the

development of a capacity to embrace what is difficult to

control—much less predict—as the choreographed

perversity of my labor to strike only at the air. The

axe-swinging videos were, in fact born of a desire to

harm nothing, no one, and no thing, though their

apparent aggressiveness might elicit thoughts

grand intention that was quickly altered. In something of a public proclamation early on in the residency, I rhetorically pounded the palm of my hand atop the speaker’s lectern during the five minute artist introduction required of all residents. Once the rhythm had enveloped the audience I began to chant a single verse of an old slave labor song, “A col’ frosty mornin’, de nigger’s mighty good. Take yo’ ax upon yo’ shoulder, Nigga talk to de woods,” and thereafter indicated, “My plan here is to chop wood.” After which the Director promptly reminded me that I was on protected and sacred land, and that it was against the law to so destructively act upon the environment. The rights of the culture and peoples who were there before I arrived altered my so-called good intentions. That’s the antithesis of what happened historically there and in this country. While I thought I might genuinely attempt to make work that was in part a fictive continuation of the narrative and that would also expand my interest in ‘migration’ geographically and intellectually framed, that initial romantic conceit was swiftly dealt with.

What I ended up doing, I believe, was far more beneficial and complex, owing to the residency’s theme, *Our Literal Speed: Stuff Near Art That is Not Art, Which Is Treated As If It Were Art, Is Now The Substance of Most Serious Art*. You could say that my Plan-B move was to spin around and capture things that inhabited my peripheral vision but with which I had no initial concern to engage as art—that being, the landscape as image (which, again, intersects and merges with art history and cultures that extend well beyond America’s grand mythologies of the west) and the artifacts common therein, and, what I would eventually learn through the actual doing of the work was, a ritualistic attempt to demonstrate—not just depict via graphic diagram—a theory of the interior structure of the artifact.

If I may indulge myself, I know this is a long answer to the question but here we are, there are things that should be said. The body of work I’ve chosen for the *Iowa Artists* show may seem a departure from my most recent works of assemblage and previous works of site-specific installations with found objects. Those works reference various institutions, practices, and personalities having great creative agency in the construction of American culture. However, what might not be fully recognized is that my art practice actually was initiated in photography. An interest in perceptual acuity has underwritten all aspects of my work from the beginning, and photography was the medium that revealed that interest (and others) most clearly. Issues of race, identity, politics, sexuality, and culture were everyday modes of thinking for my teachers and I in the 90’s. But these new and recent works move beyond critique of culture and questions of race to expand into a more nuanced query on the broad spectrum of human perception and projection, to a space on the other side of issues of representation. As such, this work is less a departure and more an expansion that I hope lends greater breadth to my practice.

Let me explain. For this exhibition I’m offering a set of intimate and personal videos that I never intended initially to make public. They document exercises in philosophical vulnerability that occurred through the physical act of swinging a 3.5 lb., 23” Gränfors Bruk splitting axe to the point of exhaustion. These were the things operating with literal speed—that is, “stuff” near art that is not art, which if treated as if it were art could somehow become substantial and serious art”—made with absolutely no intention to exhibit. They were simply for my own exercise, intellectual and physical. But what I learned from them was that, as routines, they record the development of a capacity to embrace what is difficult to control—much less predict—as the choreographed perversity of my labor to strike only at the air. The axe-swinging videos were, in fact born of a desire to harm nothing, no one, and no thing, though their apparent aggressiveness might elicit thoughts

otherwise. That was the risk. Therein lays the vulnerability. I stroked the air and lay bare for the world to see, in a manner less apparent than my obvious physical nudity, the invisible consequences of my mind. Who in the hell, and why in the hell, would anyone do this? Answer: the possibility that the external, visible work often under scrutiny was intended to be of internal and invisible consequence, ironically.

I did no physical act ON the world but rather IN it. The performance can be viewed as a demonstration of absence, if that makes sense, a deep and constitutional avoidance particularly of outward material impact or concern, in the secession of swings/strokes. Yet there is still within them the harborage of an enacted desire that would resonate and be measured in my body. I sought to inhabit an interior structure that exists on the other side of a material object en route to its destination in the world. In essence I’m interested in how the object carries a potency that operates beyond the utilitarian task for which it was created. This is in accordance with a Scarryan model of the interior structure of the artifact, which is shown in the diagrams. By which is meant my awareness, my presence, and whether and what kind of ‘product’ such a force might forge in its invisible emanation from my interior, through me, and onto and onward from the exterior world was the real ambition of the work. It was my quest to more deeply understand the invisible arrival to a point of higher and more substantive labor, the kind of thing that I imagine slave labor songs to have facilitated. Labor of such kind, degree, and perniciousness through the tool of brutality meted out upon the human body for the sake of the material world, had to have been transformed into—even if not fully understood—as a more potent labor upon one’s interior, a work on the preservation of one’s humanity in the obvious absence of any corporeal, political, or monetary benefit. “Nigga TALK to de woods!”

The entire exhibition refers to labor and physicality in complex ways. There’s the exploration of historic labor, related to the narratives, whether the involuntary labor of slavery, the laborious journey to Canada, or the hard work of survival in this new environment. Your trek into the landscape in the photographs, the actions in the video, and the expressive marks of the drawings all represent your creative labors in the practice of contemporary art making. The presentation of artifacts represents materials needed to sustain the body and survive in a potentially harsh environment. And yet, in the photographs, you render the human figure (yourself) all but invisible. Is nature here the ultimate leveler, immune to our labors, or a challenge against which we can define ourselves by work and determination? Neither?

I think I probably hit upon this in the previous lengthy response. But to be clear, it isn’t so much about the preservation of the body, but rather the preservation and continued construction of human sentence. THAT’S invisible. That cannot be measured except in the issuance of eventual artifacts from the body. It seemed fitting to me that my presence, then, be a kind of invisibility in the world of the photographs, the world that is made less irresponsible to our internal needs by reason of our creative presence projected into it.

I’m curious about the exclamation point in your subtitle *I Like It Here!*. It can be construed as a joyful statement by one happy to be where they are, or as a defiant, even angry declaration of someone claiming their own place. Is it either? Or both?

Sorry, I’m not sure how *I Like It Here!* can be construed a

declaration of anger or defiance, except perhaps if

spoken with the pouty lips and furrowed brow of a

stubborn toddler who must have things their way and

their way only. Are you suggesting the title might be

construed a subversive act so infantile? Does one need

to claim the space in which they already exist, which

they’ve helped to build, continue to build, or perhaps even were here first? I guess they would if someone came along and manufactured an impression that they had no right to exist here.

When you first showed me Banff Images, my initial reaction was to think of Romantic painting and the “Sublime.” You don’t ever use that word in any of your answers, but you do talk about the work as “a query on the broad spectrum of human perception and projection,” and ask about your labor “what kind of ‘product’ such a force might forge in its invisible emanation from my interior.” It almost sounds like a kind of reverse or even cooperative notion of the sublime—this landscape, and the labors you assigned yourself in the related work, inspired you to explore the immaterial or transcendental in a new way. Is that an accurate reading?

It wouldn’t be inaccurate to say that. But in the same sense, I would want to be careful that we not falsely assign to the experience a kind of equational logic or flow, as if it all made perfect sense as a lead-up to the exploration and the resulting work. What might be beneficial to focus on, here, are not entirely the panoramic images of the landscape within the context of the “sublime,” though we know we cannot completely remove that notion from any landscape imagery, but rather the graphic diagrams which comparatively are the least awe-inspiring work in the show, visually speaking. They may in fact be the most important works because they were the result of what I had originally proposed to do several months prior, which in large part is what won me the residency; that is, to sift through Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) using a finer mesh, something I hadn’t had a chance to do since grad school. The diagrams show my attempt to more fully understand Scarry’s transformation argument, not so much the “making” but rather the ‘unmaking’ of the subtitle. Therefore they do the lion’s share of helping to frame my particular project and practice regarding human sentence, artifacts, and the transformational, not the ‘transcendental,’ actually. I should probably now comment about the two things that form a cross axis to the panoramas in the gallery: the diagrams and the collection sculpture.

Of the many components comprising Scarry’s “interior structure of the artifact” and that may assist the development of say *sculpture* as a socio-material practice in an era that others have argued has abandoned utopian truth and bewildering critique in place of here-and-now plausibility, her notions of “excessive referential power” and “self-amplified generosity” remain important to me. Creative culture’s so-called ‘move’ beyond heroic manifesto and ideological critique allows a practice of *sculpture* (which the diagrams and the collection become a kind of axial theory regarding) to be broadly embraced as an effort to manage the mélange of concussive events arising from the myriad chatter and information surrounding us. Such ‘intelligence’ harbors unanticipated potential. To *sculpt*, then, can be argued not simply as an engagement in the making of x or y but rather in the making of making itself, the formation of a supposition that opens onto a geography of potential. As such, a work of art (an artifact of material, action, image, or speech) and the conditions to which it may loosely refer are not always best to be looked at but rather to be looked through. The things of which an artifact is comprised do not always form but rather platform disquieted mental content. I provide a political example of this in the text that accompanied the *Inside the White Cube* exhibition in London two years ago. This is what I think my panoramas are doing and what my sculptures have done, platform a set of conditions and concerns which in effect, invite one to move through. It is important, then, that they are difficult, if not impossible, to actually see, like the ‘man with axe’ that they present an image that is a total artifact. Though it can be mistaken to be factual, the panorama is as

artificial as the object collection and as deliberative as the diagrams. But this is where their proximity to issues of sublime comes oh so close. They rub up against it as one would to people moving in and out of a subway car, only in passing. By overlaying Scarry’s “total arc of action” that constitutes *making* onto a ‘found object’ practice, *sculpture* is re-positioned along the second half of that arc of action—that is, the arc of reciprocation—expanding and exceeding that which occurred along the arc of projection via ‘affect’ rather than ‘work’. The landscape, to me, was nothing more than a found object, and I attempted to depict it so, despite its obvious magnitude and sublime grandeur. *Sculpture as supposition* operating under this paradigm announces itself as a consummate artifice, freeing its transformational capacity via excessive referential power, and providing its substantive escape from the entangled strictures of material procedure or technique, and utility or “genius” (and, in this case, might I also say god) that occurs when too much veneration—i.e., Matthew Barney’s private “hubris” to alter self, or Joseph Beuys’ social “shamanism” to change the world—is attempting to be leveraged by the arc of projection. You’ll have to check out the diagrams for how these artists are referenced in the thinking behind the work.

See, the panoramas are a stitched together grid of automaton snapshots taken without deference to focal point or exposure adjustment required to compensate for subtle changes in atmospheric conditions that occur throughout the time of their lengthy registration. While they hint at a seemingly cohesive moment in time, the images do not actually document such a space but rather, ironically, dispel all notions of speciality and precision despite the intricate technology required to make them. Like the label on a new pair of jeans might read, “Irregularities and discolorations are inherent to the creation of the product, lend character to the garment, and should not be considered defects,” these images purport a high degree of perceptual dynamics due to the equalizing strategy from which they arise. Yet the viewer might question whether they’re being swindled because they’re also just plain weird. They get to see 360° in a single view, and become omniscient as some kind of god. There’s something not quite right with these images, unsettling and calming at once. In other words, a lot of technology has been put to task to show nothing more than the instability of perception and the seemingly well intentions of desire. Thus, for me, these images have a profound way of situating the viewer into a dynamically contrived space, a veritable scene for which there is no true visual referent. It’s architecture absent a building you might say. They’re visual antitheses, images of something that the eye cannot see, contradictions of and for the human tool required to experience it. Out of an absolutely gorgeous and indeed awe-inspiring experience too great to comprehend or capture comes a visual fiction in which one might fluctuate between wonder and alienation, distance and nearness, shade and light. Sometimes I think they relate to plein-air painting of the 20th-century, digitally impressionistic images openly bearing thinly perceivable signs of each frame that comprises the full image, and a more accurate depiction of how we perceive the passage of time.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I guess you’re right about the “Sublime.” And that’s why I said it wouldn’t be inaccurate to say that.

How much does architecture affect your work? I think everything in the show works as an individual object, but you clearly seem to be interested in interconnectedness and the gallery environment as a whole. I hate that question. I get it a lot.

List of works

Man With Axe (Lake Minnewanka, Alberta Canada) no. 1, 2013 archival digital print 59 x 209 inches

Reverse side detail: *Man With Axe (Lake Minnewanka, Alberta Canada) no. 3*, 2013 archival digital print 59 x 227 inches

A Simple Demonstration of an (Unreal) Artifact with No Ends, 2013 Digital video projection; 1:30 minutes

Untitled (stroke exercises 18 and 24, Banff, Alberta), 2013 Digital video, paired monitor display; non-synchronized loops, audio Dimensions variable

Toward a Reformation of Labor (My North-side Knapsack), 2013 utility tarp, select winter trekking gear, wood architectural fragments, Gränfors Bruk 23” 3.5lb Small Splitting Axe, gloves 120 inches diameter

Toward a Theory of Sculpture, 2013 Ink and acrylic on paper; 5 pieces, 30 x 22 inches each

Man With Axe (Lake Minnewanka, Alberta Canada) no. 4, 2013 digital print on polyfabric 10 panels, 120 x 59 inches each

All works courtesy of the artist.

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