

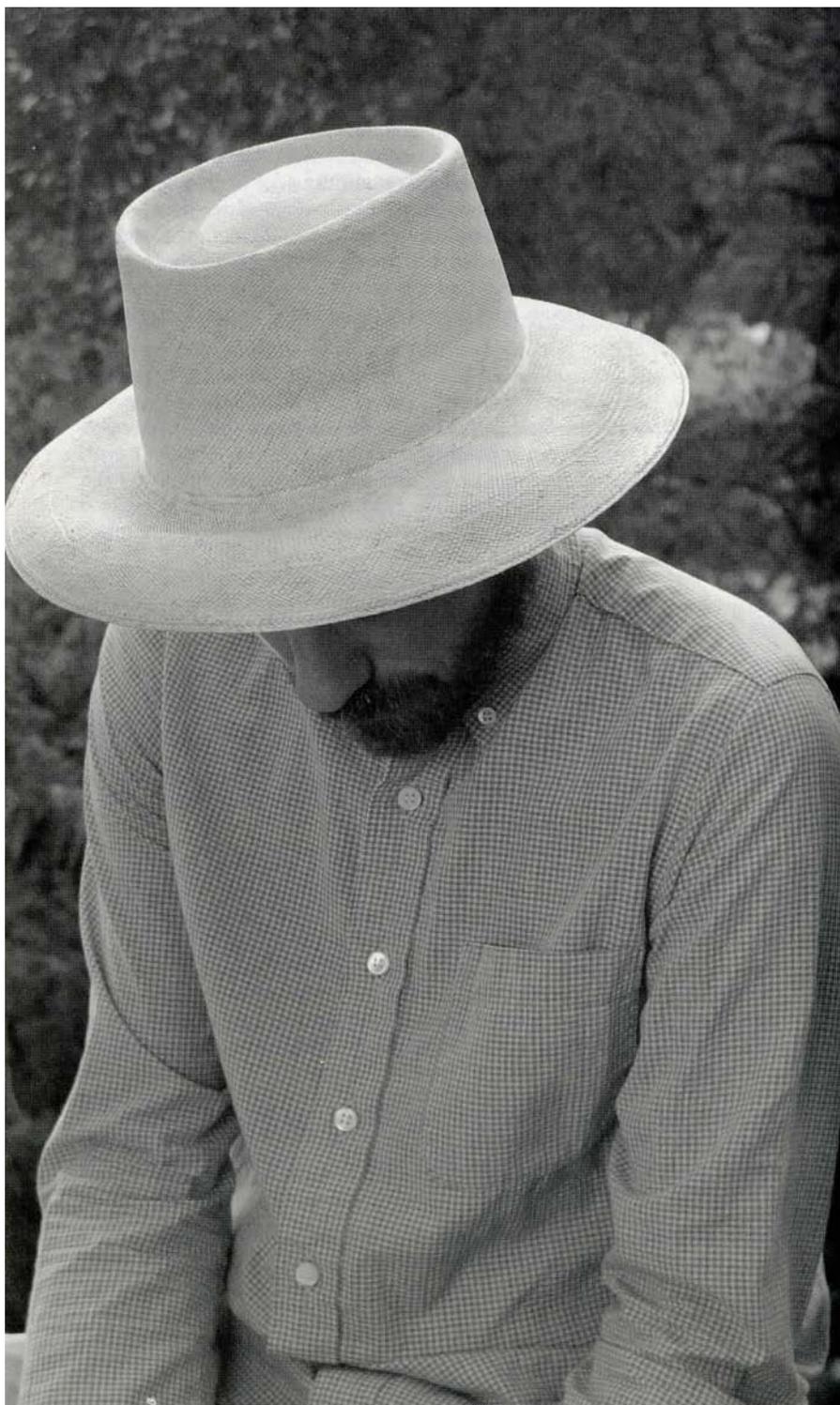
Milne, Robert, in conversation with Ricky Swallow, "Los Angeles Wednesday," *The Blackmail*, Issue #2, 2013, cover, pp. 110-125

THE BLACKMAIL



OFFLINE
ISSUE #2, 2013

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LOS AN- GELES WEDNES- DAY

Introduction & Interview – Robert Milne
Portraits – Barry T. Fadden, Laurel Canyon, CA
Artwork photography – Fredrik Nilsen

Getting to know someone by the objects they collect isn't necessarily the most common way, but it can reveal a lot about who they are and where they've been. My experience of getting to know Ricky Swallow was kind of like this, after finding *Ready for the House* (his blog, named after the 1978 debut album by mysterious Houston-based musician Jandek), which catalogues, among other things, the objects he acquires at various flea markets throughout Los Angeles. Initially unaware of the blog's author, I became fascinated by the books, records, ceramics, furniture, button badges, boro textiles, denim jackets, vintage hiking backpacks, Navajo blankets and *Peanuts* characters, which, at the time, were posted on an almost-daily basis. The images were given labels, including the location where the objects were found and potential categories such as 'RIGHT ON', 'THE DO A BIT POSSE' and 'WIZARDY'.

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I was already very familiar with Ricky's art practice and would make connections between the personal objects of the unknown collector and the produced objects in Ricky's work (in much the same way that fans of Jandek tried to piece his life together using extracted information from the photographs on his LP covers). About a year or so later, we ended up meeting each other in Melbourne while Ricky was in town for his exhibition at the NGV. It certainly didn't feel like a first encounter as, to me, the objects had created the initial rapport for an ongoing conversation.

Robert Milne: How do you feel the shift in geographical context — moving from Melbourne to Los Angeles, then to London and back to Los Angeles — has affected your work?

Ricky Swallow: I moved [to Los Angeles] 11 years ago and somewhere in the middle there were two years in London — lost weekend! — so although it's hard to shake the idea of Australia being home, Los Angeles really feels like home now. It continues to be new to me or reveal different sides or elements, and I feel this is the great thing about LA, about California: there's always a new thing to find. That's a simplification, but it's a place you could try — unsuccessfully — to figure out forever.

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I could propose that my time working in London allowed a very particular history to surface in the works but I also think if I was working in London now, different histories in the British sculpture or object tradition would be influencing the work. Well, they have — my first show of all bronze work just over two years ago in London with Modern Art had direct links to forms in British modern pottery, [Hans] Coper, [Lucie] Rie, [Ruth] Duckworth, et cetera.

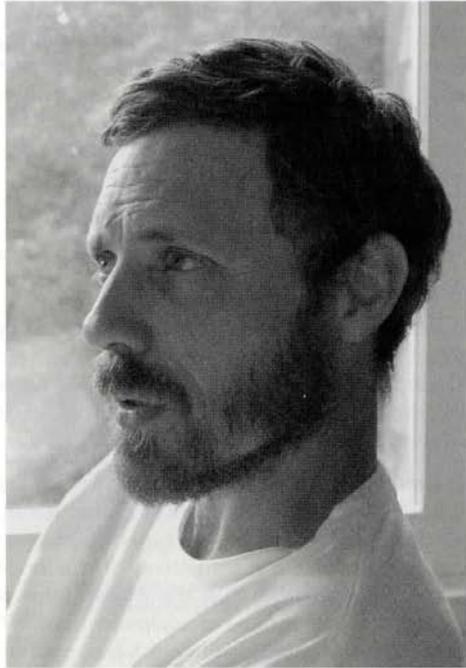
There's a unique space carved out in the object history [of LA], which for me is very specific to California sculpture and has been really influential on my practice. Peter Voukos, Ken Price, John Mason, John McCracken, Robert Therrien, through to more contemporary figures such as Vincent Fecteau [and] Liz Larner. With all these artists there is a kind of concentrated magic to how the things are realised and functioning as forms, a commitment to such bizarre formal presence and a material discipline or something like that, which is hard to explain. At any rate, as an artist, you gravitate towards different information, whether consciously or not, and I feel fortunate to live in a city in which that information is visible and available.

Living in LA now, do you feel a necessity to engage with the object and craft history and to make work that could be identifiable with California?

I don't feel a necessity as such. I think the goal of any artist should be to just be genuine or authentic to one's self, and the practice is an extension of that — reflective of where one is at and what kind of objects one wants

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to add to the world. Sometime sculpture seems like an anxious condition. There are so many perfect forms in the world, why fuck with that? I've always felt it necessary to engage with craft or the crafting of forms, to keep one's hand in the studio and one's touch present in the sculptures. And that's something I see in the sculpture, and the sculpture history specific to California that I admire. I would say there is a type of singular strength or resolution within an individual sculpture that I'm working towards — and will be forever, most likely — which is directly linked to handcrafted or well-designed objects. When something is really asserting itself or making itself complete, despite being a referential form, it still has a capacity to allow you to forget everything else when you are confronted with it. Somehow this sounds ambitious in description. It's more of a sensation or belief system, I guess!

And, you know, I have this built-in moral resistance to abstraction that I've been trying to vanquish for years. I think of it like a small town fear of drugs or something, which I also have, where you understand there's value there but the way you're built won't allow you to jump in. Anyway, I think with recent work I'm finding a way to produce more pure, or less clearly figurative, things via a simple abstraction: splitting, simplifying or

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forms where the basis for something figurative is still there, yet it's open to other possibilities — and this started intuitively by splitting these simple cup sculptures I was making, which was a kind of parallel practice, at least in sentiment, to looking at early Voukos and, subsequently, Price and Mason [and] also Duckworth's work, right at the time when their wheel-based forms were being subject to simple manipulation and combinations to produce more sculptural results. That transitional zone for ceramics here in the late 1950s, in which, under the spell of Voukos, a lot of the work is almost interchangeable or clearly illustrative of this moment. There is a lot of freedom or play to that work, yet it's still rooted with a really traditional training. I like that.

Is your intuitive movement towards producing works that are less clearly figurative a result of trying to break from the craft tradition of function — which clearly came from Voukos' 'pot shop' at Los Angeles County Art Institute, now the Otis College of Art and Design — or more about pure experimentation to create new forms?

Well, you said it better than me! It's a result of both, I guess. I've always thought my first task in the studio when making a sculpture is to remove the function; to turn out the light on my expectation of the object and look at it as a pure form, make it something of a stranger to itself. In mentioning Voukos I was thinking how the thrown form was a basis or mother form to begin or extrapolate a sculpture from. When I started working with these different sized cardboard tubes as the starting point for sculptures, it was liberating because the tube was also this mother form — a place to begin — and it guided what type of things I'd make, but then that gets questioned too... Something about having a ready-made unit, but not being limited by that. In that regard, seeing the David Smith show at LACMA a few years ago was huge too. You see the sculpture first and then start identifying the rudimentary nature of the steel units used in its construction.

When I first visited your studio in LA in 2010 you were working on your first show of all bronze work for Modern Art in London. It was interesting to see these works before they had been cast, in a patchwork-like state of construction, particularly those that became *Make-do Suite* (2010), as they were made using the same salvaged archery target cardboard that was used in some of your earlier bronzes. Can you speak about the idea of the 'make-do' and the additive process of these works?

I'm glad you saw that stage of the work. I think about that time when I was first making the vessel-type structures from the archery targets as an important moment in my practice. It happened very intuitively. I'd taken this long break from the studio and when I came back I just started using the cardboard material to build forms piece by piece around existing vessels in various combinations to produce these 'ceramic adjacent' objects.

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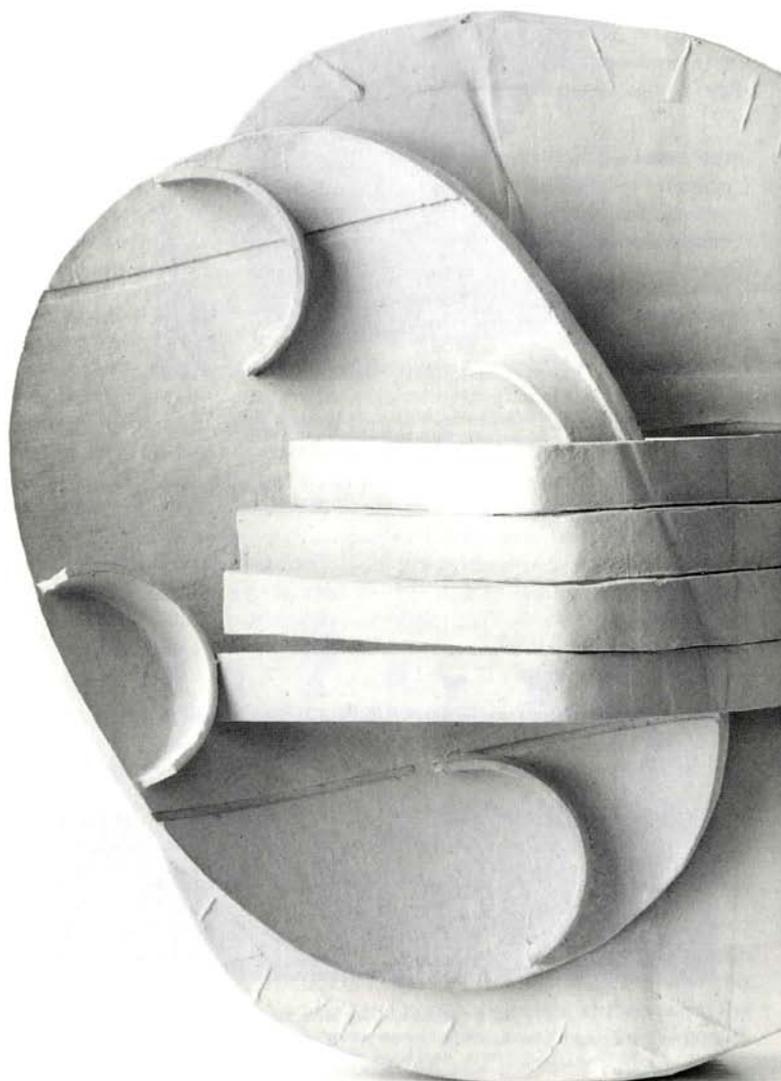
Ricky Swallow, *Make-do Suite* (detail), 2010
seven patinated bronze vessels with oak table



Ricky Swallow, *Make-do Suite*, 2010
seven patinated bronze vessels with oak table
Courtesy of Stuart Shave Modern Art, London
Image: Todd-White Art Photography, London

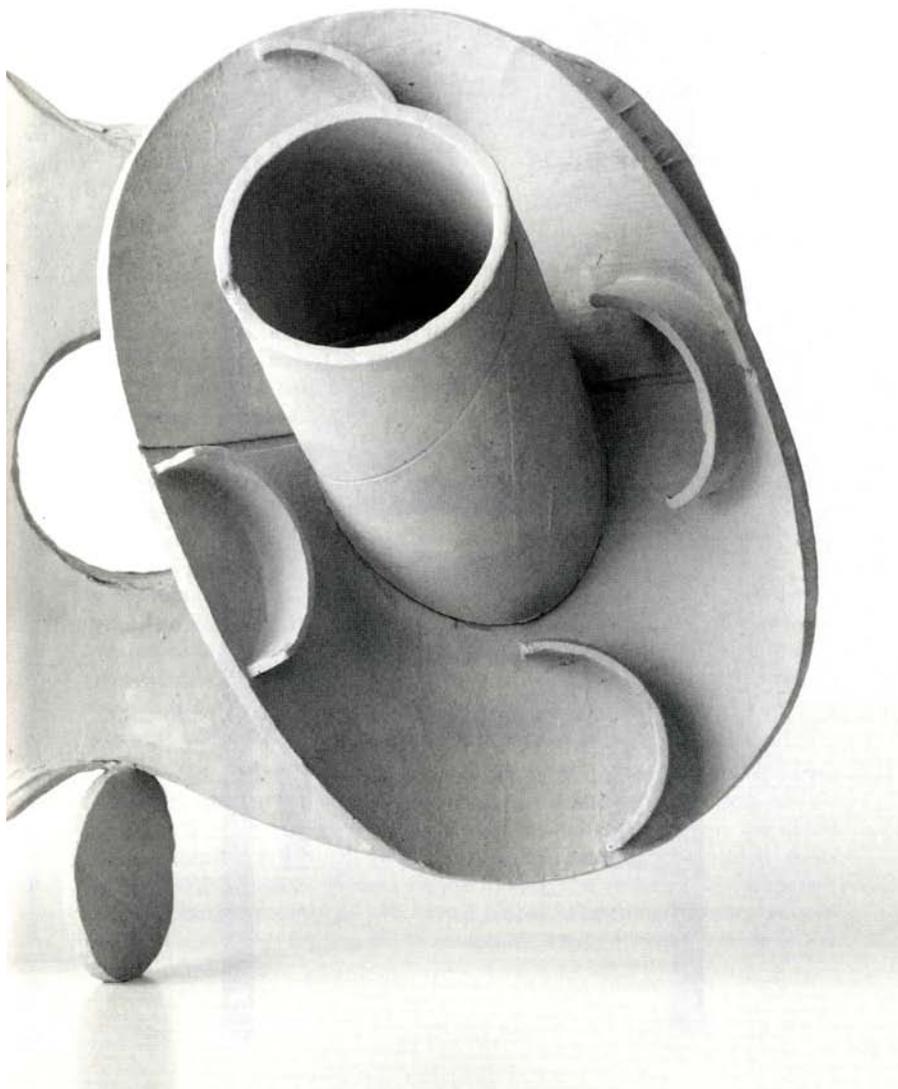
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Ricky Swallow, *Reclining Guitar with Dials*, 2012, patinated bronze

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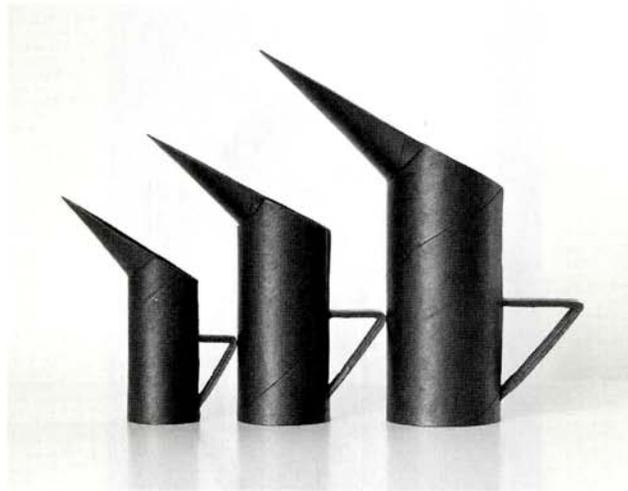
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Ricky Swallow, *Chair Study/Relief (soot)*, 2013, patinated bronze

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Ricky Swallow, *Penguin Pots (soot)*, 2011
patinated bronze

I was making sculptures as this formal exercise or homage — bootlegs, I guess — that landed somewhere between the preserved static I love in [Tom] Morandi and the prescription I was taking in of British modern ceramics at the time.

The way I felt making these works was very impulsive, a renewed excitement which comes from drawing or constructing things at a rate in which each form influences the next in an easily seen and measured way. Things were forming, accumulating in the studio on a daily or weekly basis, as opposed to a monthly basis, which was the only way I could measure progress when I was working on the wooden pieces. And that activity of building a work, a body of work, through an additive or tactile collage-based technique was so different from the carvings where material is removed to gain information. It reopened the door for me technically, and also allowed a more intuitive or symbiotic relationship to surface, between the kind of objects I collect and study and the kind of sculpture I want to make.

I've always been into exhausted objects, things which outlast their expected lifespan via improvised repair or adjustment, and also pottery that has either been reconstructed from the tiniest fragment, the shard literally surrounded by moulding compound to form a recognisable vessel in the British Museum. When I began making the vessel from the targets and mapping the surfaces with joined pieces, it became a studio archaeology of sorts. And the way those sculptures were patinated followed suite with that mentality.

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Ricky Swallow, *Retired Instruments with Disc (yellow)*, 2012
patinated bronze

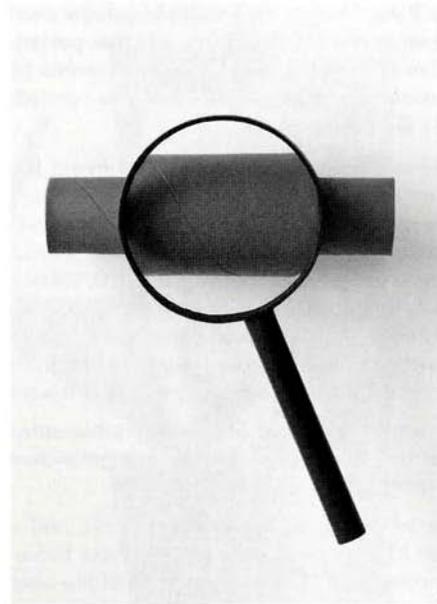
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Do you consider the casting of the cardboard sculptures and the patina application to be the final adjustments to their form? The patinated surface does such an accurate job of capturing the processes and materials used in their construction.

The sculptures as forms are finalised or fused or resolved upon their casting, but the patina process is the full stop in their realisation. It's strange to look at the bronzes through every state. I'm an over-attached parent in that regard, tracking these objects through each state on the way to bronze, wax gating, the shell room, busting them out of the shell after casting and then chasing the metal and assembling it in some instances. I try to participate and assist in these steps, more out of quality control — anxiety — than a sense of authorship, and also because I think I learn a lot from being a participant in the process. The selection of a patina for a piece is the most stressful task because you are assigning the object certain qualities through those choices, locking it into a specific reference via the colour or how a patina cloaks or reveals a surface. The term in your question "adjustment to their form", is really apt because it is an adjustment. Often I'm thinking of how heavy or light I want a piece to be, how industrial or domestic.

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Ricky Swallow, *Magnifying Glass with Pipe*, 2011
patinated bronze

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There are a few works which I re-patinated three or four times before they sat right, and in those cases the choices are normally, "This is kind of necessarily an ugly piece, should the patina honour that or contradict it?" In Robert Morris' 'Notes on Sculpture' (1966), as well as a fear of the "intimacy" and lack of "space" within small sculpture, he warns against the use of "intense colour", which "emphasizes the optical and subverts the physical" or "detaches itself from the whole work to become one more internal relationship." I've spent good time circling this text, and in the end I agree with his descriptions of how colour can affect a form, but disagree with the merits of the results. I've spent most of my career avoiding any use of colour and believing in the neutrality of the colour of the untreated medium itself, so employing [colour] in my work and trying to gain confidence in its value has been a new experience. I think it's important to have a specific palette or family of colours to work within. I like when you can identify an artist or designer's objects via the colour or application. I'm thinking of Doyle Lane's weed pots or Roy McMakin's stubbornly perfect colours, which he has used with consistency on his furniture for the past 20 years.

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Or someone like Peter Shire, where multiple colours can be instantly recognisable when applied to their form, whether pottery, furniture or other objects. Can you tell me about your relationship to Peter and how that led to the exhibition *GRAPEVINE~* that you curated this year at David Kordansky Gallery in LA?

I was introduced to Peter through our mutual friend Ryan Conder, who runs South Willard in Los Angeles. I found an older two-toned hourglass-shaped EXP vase at the Pasadena flea market and when I showed Ryan he was like, "You gotta meet Peter and see his studio," [which was] just down the hill from Ryan in Echo Park. That was in 2010. Peter's a real influence on sculpture in LA, I think — even subconsciously, because his stuff is sort of camouflaged into the landscape on Echo Park Boulevard. Also through his association with Memphis [Group], some of the traits of which have been resurfacing in LA painting and sculpture over the past decade.

Although both [Ron] Nagle and Shire are pre-Memphis, when you dig back into their archive of objects... I'd call it dragster-deco, perhaps. [It's] something very specific to California.

I realised that a lot of Peter's really iconic works had not been shown within the context of a contemporary gallery whose focus was not specifically ceramics-based. The same goes for most of the artists that made up *GRAPEVINE~*. Even someone like Ron Nagle, who is a real artist's artist, and has been gaining a lot of deserved traction the past few years, had not shown a group of sculptures in LA for several years, and he's just up the grapevine in San Francisco. (The "grapevine" is the mountainous overpass on the Interstate 5 you cross which connects Southern California with the Central Valley and onto San Francisco.) I realised a lot of this work was being experienced via kids staring at their screens, at their phones, so it was neat to put it out there in all its awesome tactility, and the response was rewarding for me personally but I think for the artists too.

It goes without saying that most, if not all of the artists' work in the show has been an influence on my practice before and during the course of working with them on *GRAPEVINE~*. I think the common ingredient of influence would be the daily ritual towards a type of discipline or precision, very singular projects being pursued, unique visions played out plastically.

One part of the exhibition that I found particularly interesting was the 'index' in the second room, which contained works by the artists made from the late 1950s until the early 70s. This room also contained works by two artists, Ken Price and Peter Voulkos, who were not listed as participants in the exhibition. What was the reason for the separation of these works, and for including Price and Voulkos?

I always liked that smaller gallery at Dave's. Generally it's an office but it's also been used as a way to extend certain shows or add another element.

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Ricky Swallow, *Standing Figure with Animal and Shield*, 2012, patinated bronze



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My wife, Lesley Vance, hung watercolours in that room for her last exhibition of paintings there, and I liked how it added an intimate viewing experience to the show.

I found the Ken Price work in the studio of Michael Frimkess and the small Voulkos is a permanent fixture on one of John Mason's studio tables, along with other smaller pieces and models of his own work. The Price is from 1956. He had traded it with Frim and it really has some magic about it — the seeds of how talented Price was, even as a student. Also included in that room were a Mason pot from the 1960s, a very crude thing, a few pots by Frimkess from the 1960s owned by Ron Nagle, and a suite of tool prints by Mason, made in 1971 but not glazed till 30 years later, never exhibited before.

It was dubbed the 'index room' because it acted as a physical footnote to the show, displaying pieces closer to the expressionistic beginnings of the California Clay Movement. I wanted to separate them from the main exhibition because those pieces were behaving so differently to the tightness of the other works, and from where those artists had taken their respective practices. Somehow, the experience of discovering those works grouped like that in the small space approximated my initial excitement of discovering them in the artists' studios. In California, when you see properties listed, there is inevitably an extra room added to the original house plan that's not city-permitted. The term they use in the description is 'bonus room', which seems appropriate here.

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I imagine the research and studio visits would have mirrored your own practice of collecting and accumulating personal objects. How is this situated in relation to producing objects?

I think it's interesting to live with objects and have them mean different things for you over time, or rather have different qualities in those things become more amplified than others. Collecting objects is something I can't imagine ever not doing, and making objects is also a seemingly compulsive activity, so as the nature of the material I'm collecting changes I'd like to think you could see that register in the work. It's by no means a crucial interpretive point, however. Also, while there are certain things that I collect in an ongoing fashion, [there are] groups of objects I have stopped collecting. It does work in cycles, accumulating specific groups of things and then saying, OK, I feel like I have exhausted this now, either because I'm trying to be momentarily more rational about how much space I have at home, or because I feel like I have enough examples that capture my impulse for that thing. In the studio, forms work in cycles also. There are bodies of work that can be obviously read as being made with the same spark. There are stragglers or transitional forms, then another body of objects, and I think there is some parallel to collecting there.

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Becoming a collector of sorts, always within spatial and economical restraints, I can more clearly understand an art collector's response to an object — that "I need this thing in my life" enthusiasm, which more pure collectors have. As an artist, it's great when you meet those collectors: Liz Lavery in Sydney emailed me a shot of one of my bronzes beside a small Robert Klippel sculpture she owns, and it blew my mind to be in that kind of company. Earlier this year I met a collector here, totally by chance, who has a recent bronze beside a small Matisse bronze that has been in his wife's family for generations. I'm drifting here, but experiencing collections in a domestic setting, whether that be folk art, Indigenous material or contemporary art, is potentially a richer experience for me because there are more variables, different readings to be had in the proximity of things to each other, and in an architectural environment where the taste of everything from furniture to textiles is put together quite individually. I'm always puzzled when I go to someone's place and they don't have any stuff! Not because it's wrong, but because I need things around me. My house, to an extent, is a sort of index to what I do as an artist. I don't have any of my own work at home... Maybe one small piece, I'm around it everyday; I don't need to see it when I get home. One thing I know has had an impact, through collecting ceramics and smaller sculptures, is this confidence to make works of a smaller scale. Some of the smallest things we have at home are my favourite forms: a tiny Inuit-carved otter made of bone, my Doyle Lane ceramics and also a David Musgrave wall relief in polished bronze. They all have such a specific formed-and-finished surface to them and a really potent energy blasting beyond their scale.

Collecting is compulsive too, and I mean collecting things on any level. A large part of it is about the search, the knowledge gleamed on the way, the accidental diversions in research that send you down other wormholes or branches of collecting. Behind every object, there's an activity.

END

Ricky Swallow is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney and Stuart Shave Modern Art, London.
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