

Matt Paweski and Ricky Swallow In conversation - August 8, 2014

## Kerf Talk

Ricky Swallow: *Part of my thinking coming to your studio was this idea of sculptural ingredients, what makes a Matt Paweski? The material structure of these sculptures hasn't changed much in the last few years, yet the forms have really evolved. What would you say about your decision to limit the amount of materials or ingredients that go into a sculpture? It seems like you've always worked within certain material parameters, whether that's the gauge of the metal, just metal, wood, rivets...like that's your toolkit or something.*

Matt Paweski: Over the last few years I've found myself trying to simplify things more and more, its something I have to constantly remind myself of. Ultimately the decisions I make with these material and graphic restrictions in mind are more sophisticated, leading to a more unified work. The materials haven't changed much, the real shift is in the way things are constructed - the intersection of things - and that my line and the more organic information is now contained within the frame of those materials. The works are more refined than they used to be. Before there was welding and weird hinges and pinning and now its just a simple intersection that connects the wood and the steel - a copper rivet.

RS: *One of the things that's most identifiable within all your work- apart from the materials and color- is your line. And the line's changed from mapping more organic forms, creating the form through cutting it out- to this new graphic intrusion or articulation inside of these forms. The 'kerf' cutting is both a way to create a black graphic line, or to create a delicate aperture, depending on where you're standing.*

MP: It took me a long time to understand how to translate drawing into sculpture. I have always felt that my work needed to have a certain notion of volume to be relevant - like the worked mass of a Vincent Fecteau sculpture - but my brain doesn't work like that, my work is rooted in drawing and in line and in planer information. There is a flickering that happens between the graphic and the aperture "kerf" cuts, which creates an odd planer volume.

RS: *In the past we talked a lot about the Chicago Imagists. If I think about the Imagists, whether its Karl Wirsum, Jim Nutt or Christina Ramberg, there is this really specific line that's identifiable in that work which comes out of drawing. With this current group of sculptures - as materially rigid as they are, I'm aware that drawing is an important medium in how they are conceived and constructed.*

MP: Right, also with the Imagists, they're attention to the detail and minuteness of things is really important - that's mixed with a deep understanding of their craft, their works were so extremely tight in technique. There's definitely a relationship between their work and the work that I have always been interested in making. I feel like my curve and my line has found a place where my hand can be evident but it doesn't have to be this whole big mess, it can be a detail within something else. Over the last year I've been totally obsessed with early 1900's Vienna, specifically the work of Koloman Moser and Dagobert Peche. I feel there's a close relationship to some of the madness contained within the panel of a Karl Wirsum painting and the ornate inlays on a Koloman Moser cabinet. It's funk within the framework of something else. I'm really drawn to how Moser uses, say a chair, as rigid geometric framework to then incorporate something totally ornate. That relationship - between something that's weird and personal and organic mixed with something that's functional and useful and rigid is something I have always been attracted too.

RS: *It does seem that with Moser or Hoffmann, the furniture is often just an excuse or a template to then allow for the inclusion of some kind of decorative or graphic embellishment.*

*I think about the studio as a place for material translation - and influence is one thing that's also translated, or a non-listed medium or something. I know you went to Marfa, Texas, years ago on the Bruce Hainley field trip and it seems like it took 4-5 years for the influence of Judd to show up in the works. Certain works are more referential; potentially homages to things you're looking at, and some seem to have more of an approximated atmosphere...to say Taliesin West or the Memphis group. The works are very associative to different disciplines, to the discipline of sculpture, the discipline of furniture, to the art of installation and interior design, how do you navigate all those influences?*

MP: I'm most influenced by work with an extreme attention to detail - where every bit of everything is considered. This extreme focus builds an all encompassing visual language, where the work thats made refers more to the other works produced than to things outside of them. My work has always been layered with the bits of other things, and certain works deal more or less directly with other objects or environments. I think they read as different disciplines because I have always worked in multiple fields, whether metalworking, painting, or building furniture, and those processes come through. Many times technical elements can be as influential on the work as another artist or object.

RS: *So these sculptures, I think of them as having a diagrammatic motion or some kind of motion that's preserved, and that's what I mean by the idea of diagrammatic. They don't suggest movement but they imply the potential for movement, or the potential of proportions to extend or something to pop open.*

MP: Right, the edge of a door propped ajar, something about to spring out or an implied awning that you pass under.

RS: *They behave in a way that references furniture... an abstracted windowpane, a sconce, a screen, the movement of a cabinet door or the opening of a grandfather clock. It's not that they read like functional furniture, they have the attributes, the sensibility of furniture, both in their materiality and scale and the specificity of how they sit in a room. Do certain works for you feel like they belong in a certain space, or a certain part of the room based on the type of object being referenced?*

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MP: The form definitely determines the works presentation, though the larger design of the installation is more important than trying to point back to something that inspired the work. I like referring to some kind of function but never actually getting there. I think interior design is interesting - considering all the parts and their display and their placement in an environment, the way the Secessionists produced every object and every detail that went into each space. In many cases they even designed and built the structures that the works went into - so they had total control in determining the flow of the room and how you moved through and viewed the objects.

RS: *Yes, those designers were also involved with exhibition design, the posters all that kind of stuff and it does seem like it was a complete art. If you read the Adolf Loos essays he's really advocating for higher standards and expectations-both for the designer and the client. A large part of which is about quality of materials and workmanship. The difference between making your own work is that control and that goes back to some of these artists and designers we've been talking about, they want quality control from the very inception of the idea to the completion of the object. And that's another thing that has been satisfying to watch from the outside of your practice for a while, everything is made in-house, materials come in, they're worked, they're cut, they're sanded, they're colored, they're finished and it all happens in this small room. The investment in a new tool can influence a work, or the way you episodically adapt the layout of the studio to suit what your working on. That kind of workshop mentality is about not throwing anything away too soon... adapting to what's working and you can't do that as easily when someone else is making your sculptures, right?*

MP: You're totally right, although that's tricky because you could start getting really fussy and nothing will ever get finished... The workshop mentality has helped me to set up a system of working that allows a lot of freedom but also limits many of my decisions, so that I can actually get things done. And I think that speaks to a history of being a carpenter, and commercial painter - having a job that has a certain set of parameters - you can add flourish in some areas, but basically you just have to get it done.

RS: *When you look at each sculpture, although there is this recognized ability that it could've been reconfigured differently, it seems like each sculpture couldn't exist in another state. It is exactly as it should be. I think that's probably a testament to trying to be, like you said, more decisive about decisions...but then you have the color to slow you down!*

MP: Color is always the hardest part, certain things can't be a certain color, and it's the fastest, easiest way to ruin something! I try to think about the works as soaked in color, to make the color decisions unified with the sculpture, so that there's no distractions from the piece as a whole. Scale has a lot to do with what the colors going to be. For the most part, I'm drawing, and working on the forms and sitting with the previous work, and trying to dial in the color of next piece at the same time. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

RS: *What's cool to me is how sometimes the same color behaves so differently on the steel and the wood within each sculpture. With the wood it's almost like a watercolor effect, where it enhances whatever grain is there, it really absorbs into the wood. Whereas with the metal there is a lot of treatment - waxing and sanding in order to get the sort of powdery look that absorbs light.*

MP: The wood soaks in the color and the metal radiates it. I use these materials exactly for these properties, I try to let them be what they are, try not to disguise things. The wood retains its grain and the color is stained in and the metal is painted and sanded many times to highlight its surface. The way the materials and color behave is similar to the way the cut lines turn from light to dark when you move around the works, the sculptures flicker as you move around them and these color and material shifts accentuate that.

RS: *I think it seems imperative that once the pieces got off the wall and onto plinths they needed a really particular way to breathe, both in the room and optically. Plinths are almost as tricky as color. You don't want to put gemstones on the sides, but you don't want to get a roller and paint a piece of chipboard either. The proportion of the kick [shadow gap] seems to imply secessionist functionality and it gives the works a weird sense of elevation....also how narrow some of the plinths are. It seems like one of the things you're thinking about is how can you best serve this sculpture through its display, both through its placement in the room, and its placement on the plinth.*

MP: Yeah definitely. I've been thinking a lot about the pedestals. Trying to incorporate them more, thinking of them as a specific piece of furniture, more integrated with the sculpture that sits on top of it. The pedestals are something that's built into the entire process, the scale and proportions refer to the sculpture on top while setting up a more dynamic installation overall.

RS: *This little blue piece - Small Plaque (With Wedge/Blue), 2014, the blue seems like a makeup blue, such a specific powdery blue, and the lines cut into the form look like some kind of weird Donald Judd talking bubble or something, those pinched curved cut lines again, they remind me of some of the exterior lines that mapped your earlier sculptures. There is a type of cartoon economy to how the line is used. But again it is walled off, or the audibility of the lines is limited. This is about the smallest sculpture as I've seen you make. Was the impetus to make it?*

MP: For one, it was a necessary shift in scale. I made the largest piece so far for this show so I felt like the room was going to need something tiny and intense. The blue piece is a small detail on the wall, and I feel it has a lot of energy, like a small jewel. The two cuts on each end create a kind of pinched pressure - or the graphic representation of pressure, which is then intensified with that dense blue.

RS: *It's a gesture that repeats itself in a bunch of these sculptures; the cursive cuts direct a lot of the energy inward to the sculptures. It concentrates the looking, all the information is pointing inward. It is either creating or relieving a pressure.*

MP: The cursive cuts focus the way you view the works, moving you around the pieces both visually and physically. I have always thought of them as a way to describe an organic characteristic to a geometric shape. Like a square that is swelling, or wrinkled, or fraying. They describe a certain kind of sculptural volume but as a graphic representation. It's a way for me to sculpt works, but through drawing.