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I first encountered Ricky Swallow online. Or rather, what I actually encountered was an anonymous blog called *Ready for the House*. It was an album quilt of objects—hundreds of objects—stitched together by some mysterious collector in California: Navajo jewellery. Nineteen-forties wave splitters from Papua New Guinea, worn and weathered from time at sea. Japanese textiles. John Mason sculptures. Scrolling through, you sensed a magpie mind at work. Every object adumbrated a deeper story; somehow those stories hung together, yoked by a singular sensibility. It was an underground history of art and design—at least according to this one guy. What I didn't realise until later, when I relocated to LA, was that the guy I'd been following was Ricky, and that Ricky was an artist. Not just any artist, either: an artist who'd attracted a lot of attention at a young age in his native Australia, then moved to LA and established himself, over the next decade and a half, as one of the most exacting and incisive sculptors of his generation. Ricky's early work was adamantly figurative and 'narratively drunk', as he once put it: skeletons, stereotypes, even a table spread

RICKY SWALLOW

INTERVIEW BY ANDREW ROMANO
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with every sea creature he'd ever caught, carved in unfathomable detail, at 1:1 scale, from laminated jelutong and maple. By the time I saw Ricky's stuff in person, he'd turned towards abstraction: enigmatic forms and vessels, but with connotation, that read as scrap cardboard and rope but were realised in bronze—a transmutation of ordinary materials that he'd reshaped in the studio, then reduced to ash in the foundry. To me—a writer, a new dad, and a fellow flea-market fiend—Ricky's work seems to ask some of the loftier questions I've been asking myself lately. What's ephemeral? What's permanent? Where's the line between the things we live with and the things that outlive us? Between what we take in and put out? At Ricky's most recent show at David Kordansky Gallery, 'Shoulders', was winding down, we finally managed to meet in real life: first at the serene Laurel Canyon cabin he shares with his wife, the brilliant painter Lesley Vance, and their son Marsden, and then at their impeccable studio building in Burbank—two spaces they've carefully reimaged and remade over many years, then enlivened with all those charismatic objects I once admired from afar.

apartamento - Los Angeles



OK, so let's go all the way back. To birth?

Exactly! What do you remember of your birthing experience? Seriously though, if you go back through your career, when do you feel like you became yourself as an artist? Or maybe that never happens?

I feel like the moment that happened was when I was given the keys and then walked into my first studio and was like, 'OK'. To have to go from art school, where you're penned in there with everybody and you're following assignments, to leasing a building and feeling like an adult and realising it's your job to go there every day—that instant, for me, is important.

the sculptures are doing physically, taking on a certain character, and realising that there's an ability within sculpture itself without having all this other stuff that figuratively needs to be there.

How do you know when a sculpture works?
I think of it as 'doing something'. Like, which sculptures are doing something?

What is 'doing something'?

Doing something for me is the object having some sort of circulation; a relationship with where it's placed; a relationship with the room. It looks like it has capabilities—conceptually, psychologically. It should feel indelible.



It's almost like whatever comes out of that process is your voice.

Yeah. It's occurred to me a few times this year. It's been 20 years since my first commercial show. And since that show, I haven't really worked another job. That's 20 years of just doing this, just going into a room and making shit. Early on I was making work based on stereos and record players and other seemingly obsolete technologies, work that was very readable and very clear. As I've got older, as a person and an artist, I've wanted things to be more open-ended or more ambiguous than that. I didn't wake up one morning and say, 'I'm an abstract guy'. But for me it's gradually become more about the materials themselves and what

When you see it in the room, you think, 'That's where it should be. That's how this thing lives'. I actually know more when a sculpture is not doing something. I think my sculptures are failing when they're not housing an energy. There's no tension. Often there's literally tension that's preserved in the sculptures, but there are other ways of achieving that kind of energy. I feel like there needs to be some resistance implied in the thing.

Have you had moments when it's been difficult to keep progressing creatively?

Doubt is something that I have every day of every week. There have been times when I've thought, 'This is the best show I've made'.

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And then I had to pick something up from the gallery and I just took one look in the door and thought, 'This is just junk on the floor'. I didn't allow myself to go in because I didn't want to get drawn down that road. But I was like, 'There's enough stuff. There's no need to make more stuff. Why did I do this?' I knew myself enough to just leave the gallery. But that's the healthiest part of being an artist. I wouldn't want to remove that part.

Doubt is what keeps you moving forward, isn't it? I love Lawrence Weschler's book about Robert Irwin, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, because it explained to me, as someone who's not an artist, this re-

In some form. And weirdly for the family that I grew up in, that was never really questioned or discouraged. My father was a fisherman. He'd go away for a week fishing, come back for two or three days, go out again. His time on land was always about maintenance, whether it was welding or repairing nets or repainting something. He was someone who couldn't stop working. So I was exposed to a lot of different making activity, which I think of as pretty critical now. It always seemed viable, making stuff with your hands.

One of the earliest things I saw my father make was a rope basket of stainless-steel rods. He got all this stock and he welded it in our garage. There was a lot of emphasis on the weld;



ally eye-opening process—just how each body of work led to new questions, and how those questions led to a new body of work.

That's what I'm doing right now. For my last show, 'Shoulders', I had this idea of 'no pedestals', and there was something liberating about that. Especially in the works making contact with the floor, or the corner, and just being really grounded to those surfaces; I think those pieces signal where I'd like to continue or pick up. I was recently asked if I could accomplish a pedestal-based sculpture for something and I'm just dragging my heels. It's not where my brain is at.

Did you always want to be an artist?

it had to be strong because there was going to be a lot of salt water, a lot of weight in that basket. And the critical decisions that would make that thing function as a piece of fishing equipment, I feel like the same kind of problems arise when I'm making sculpture, in terms of, 'There's a right way of doing this and there's a wrong way of doing it'. That's an influential and stubborn part of my personality, as someone who would make an interior or make an object. It's the same muscle.

Speaking of fatherhood, your son is five and he's already drawing these really distinctive pictures. How do you think having artists as parents is shaping him?

He got really into drawing last year, and the way he draws is completely some self-generated system. I lay out the paper and the markers in the evening, so when he walks out, he's like, 'This is what I'm going to do!' But then we started praising it too much. I was getting excited. And he stopped drawing for maybe four months. He just refused. I think it was because we put too much pressure on it. Friends with kids were like, 'Just leave it, just relax. It'll come back'. And now he's into it again. As he's being asked to do more art at preschool, he seems to prefer drawing here at home.

Because they give him assignments?

Yeah. He never gets to use that voice. So

him here in your house seems somehow the same to me.

I don't know when this started, but we do have a lot of self-taught artists that we collect. It's a growing part of what we bring into the house.

Why?

With quote-unquote outsider art a lot of the clichés are unfortunately true. The appeal to me is just this way of making things that is less inhibited by certain expectations. As an artist who puts so much expectation and so many rules over what I make myself, it's generative to be around art that's not that. I'm sure these artists are putting parameters over their own work. But to me it feels like those forces are



now we buy nicer markers and try to get nice paper, because these things are becoming things. I still have to resist being like, 'This is awesome! We have to frame this!' Or, 'This is better than Dubuffet!' He said two weeks ago, 'When I grow up, I'm going to be an artist like mom and dad'. I like that he knows that it's available to him, that it's a real job. But even if he's not an artist, which I'm totally comfortable with—I would be happier if he were a marine biologist—at least I can say now he has his own way of building an image.

It's interesting what you said about his style being a 'self-generated system', because so much of the art and design that surrounds

self-generated, as opposed to, say, the market or an exhibition or a certain amount that needs to be put out each year or a pressure to evolve their practice. There are fewer outside forces. Any pressures seem very much directed by the artists themselves.

Why is it so important to you to live with art?

I've never not lived with art since becoming an artist. Even as a younger artist with less of an income, I always tried to buy art, to trade art, to have art in the house. I'm totally suspicious of people who don't have any crafted objects or artworks in their house. I don't understand how those people live. My feeling is, 'What are you taking in if you're not living with

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things that have been made by other people?' We don't have a ton of our own artwork here. A couple of Lesley's paintings. I don't really want to come from my studio and be confronted by the same problems when I enter my house. So that's a comfort for me, I think, to be confronted by other problems people are working through with objects.

Before I knew you as an artist, I knew you as a collector, mainly through your old blog. And it was really nice when I finally discovered your work as a sculptor, not just because I could suddenly see this conversation between what you collect and what you make, but because it collapsed this idea of the artist as some sort

buildings and in photographs. That was super reaffirming, because I already had something of that attitude, that sense of responsibility to give these objects the grace or the space they deserve.

It's interesting that you mention Judd, because I've always seen him as a supreme example of my favourite kind of 'decorating', which is actually anti-decorating; that is, if you know what you like and surround yourself with it, it starts to adhere to a logic beyond just adornment. And that, in turn, becomes a sensibility expressed in space.

Right. In all the furniture and stuff that Judd collected, you can see some idea of finding a



of isolated genius. I could see you were a fan, too. I love the openness and generosity of that—how you share your enthusiasms.

A few years ago I did a residency through the Chinati Foundation in Marfa. I got to experience Donald Judd's sensibility of living with things. He was a total hound for stuff, and with Judd specifically, you can map some of his own work through the furniture he collected—the Aalto stuff, the Rietveld stuff, the Schindler stuff. You see some of the dimensions appearing in his own furniture. It was all in his possession for a reason.

But what I also liked was that he clearly decided to share that awareness, to point to it by having his collection on display in his

solution, that the person who designed it was finding a practical solution to some problem.

I really feel that here, too—your own sensibility, not Judd's.

I do think there are parameters to how I think about filling a house. Everything in this house has found its way here through some kind of story. I can look at something and trace its origins, often through an interaction with the person I bought it from, or the artists I subsequently met, which then led to me collecting more of their work.

Those narratives give a house a depth beyond just, 'Oh, that thing looks nice here'.

They guard against decoration.

For me this house is very personal. The moment after we purchased it is the only time in 20 years that I've taken time out from the studio. I spent six months working on the house instead. My job for those six months was just finding ways to make the house what we wanted it to be, within a certain budget. But the hardest thing was putting anything into it once it was finished. It looked like such a nice space with nothing in it. So at first we had a lot less furniture in here; we had a lot less of everything in here. And now when I look at those early photos of the house, it does look a little self-consciously 'staged'.

That's something I'm glad I've got over. My wife, who's from the Midwest, really helped with that, because she's much more practical. She would just be like, 'Why is this bench here if you're not going to let me sit on it to put my shoes on?' My answer was that, 'Well, if you sit there and put your shoes on, then you're blocking the hallway'. And she was like, 'OK. Let's move the bench'.

Why this house? What was the attraction?

When friends would come to town, we'd say to them, 'Let's drive you through Laurel Canyon. It's this fantasy land. There was Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, that whole scene'. Then this place came up. It was a short sale; it looked like a train wreck. The walls of the bathroom were filled with poems in Sharpie that documented the declining mental health of the actress who lived here.

Talk about narratives!

But I was really attracted to this long bank of casement windows. When you're sitting up here, because of the trees outside, it feels more elevated than it truly is. It was super quiet, too—the first and only house we looked at where we couldn't hear the freeway. And I just liked the form—this simple, elongated cabin.

So we thought, 'OK, we can live here and be in this little pocket of nature, but still be close to the city, to commercial and creative culture'. I mean, think about the Canyon Country Store. It hasn't changed since David Crosby was eating sandwiches there. There's something great about the fact that it's this holdout, just a straight-up deli counter and a semi-functional minimart.

No avocado toast.

No. It has not been gentrified! Same with the

restaurant below it. There's only one game in town—that place and the dry-cleaners. That's it.

As someone who came here from New York, that's the most wonderful thing about Los Angeles—this idea that you can be in the city and out of the city at the same time. There's natural wilderness and man-made wilderness—these untamed spaces in-between everything else. That's one reason I'm excited for our kid to grow up here. Despite the gentrification, there are a lot of stubborn histories in LA that are always going to be cool and available to him. It's totally unresolvable as a city. Even in Burbank. We bought the studio there before the monstrous Ikea went in, and there were two hot rod shops on the street—legit, still-functioning hot-rod shops. And then there was a bronze foundry, which has since closed down, and a tow-truck place and two hotels—the most crazy amalgam on one strip. Cross the street and it's all residential. And then half the town is owned by Disney. It's a funny puzzle. There's always something else to discover.

How has that aspect of Los Angeles—or just living in LA in general—affected your work?

There's no doubt that it's happened. Being exposed to the ceramics tradition here—and I include Ken Price and Ron Nagle in that, even though what they ended up with was quite radically different—has changed how I think about making stuff and what I think it is to be an artist. When I met Ron, I was talking to him about the early days of Ferus Gallery. He was living in San Francisco. And he told me, 'Yeah, we would all pile in the car and drive down to LA just to be around it'. This was the spot. Their thinking was, 'If we could just be exposed to it, we would become better artists'. They had to hunt things down. And I feel like, in a way, that idea's still alive here.

Back in Melbourne, I had a really clear picture of how my career could have been conducted for the next 10, 20, 30 years. And that made me uncomfortable about staying. In LA, I still feel like a newcomer to the city. I own a house and a studio. I'm married to an American citizen. I have a son. But I still feel very new here. I'm still surprised.