

Interview with Peter Kirkiles: 2012

ARS - I've been lucky enough to have the opportunity to 'live' with a few of your pieces over the years and it always strikes me how heavy and solid they are. To the eye they seem like objects of fantasy--oversized tools of visual play more than actual function. But as soon as I had to move a 'wisk' or 'level' I quickly realized there is nothing 'fake' about these tools. Carved from solid wood or fitted with steel trimmings; they are as authentic in materiality as the thing they replicate. Suddenly my fantasy of being Alice in a kind of 'Hardware Wonderland' meets the reality of the material. What is it about size, specifically *oversize*, that is so fascinating for you? And how do you reconcile oversize with function and non-function?

PK - I don't think I perceive the objects as "oversize" at all... sometimes I have made big things small, and small things big. I scale the piece in order to find the right proportion, and the material I choose for the piece usually makes the object feel "real" to me. I don't really care about the original function of the object, yet I feel I put some element back into it so it feels good to handle.

ARS – You use the word 'feel' rather than 'look'. In sculpting, how much thought is on sense/tactility and how much in visuality? In other words, have you ever made a piece that 'felt' right but 'looked' wrong or visa versa?

PK - Exactly, you could say I acknowledge the viewer by offering a resemblance of a common object, yet it's just an excuse for me to explore the object physically. This active participation with "feeling" is the point of sculpture? right?

ARS – Yes, I agree, feeling in both the literal and emotional sense too. Going on this idea of exploring an object physically...how do you choose the objects you sculpt? Is there an inherent beauty or harmony you find in the 'original' tool? Or is that something you try to bring out through reimagining it sculpturally?

PK - The objects for me do have importance. I remember taking an undergraduate course at The Boston Museum school called "Contemporary Diets" the artist who taught the course was Mags Harries. We discussed culture's relation to objects and created pieces as contemporary icons. I have still after almost 20 years based my art making on my relation to objects and their cultural history. My latest piece "Harmonica No.1" is absolutely chosen on this thesis. I have been thinking a lot about Woody Guthrie and his use of the Harmonica... I think there is an association between Guthrie's music in the 1930's and our present cultural and economic climate. The object's resemblance carries this cultural history. The iconography is intentional in my sculpture.

ARS – Guthrie's harmonica, zig zag rulers, a dovetail saw...the objects you recreate have a kind of nostalgia that harkens back to the days when 'grip' meant something, when using your hands did not involve sliding your finger across an iphone screen. Can we expect a giant iphone from you next? Or do you think modern technology (Kindles, iphones, ipads et ectera) have driven a wedge between 'use-value' and 'cultural value'?

PK- I am trying to make Art.... To answer your question, I would not want to make a giant iphone... maybe a giant typewriter, or fountain pen could get the point across better. I nostalgically remember the whack of a typewriter lever hitting the paper... But only in the context of the Art gallery could the whack of the typewriter key effect resonate poetically like I have described... many people still use typewriters... and they function perfectly well as they always have...it's just amazing to be confronted with Art, or Art ideas directly.

ARS– How did you find yourself as a sculpture? What early experiences helped define your artistic career?

PK- After undergraduate school I found a job in New Haven helping fabricate large scale sculpture with Peter Versteeg... he had been fabricating Art since before I was born. In the 60's he had been the layout guy for Lippincott in North Haven producing some of the largest work of Oldenburg, Louise Nevelson, Wesslesman, Ellsworth Kelly etc... in 1987 he started his own business and I was one of his first employees... I learned his methodologies directly from him. I worked for him on and off for several years until I went to graduate school. I would make my own work after hours using materials from projects there...it was an amazing experience. This is where I was exposed to the large scale Art fabrication world... I continued throughout graduate school always supporting myself through Art fabrication.... in Chicago, then with my own Art and Architectural fabrication business in New York City... it wasn't until seven years ago did I move and built my own studio in Connecticut did I then begin making my own sculpture again... So, in fact my tool sculptures are referential to my history working at Art!

ARS- Your pieces have a unique material quality. You've used claro walnut, spalted applewood, ebony, big leaf maple...how do you choose which wood is right for which piece and how do these different materials give a one-of-a-kind quality to each piece?

PK - I continue to run a business out of my studio fabricating specialty parts and pieces for Art and Architecture... usually I end up with a small percentage of material left over from jobs... most of these jobs specify quality and unique materials and they end up cluttering my studio eventually finding there way into my imagination as the impetus for my next self generated Art object. I usually have three or four unfinished pieces going on in my studio at any given point. When I see something making sense I start working on it...

ARS- How does your environment/work space affect your art? Is your studio and it's location critical to your creative process?

PK- I have had many studios, I think the most important thing to me is time, I never seem to have enough time!

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