I Built This City

Joshua Isaiah Rodenberg

Virginia Commonwealth University

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I BUILT THIS CITY

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

JOSHUA ISAIAH RODENBERG
Bachelors of Science, University of Southern Indiana, 2005

Director: BILL HAMMERSLEY
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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Acknowledgement

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Abstract

I BUILT THIS CITY

By Joshua Isaiah Rodenberg, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Bill Hammersley
Craft/Material Studies

I have been overwhelmed by curiosity, a curiosity that is keeping my desire to make valid. I have an endless infatuation with growth and constructing. My aim is to juxtapose an academic and a “rudimentary” approach that will set up contradictions in which traditional woodworkers may find irreverence towards.
**Artist Statement**

My work is inspired by vernacular constructions, being available resources that have an apparent hand made aesthetic. They are made with a mixture of intuitive and conscious decisions that dictate how and what is built. This body of work utilizes an academic and “untrained” construction technique, both illogical and logical connections. In the construction process, I make decisions to create absurd situations that have structural issues. I build with the idea of finding a temporary solution that can be extremely haphazard. The solutions I come to allow me to make quick judgments and to continue on to the next component.

It is important that my work grows in a sporadic manner to reflect its unplanned development. While I am working intuitively, the work expands rapidly, and it is continuously changing. The conditions I set for myself usually result in congestion, confusion and the building up of “wasted space.” My work is fueled by the problems that I create, and it continues to expand in all directions.

I consider my work to be three-dimensional paintings and drawings that have come off the wall. I draw with wood and string to create direct lines in space that stretch across the room. I want the viewer to follow the lines that start from the center component and end with the discovery of the simplicities and complexities I have constructed.
Chronology

When I started at Virginia Commonwealth University I did not know what to do with the new found freedom that I was submerged in. I embraced the range of ideas and possibilities that the faculty and my peers suggested to me. The question of why I make functional objects arose and I did not have an answer for this. Professor Bill Hammersley showed me images of graduate alumni, (such as Karl Burkhiemer and Travis Townsend) and how their artwork’s function differed from practical terms by having little to no function at all.

These ideas sparked a wild fire within and opened up the possibilities of my own exploration. I thought about the relationships that exist between people and their furnishings and their attachment to these objects. I wanted to connect my viewers to the work I was making by combining two functional objects to make one nonfunctional piece. For example, the piece “Pull my heart strings” (fig.1) was a hybrid of a table and a pedal steel guitar. The tabletop was a curved surface with strings attached that lead up to an abstracted heart. This combination was nonfunctional, as either a table or as a guitar.

The idea of “mixed objects” became a challenge because it forced everything I made to look certain ways. It felt to me as if each object became just another abstracted table. The aesthetics of these pieces employed the look of the work I had been doing as an
undergraduate. I was still searching for something different, something that reflected my personality more deeply.

The furniture aspect of this work did not necessarily appeal to me, but as I am a musician I was interested in further exploring my relationship with instruments. While in high school, my class went on a field trip to the St. Louis children’s museum. The building is a restored factory that had been rebuilt with multiple levels of amusement. Some friends and I found one floor that was particularly intriguing that had a percussive room that we entertained ourselves in for a while. We slowly found that we had attracted an audience because of our enthusiasm and tribal like beats we generated. I wanted to recreate this same type of experience in an interactive piece but build different types of instruments. The installation would consist of a variety of percussive instruments, each having different ways of being played. After building several of these instruments, I realized that I was rebuilding existing instruments, just in different shapes. A second thought passed through my mind that I was making something that was very similar to what the Blue Man Group does. The idea of making instruments ended but the idea of the interaction between the viewer and the object has remained.

In the spring semester of 2006 I wanted my work to undergo a drastic change. I needed to create a seismic shift in what my work was trying to do, and subsequently in what it looked like. In the past I had mostly made furniture with rich surfaces and organic forms. I decided to try the opposite, and to make objects that were smooth and crisp clean forms with neutral colors. I realized that the most important thing that I wanted to do was for my work to be honest. The only way I knew how to do this was to put my own
personality and my humor directly into the work. I came upon the notion of working with simplistic machines, machines with actions that would engage the senses through their movement. These machines would do tasks that were totally ridiculous and unnecessary. The piece “Wiggle Machine” (fig. 2) consisted of two boxes spaced next to one another on the wall. One box had a hand crank that was connected to a hidden pulley with a string that lead up through it. The string continued over to another pulley, which reached over to the other box that had a cylindrical spring loaded, stick pointed upward. When the crank was turned, the string tightened and due to the friction slipped off the stick making a motion left to right, all while a strange springing sound occurred. The work promoted a sense of curiosity and playfulness that could be discovered only through viewer interaction. I was interested in the reaction of the viewer, whether the piece generated laughter or confusion.

During the summer of 2006 I took a workshop with Travis Townsend at Peter’s Valley Craft Center in upstate New Jersey. In this three-day labor intensive workshop, I was free to make whatever I wanted. Townsend taught me how to directly use my immediate energy by letting go of the craftsmanship that I was so familiar with. My ideas are always so random and quick, and this way of working helped me to create more freely, and to get the ideas out in a hurry. This way of working was so liberating and natural that I found I had made seven new pieces just in three days.

Over the next several months leading up to the fall semester, I found that I still had the intense energy Peter’s Valley had evoked. I was working more intuitively where as before I made multiple sketches and models before beginning to build. I now was inspired
by the shapes of the scraps of wood from others and incorporated them into my own work. The pieces like in “Circle Cart,” (fig. 3) began as simple cart like objects with two wheels and some sort of kickstand. Their exteriors had a sloppy painted surface with what seemed to be carelessly constructed objects. These works came to me so quickly and were almost sketch like.

While making the carts, I was also constructing other forms that used pieces of plywood I reclaimed from found objects. These found items were already constructed for other uses but had interesting shapes that I wanted to work with. After collecting what I thought was enough material, I would go to work building my forms. My pile of started works began to grow as an inventory for larger and more complex work. I noticed after awhile that my quick constructions reminded me of the barn that my father and his two brothers had built when I was a child. They constructed the building using mostly recycled materials. Neither my father nor his brothers were carpenters; so to say the least this buildings’ construction was odd. Thinking of this barn led me to combine smaller pieces into “Wall Spaces”(fig. 4), where I used multiple containers to construct with different sized slat like surfaces juxtaposed together and cantilevered off the wall three feet. These containers reminded me of the spaces I had hidden in as a child inside of that barn. Each piece that I added became another space within a space, each with its own door. The work intruded into the personal space of the viewer and was held onto the wall by a mere three screws. I wanted to continue exploring the idea of “the illogical” by making the work look very temperamental and as if it could fall at any moment. I wanted the viewer to be curious about the space that the piece intruded into and the space it contained.
I liked the direction that “Wall Space” was headed but there were some formal issues that I was facing. I was not happy with the busy exterior surfaces on the piece. There were lines moving in every direction highlighted by the constructed wood forms with their painted exterior, I felt that they had too many colors. The functionless compartments that the viewer still had access to trouble me. I was not sure if I wanted them to have the ability to interact so directly. I did enjoy working off of the wall, making barn referenced constructions by combining the smaller detailed parts together. At that point I began to realize that I was making three-dimensional paintings or drawings by using boards of various widths and lengths to create direct line compositions in space. As in the piece “Wall Hutch,” (fig. 5) a small complex section of constructed boards were attached to a larger simple container cantilevering off the wall three feet. The inside of the form was only visible through a synthetic silk screen attached to the front. When peering through the screen, rays of light would draw on the interior to make an illuminating composition just as the barn would do.

This last group of work encouraged me to push the idea of working off the wall even further. I was getting a positive response about the physical tension between a large piece that was barely attached to the wall and its relationship to the ground. There was a lack of logic and became an illusion of collapsing at any moment. This inspired me to on a think larger scale and more illogically. I started to experiment with using more volume and less mass so that the constructions could grow larger and stretch out farther out. I began to be influenced by other constructions besides the barn such as vernacular constructions and city planning.
Working through a variety of experiments in my work, I finally felt that I had created a style and process of working that was honest, and connected directly to my personality. It was from all of these “failures” that I gained the feeling of being successful. This reflection can be summed up by a quote from an article written by Joel Fisher called *The Success of Failure* when he states, “we view success as finished perfection-- at other times as the perfectibility of growth.”
Influences

I have had numerous influences over the years that have aided me in progressing as an artist. These influences have been artists in all media. I feel in order to be a properly developed artist, one has to subject oneself to all different types of styles, processes, and media. This is as important as making the artwork itself. Artists can and should be influenced by absolutely everything. It is the reason we live, breathe, and create. Observing is forged into interpretation and creates the voice of the muse inside every artist.

Wendell Castle was the first major influential artist in my early development. His stylized sculptural furniture takes the form of organic shapes that range in function from chairs and desks to cabinets and evoked a curiosity not found in most furniture. I remember the first time I saw one of his pieces at The Sculptural Objects and Functional Art exhibition in Chicago. It was a finely crafted vanity desk that was veneered with an exotic wood not indigenous to North America. It had a set of two drawers, but they were hidden with no handles were present. Upon the vanity, sat a large mirror. Feeling intimidated by gallery employees circling around me, I was apprehensive about touching this piece. My wife, (not having these same feelings) pulled on the left drawer to discover a electric pink neon sign behind the mirror that said “HOT”, and when she pulled out the right drawer it said “COOL.” Finding this sent chills down my spine, I was struck by the pure simplicity of it. Up to this point my ideas of art had felt confined to highly intellectual
and conceptually based work. This vanity seemed to find humor in itself that seemed unprecedented or slightly forbidden. This started a chain reaction in my mind that lead to many ideas for my own work.

Castle’s work has a positive outlook on the value of critiquing ones self. He created what he calls “My 10 Adopted Rules of Thumb” in which he gives his opinion of how an artist should approach their artwork. One of my personal favorites is rule number one, which says, “If you are in love with an idea, you are no judge of its beauty or value.” It questions why I want to make something even before executing and taught me to pace my initial ideas and not to act on my first instinct. This is a quality of a mature artist that is displayed in their progression.

My previous professor John McNaughton at the University of Southern Indiana became one of my strongest mentors. McNaughton is prolific for his sculptural objects and stylized furniture, along with his energy and spirit to produce which rivals any twenty year old. Even in his Sixties, McNaughton shows in several galleries around the country and is constantly developing commissions that keep him busy years in advance. I have worked with him on several commissions of large whimsical houses and other sculptural objects ranging in scale.

More often than not, I sense that an artist becomes fixed in a routine of making and selling one particular style of work. Through the years, McNaughton has progressed as an artist by working in different series of work since the early seventies. His work has constantly evolved yet somehow continued to look like it is his own. I call up John every once in awhile and ask, “What are you working on now?” The response is always
different, but he always is more often than not working towards some large project. I have every ambition to be the similar to John by challenging myself and constantly evolving as an artist.

The imagination within surrealist paintings inspires me greatly. Max Ernst in particular creates elaborate textures and juxtaposes different incongruous objects to make interesting compositions. As in “Celebes” (fig. 6), Ernst places a headless woman, an elephant bull machine-like combination, fish flying in the sky, and other random shapes that coexist together to make a beautiful composition. This is something I seek within my work by constructing situations that do not quite fit. Together there is a liberation that opens up the door to anything one can think of. I admire the decisions Ernst made to develop these compositions whether it is impulsive or planned, I work towards the same balance in my method of working.

The work of Trenton Doyle Hancock intrigues me greatly. During the spring of 2006 I visited a show of his in New York City at the James Cohan Gallery. The show was titled, “In the Blestian Room” (fig. 7), in which Hancock filled the entire wall space of the gallery with hand written descriptions of what goes on in this room like, “Minutes are unlimited in the blestian room.” I later found out that “blestian” was made up by Hancock and was defined as a combination of the words “blessed” and “Christian.” His three dimensional paintings depict absurd narratives that were hung over the top of all these sentences. Hancock uses a thick amount of paint and collages images together gluing more canvas on top of his abstracted figure paintings. Seeing this work was an overwhelming experience because I felt so very small in this space that was dominated by these thick
black letters that gave me things to think about. Because of the repetitious patterning of 
the letters, your eyes would blur some of the lines together until one of the scenes in the 
paintings would give you something to focus on. This made every detail to me harder to 
find but more rewarding when I discovered them. I became interested in this 
overwhelming quality because it evoked curiosity and playfulness that I wanted to explore in my own work.

I also find myself looking to cartoons for inspiration, perhaps more than most outside sources. There is something very comforting about the illogical and absurd behaviors that the characters express. Cartoons have a way of taking a social problem and masking it with a witty subtext and goofy behavior. These cartoon situations are cute and humorous, but in reality they becomes a genuine critique of our society. I relate to cartoons in this manner because I myself often cope with situations through the use of humor. The subject may be a complex problem but the one thing everyone can do under tough conditions is laugh. Thus it is only natural to apply the humorous and illogical to my art making as well.
Thesis Work

My obsession to make contributed to the piece in my MFA thesis show “I built this city.” (fig. 8) I have been overwhelmed by curiosity, a curiosity that is keeping this desire valid. I have an endless infatuation with growth and constructing. My making is like ivy that will not stop growing until it consumes all of the surrounding plant life. This plant has deeply rooted itself into my brain, causing me to make this image, an image that is growing uncontrollably (and could have no end.) The process of making this piece has itself become like that ivy and it demands its own space. Each board is a limb of a plant that crawls in every direction, taking over the room. It searches for nourishment just like the ivy. When I am building, I'm always thinking of how I might push the limits of what the work does physically.

Assembling with wood and string provides the capability to have the structure reach out to the opposing walls, and stretch across the room. This piece spans seventeen feet from left to right and fourteen feet from front to back, without touching the ground. Each facet of the construction originates from a central component that acts as its root. Off of the main structure, different sections branch in haphazard directions, that sometimes end up clustering together. They all depend on one another to keep themselves from falling apart. I am working to build a community that is reliant upon itself.
The piece: *I built this city* is a conglomeration of shapes that take inspiration from cityscapes. When looking into the structure, the string and boards work together to create an engaging negative space. It starts with the main structure and branches outward, it is here that it compares to the lack of planning that urban sprawl creates in cities. As in urban sprawl, the structure had no blue print and subsequently it creates ridiculous situations that have a myriad of repercussions. The result of all of this is congestion, confusion, and wasted space. For this installation there is a sense of collapsing where the “start” of the construction is in comparison to the withered inner city occurring after urban sprawl. The center component has maximized the space it has initially acquired, leaving the only option of growing outward. The “city” contradicts itself, because the growth continues unchecked and sooner or later it will be too big to support its own weight.

Over the years I have experimented with many materials, currently wood and string are sufficient, and aid me in realizing my concepts. I understand the limits of these materials and find that I can push the boundaries of what they normally can do. I am familiar with many techniques used in woodworking, but I choose not to work under traditional guidelines. I do use traditional joinery, such as lap joints, and mortise and tenons, but I also slap the wood together using nails and screws. My aim is to juxtapose an academic and a “rudimentary” approach that will set up contradictions in which woodworkers may find irreverence towards. It is almost central to my efforts and concern that I find this all absurd, ironic, and humorous. It pokes fun at the long labor intensive processes that a traditional woodworker is a custom to (and I’ve grown tired of), but in irony turns into a time-consuming process. Besides the visual, it is as well important that a
tactile quality be apparent in the construction of the pieces. I want the viewer to embrace
the construction as well as have it refer to hand made processes that differs from the
expectations of fine furniture.

My methods utilize direct, and unplanned actions but also consist of the
reconfigurations of parts that take into consideration where structural joints need to be. I
apply an intuitive approach that allows me to work quickly but also can embrace the
haphazard. By using this intuition, I can avoid sketching and build my work with a raw
and direct approach. This facilitates my ability to work with each section that I add to be
not unified and for all of the constructions to reflect actions and attitudes over the length of
time it took to create the sculpture. I mess up, and decide to leave it the way it is or fix it,
by an endless process of adding or subtracting material. I make very conscious decisions
that actually create challenging situations, so my problem solving intuition and the rawness
stays apparent. All of this in turn can create a series of chain reactions that exacerbate the
problems as well. I must work to extricate myself from these dysfunctional situations, and
it becomes a game to prevent the whole structure from collapsing in upon itself.

It is so common for products to be mass produced and consumers have forgotten or
ignore the hand processes that go into the making. Most people understand that a machine
made the bottle that they drink from, but they do not consider the person who operated that
machine. My craftsmanship (or lack thereof) works to remind the viewer of that person,
who made the work. I want people to take into consideration the time and effort that went
into making every board and string, all of which were placed in just such a way, and to see
the beauty in the imperfect construction. If I can transport the viewer to a place where they can look at my installation as a three dimensional painting or drawing that consists of a composition using wood and string to draw lines in space I will feel it is successful.

The wood I use is specifically (and importantly) the waste from other students. It is found lumber and the component parts of old furniture that I seek out. Having been around so many woodworking students over the years, I saw so much “good material” that was considered trash. I’ve inherited a pack rat mentality directly from my father, and I have trouble throwing anything away. I find myself rummaging through the waste barrels and picking out perfectly good pieces of wood that were either too small, or were awkwardly shaped so no one else could use them. These scraps help dictate to me the composition of the piece. I also have acquired materials by taking apart objects that I found in dumpsters and in alleyways. I will ride my bike through the alleyways of Richmond, until I come upon something that I find might be useful. Some times it is only a lonely board that was discarded after someone has remodeled their home or it could be a dining room table that is left out and picked up by the garbage collectors. If the found piece is too large (like a coffee table), I will cut off a piece rather than take the whole thing. The items that people throw away always amaze me. In the woodshop, these objects can be found to still have a life left in them. I “reanimate” these objects in a different ways, that are in radical opposition to what they were originally used for. It can be seen as glorifying these objects for what they are or just as a way to use them like any other material. The “value” of each piece of wood becomes unimportant where as to a fine furniture maker, the “value of the piece depends greatly on the wood one uses. Taking from many scrap and junk piles, I
have acquired different species of woods, all which vary in cost. By joining a piece of expensive mahogany and a piece of cheap white pine together I am hoping their value becomes the same by becoming part of a collective that is valued in creating the overall structure.

My intention is to have the piece be a growth that is hovering in space. The mass and volume are in battle with each other, and create a three dimensional form that is a contradiction in weight and size. Although it is large (in terms of volume), the installation’s vulnerability is actually its mass. The sense of suspension in the images is amplified by attaching the foundation to the wall instead of the floor all of which hopefully creates a dramatic effect. It produces a sense of tension that makes the viewers unsure of its own or their own stability and there is a need to be cautious not to get too close. Such as a dominating patch of ivy or the senseless expansion of a city, the restricted space in the gallery combines with the tension to leave the viewer “overwhelmed.”
Bibliography


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Education

Masters of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA 2007
Bachelors of Science, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, Indiana 2005

Professional Experience

2007 Adjunct Faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA,

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2004 Assistant to John McNaughton Commission for the Evansville Central Library,
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Teacher’s Assistant, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN
The Stanley Hall Public Art Bus Shelter Project, Evansville, IN
Teacher’s Assistant, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN

2003 Teacher’s Assistant, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN,
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2002 Studio Assistant, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN

Grants
2006 Virginia Commonwealth University Travel Grant

Exhibition Record
2007 MFA Biennial exhibition, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, DE
MFA Thesis Show, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
2006 "Fluff My Pillow” Show, Inns of Virginia, Richmond, VA
“The Goods”, Gallery 5, Richmond, VA
W/E Exchange Exhibition Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA
2005 FAB Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
University of Southern Indiana Juried Student Art Show, Awarded Best in Woodworking merit award Evansville, Indiana
Senior Seminar Show, New Harmony, Indiana
Regional College Art Juried Competition, Henderson, Kentucky Awarded Best in Show
2004 39th annual Owensboro art Guild Juried Art Show, Owensboro, Kentucky Awarded Best in Show
Funk In The City benefit Auction Evansville, Indiana
University of Southern Indiana Juried Student Art Show
•Solo exhibition at Penny Lane Coffee Shop, Evansville IN
2003 38th annual Owensboro art Guild Juried Art Show, Owensboro, Kentucky Honorable Mention Award
University of Southern Indiana Juried Student Art Show
Working Together Juried show at Evansville Museum of art, History, and Science
2002 DJ’s Art Gallery Group Show Evansville, Indiana
University of Southern Indiana Juried Student Art Show
Awarded Sophomore Scholarship
2001 University of Southern Indiana Juried Student Art Show
Awarded Art Club Merit Award

Expanded Experiences

2007 Member of the Graduate Artist Association
Member of The Furniture Society
Member of the Contemporary Craft Society
2006 Member of the Graduate Artist Association
Member of The Furniture Society
Member of the Contemporary Craft Society
2005 Member of the Graduate Artist Association
Member of the Contemporary Craft Society
President of the University of Southern Indiana Art Club
2004 President of the University of Southern Indiana Art Club
2003 Member of the University of Southern Indiana Art Club
2002 Member of the University of Southern Indiana Art Club
2001 Member of the University of Southern Indiana Art Club

Visiting Lecture
2006 Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

Publications

Style Weekly, April, 2007
Convocation, Oct. 2005, volume 1 issue 2

References

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Pull my Heart Strings Figure 1.

Wiggle Machine Figure 2.

Figure 3. Circle Kart

Figure 4. Wall Spaces
Figure 5. Wall Hutch

Figure 6. Celebes

Figure 7. In The Blestian Room
Figure 8. I Built This City