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Artist Interview: Matt Woodward

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Arendtstrasse, Variable Height 10'x8', Ball Point Pen Mixed-media on Paper, 2013

Art-Rated's Sarah Elise Hall in conversation with Chicago-based artist Matthew Woodward, who currently has a solo show titled "The Forgiveness Beneath the Mountain or Sleep, Repose, and Duration in the Brokenhearted Year" at Linda Warren Projects in Chicago, IL.

AR: Matt, I met you in Berlin, where we both worked through a long, cold winter side by side in our respective studios. The 19th century building that housed our joint studios was being torn down and rebuilt around us. Part of Berlin's gentrification ... with the exception of our two lonely studios that remained untouched as little time capsules from another era... and during those three months, in that strange space, I had the pleasure of observing your singular process. I saw your work develop in a frenzy of mark making and erasure, and at times I was convinced that this artistic fury was actually about keeping warm, but then I saw the forms emerge from that blank white paper and knew that your process was integral to the outcome. You would strike the paper with such rhythmic precision and intensity that it became musical. These enormous drawings of yours consist of fine staccato marks that tear at the paper and seem to tear at time.

MW: Yes, that was quite a winter. Just unendingly cold it seemed. And indeed, funny you should say, I was definitely aware of some kind of sharp, bodily rhythm while I got into these drawings. A sort of tightrope walkers repeatability came to. I think that frenzy of mark-making, as you call it, that striking violence is a quality latent in art based on the primacy of the body, and the mark is a musical index, it accommodates that latency.

What you were hearing all damn day was crosshatching, some kind of eyelash thin crosshatching with a ballpoint pen over treated paper that I would regularly knife off, or sand or tear and start into again. They eventually became these huge swipes that arc, in the end, the hard elbows of a human contacting. Initially, I think what I was interested in was how this tedious, simple crosshatching technique and its erasure would become a part to the whole. Having done projects like this before with reductive graphite drawings, I knew how it would become visually integral to the outcome of the final image, however, what started to get me was the physical distance created in the limited

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Emma on Cuneiform tablet featuring a tally of sheep and goats, from Tello in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). Credit Gianni Dagli OrtiCorbis

range of marks. The accumulation and handling of it brings you straight back to the body, that primacy, it became the manifest abstract rhythm of the body itself which, I think, is painful and hooking, and immediately there is this distance, a fussy and trapped distance in the marks.

Few did this as poetically as Agnes Martin, who described distance through grids, which are dense and enclosing, yet her texturally terse and fixed paintings signal an open space like memory and unfamiliarity. Her work reveals the structure and content and character of space and place, it's sculptural. With my own, there is a readily perceivable distance there between us and the work, not only in the scale of it but also in a tactile, undefined environmental boundary. In the way it delimits the wall that it is hanging on. And insofar as the mark is a kind of crystalline, volatile map of pressures within the artist, so too is it the function of the architectural detail- to be a part that reflects a finetuning stress taking place in the building as a whole and make it visible. Or, perhaps, hide it.

I think there is a part-to-whole relationship in the act of mark making, foregrounded in a kind of nascent crisis between the work and the viewer. I hadn't considered it in Berlin at the time at all, the mark doesn't stop at reinstating a relationship between the surface and the image, or the face to the head, but updates the fugitive relationship of ourselves to the work of art.

That volley of mark making and erasing and unmark making, the reaching, cleanly white waxy surfaces- these are where a sense of engagement takes place, a confrontation. And the mark is a way of varying the distance of that physical confrontation with the surface. Of tapering it. Of infuriating it. Of isolating the viewer or empathizing with them. The role of the mark, here, for me, was not so much to solve that dry and noisy distance, but to articulate it, to use it as a texture that describes a space in flux. By articulating it, the surface became an issue of intimacy and separation.

Arendtstrasse, Variable Height 10'x8', Ball Point Pen Mixed-media on Paper, 2013

Arendtstrasse, Variable Height 10'x8', Ball Point Pen Mixed-media on Paper, 2013

Detail of Arendtstrasse

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Untitled (Brooklyn), 59"x 45", Mixed-Media on Paper, 2013

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AR: Yes, a sense of intimacy and alienation is conveyed, in part at least, through the mark making in your work, and for me, more apparently through your work's physicality; the enormous size, the visceral nature of the marks and the erosion of the paper. In fact, the physicality of your work is overwhelming, and seems to somehow place the viewer inside the drawing itself. I imagine that upon first sight, the viewer often reads your work as a direct exploration about the physical characteristics of architecture. But upon closer inspection it's clear there's a lot more going on here. The real exploration is about something other than the physical and the monumental that might be implied through the size of the work and your use of architectural imagery.

MW: Certainly, I definitely do not believe that just because the work is suggestive of architectural imagery that it is necessarily beholden to architectural imagery. I think it's more helpful to think about the work in terms of the built environment, a term Edward Ford uses is "sculptural intrusions in an architectural context", and I like that very much. Obviously, I have architectural concerns in my work; I talk about it all the time, but I'm using architecture as a stepping off point, an access toward some larger issues.

Whenever I can I like to take a cue from the Giacometti playbook. Those thumbed over,

pinched bodies of walkers exact the air in a room with a trauma and a tension, those forms are not bound by their physical limit, they project and model space, they are very austere architectural. The first time I saw one it felt like running my hand through a bin of smaller potatoes. It had that fiery look of undressed stone. His material aspects request a correspondence with the body, quite literally they begin to look like it as well, which invests them not only with architectural qualities, but with anthropomorphic ones. Lee Bontecou's work did this masterfully. Every material has its own action and reaction, and Bontecou seemed to exploit architecture's tremendous position over our sensitivities by animating a transaction within the interplay of her materials. The body, in a weird, reversing phenomenon of this exchange, can seem to be an exteriorization of this process. Especially when it turns destructive, when the material seems in a fit of irretrievable dematerialization. With Giacometti, there is this quality to the texture like a temperature to the material dissolving -again, that latent violence like an ambient Laocoon in the room.

The destructive nature to this kind of process is also a healing one, a transformative one. And it's active, you participate with it the same way you participate a cure with a sickness, and there its apoplectic activity provides results and forms that were impossible without it, unknowable, even. I think that was most evident in your work, Sarah. Watching you court or stalk and eventually paint over your paintings every single day was unnerving, surely, but it was also dangerously encouraging. And I think that as they tore the building down from around us we both experienced a regenerative, almost Beuysian, renovation in our day to day studio routine. Together there in that conjoined studio I think we each coaxed and cooperated with the spirit of the buildings deconstruction and rehab as if we were sharing each other's coyote. It was healing, indeed it was healing, but it was also at times humiliating.

 Huron Street 6, 6 x 6' Mixed-media on Paper, 2013

Huron Street 6, 6 x 6' Mixed-media on Paper, 2013

Yes, I think the issue is far beyond architecture. In a way, it's forgiveness. The monumentality of the work rests in that Promethean effort of editing, of reconciling and acknowledging that the only possible mark to leave right now is a commemorative mark, a gesture for a time in which there is very little cultural framework in place that fosters art making to begin with and which in turn merely leaves us feeling absolutely absurd if we don't make art. I happen to think carving into the surfaces of things makes this point all the more emphatic.

AR: It makes sense that you mention forgiveness as one of the big ideas in your work. I can feel that. Your work is comprised of so many ghost marks, either erased or eroded through your process that they create a delicate, sticky web to catch the viewer's gaze. (These erased marks are called pentimenti, which has Italian origins, and means to repent, or to have remorse). It seems there is a dance between remorse and forgiveness in your work where the mark and its ghost negotiate their relationship to space and time, present and past.

MW: Well said. Yes. Remorse. Or loss. That crop and scoring and pressing out in the drawing is indeed about loss, or about repair. Repetition in itself seeks to regain something, to retrace something lost. The lost object, the lost other, et cetera. And representation, I think, can only take place with the absence of the original, and the grief that comes with that absence will make you search yourself until you've sprained your brain.

AR: Remorse, loss and forgiveness are especially poignant in the way they relate to history and western history in particular. Your work connects itself to history through your exploration of architectural ornaments. In context these signifiers represent wealth, power and a legacy of imperialism. But your drawings castrate these ornaments. You remove them from their environment and isolate them, taking away their meaning and making them strange to themselves. And by doing this you play with history and the

grand narratives that permeate the buildings these ornaments originate from.

 Tenth Street 4, 6' x 7', Mixed-media on Tarp, 2013

Tenth Street 4, 6' x 7', Mixed-media on Tarp, 2013

 Detail of Tenth Street 4

Detail of Tenth Street 4

MW: Benjamin talks about how the loss of an original, whether it is an object, an artwork or a beloved, complicates our spatial relationship to it when we begin trying to replace it with a copy. By reproducing or copying a copy of a copy it renders our cultural narrative, our memory, unapproachable. And in turn it divests from art the function of being able to look at us in return, and prolongs, I think, that unapproachable remorse, that decontextualized meaning, as you put it.

AR: This idea of altering spatial relationships through simulacra is really interesting with your work. It seems that you use copies and repetition to distort, distance and overturn certain ideals that are represented by the original.

MW: With repetition and duration there's an intractable duplicity that opens up between the subject and its copy and is at once present yet immediately deferred. Duration, like forgiveness or loss, becomes the painlessly fixed and disorienting sibilance of a history with no time. I think it's useful to recognize that repetition can establish a kind of indefatigable distance between ourselves and the thing we are distressed to regain. Eventually it leads to the certainty that not even the least relationship exists between it and ourselves. Not anymore, at least, the world has taken it.

But just to back up a little and clarify what you've pointed out earlier, yes, all of the subject matter and imagery I use comes straight out of the city. It's my stepping off point, my context. I find it walking around and looking at buildings. For the most part, it's all from a period in American History where the Beaux Arts Movement had grown to such popularity that it influenced everything from engineers to government sponsored public works programs like the City Beautiful Movement to even dominating the Chicago World's Fair aesthetic. And because of the Beaux Arts Movement there appeared a homegrown industry of architectural ready-mades and ornamentation, which issued cheap copies of everything old. Molds, as it were, centuries old molds of European movements long dead and passed made soapy and new again. Literally, whole catalogues of copies made and shipped over.

They were, indeed, as you say, stand-ins for taste, yes, for affluence and the advent of the Empire. They say Money, Truth, Sentimentality. The Beaux Arts effectively divided architecture between Romanticism and Industrialism. But, that being said, I think their affect went beyond excess and Imperialism. I think it was slightly more auspicious than that.

AR: How so?

MW: What creating an industry of machine-made, readymade architecture did was allow architecture to escape whole centuries of weathering unscathed; it also separated architecture as a cultural touchstone from the framework of posterity. It isolated architecture and stripped it of its efficacy to view and move on from historical consequences. That castration, it blocked death. It made the city look like there was a breakdown somewhere in the chain with history, like it was all happening now, right now presently, which then made it impossible to unify the past with the future.

And because of this, the disintegration of the building, which ordinarily creates an acute awareness and response to time, is moot, it's depersonalized. By situating a classical standard into a cultural landscape that has nothing at all to do with the development of

that cultural landscape, you simulate a sense of time and space, you simulate an identity, which is enormously disorienting.

And with weird effectiveness, for me at least, this created a wildly ambiguous artistic experience, one that wholly transcends the copied architectures originally intended range of associations, and therefore jumbles the patterns of social usage and exchange that ordinary life had been deposited into. It rendered obsolete the overelaborated, menacing truth of circumstantial feedback. A disassociation of consciousness from identity. Which is insane.

So, yes, this issue of Grand Narratives you bring up, this is very important.

Richard Serra's work, I think, comes out of this, so does Bontecou's. Their work presents a kind of cultural miscarriage that is a century's worth of prefab buildings and uninhabitable reduplicated Greek summers. What their work is entirely right about is that once we begin identifying the structures of history we face a problem of self-reflexivity, we start appealing to a narrative. With Serra, the first time I saw one I was alone and walked into it, walked inside of it, it was a spiraling, room-big, Babylonian tower thing, and I wanted to eat the walls, I mean, wholeheartedly pig my nose up against them. They had been rusted and they had that airy brocade buoyancy of new cake. Moreover anyway, to me they seemed to signal an entire generations memorial to the death of a single one, any one, of Ingres' taffy fat elbow paintings. His materials acted in a way that established a certain visual network, one which instantly reached out of any signifying chain that would link him or me or us back to Romantic notions of the body and space and time and it completely cut us off from them. Completely cut us out. I don't think you have to be an artist to see that. It isn't a sedate sublime he approaches, but a terrifying one. A wall of war that meant inextricably the end of the narrative. And it's completely peaceful.

With the arrival of the machine and readymade architecture there is belied a kind of satire of a situation; whereas Romanticism was once a celebration of the primacy of the individual, the readymade, which is a kind of self-activating system of resource, is paralleled with Colonialism. And with Democracy. Industriousness. More so it created a kind of nightmare impasse, in that the torture from which we are trying to awaken, this history that separates us from the dead is made all the more real by being constantly in touch with it. And so written into the readymade, into machine made art there is the tension of a history, a dead, we are no longer excluded from. This, in turn, forces us to enter history backwards; our present is faced with an epileptic multiplicity of pasts to live out again.

AR: Right. Backwards. In the same way the viewer enters your work, slightly disoriented and tumbling into a complexity of meaning and experience. The viewer is confronted by materials and formats that challenge our notion of what it means to be a drawing, or to be architecture. Enormous scrolls of paper cascading from the ceiling to the floor, rolling out like a carpet into the gallery for the viewer to step on and make his own mark – to participate in the piece of art. Non-precious, transparent materials draped over the wall simultaneously revealing foreground marks and the cast shadows behind. Drawing/structures that seem to be disintegrating before our eyes. You progressively blur the line between drawing and three dimensional structures, testing new materials and ideas while you continue to embed them with a dislocated mark of history.

 Untitled (Boston) 3'x3'x6' Mixed-media on Sheetmetal 2013

Untitled (Boston) 3'x3'x6' Mixed-media on Sheetmetal 2013

 Detail of Untitled (Boston)

Detail of Untitled (Boston)

MW: With my own work, I am trying to emphasize the power of the material when it is isolated, to give it a sense of duration that is constantly present and tactically overwhelming like jealous replay. I'm trying to excavate from the surface, from the face, the fickle, problematic machinery between contact and boundary that is presented by duration and repetition, by intimacy and separation, these are, I think, some of Architectures bedfellow verdicts. And to take inside a limit that was supposed to mark an outside. The ornament that I'm referencing here are products of industry, not necessarily products of cultural repair and upheaval, which they are often mistaken for. However, while their commercial sense of anonymity deprives them of human characteristics, that anonymity, on the other hand, can also be seductive. It looks in on our love affair with machines and confirms a position: it is that, having immobilized history, we are left with a culture that is, indeed, castrated, foreclosed, that's without the ability to interiorize pain and so, it's unable to convert grief into mourning where death can be looked into and mastered and we can begin powerfully to work. Work, which is art making. Mechanism perpetually animates the possibility of there being only more mechanism, and then more mechanism after that. The machine has either protracted art's purpose or obliterated it, and that position illustrates the potency of our ability to understand history.

These things are objects and so they can be handled and ripped away from their contexts and converted to something else, which lends them a sense of mystery that, to my mind, is the ambiguous poetics of a new Narrative. The ready-made helped create a world in which the trivial and the ambivalent can jockey for position with the emotionally overwhelming.

De Kooning said, the mouth is a fulcrum of artistic and psychological ambivalence. And that being said, the mouth, or the doorway, or the facade or the less credible memory becomes the vandal revenge at the end of forgiveness.

For more information please visit – <http://www.mdwoodward.com>

Matthew Woodward was born in Rochester New York in 1981. He was educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (BFA 05) and the New York Academy of Art (MFA 07). Currently, Woodward lives and works in Chicago. He is represented by Linda Warren Projects, where a solo exhibition of his work is currently on view.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Sarah Elise Hall is a New York-based artist and writer. Her work has been exhibited with Janinebean Gallery (Berlin), the Drabinsky Gallery (Toronto), MUSE CPMI Center for Photography and the Moving Image (New York), Islip Art Museum, (Islip, NY) and Galerija Zvono (Belgrade). Her work has been reviewed in Toronto's National Post and Toronto Star, New York's Huffington Post, and included in Michael Petry's book, *Nature Morte*, published by Thames & Hudson Press.

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