

The Highlights - That's What He Said

PART TWO: WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9, 2008 5:00 PM

Basement of 216 Plymouth St, DUMBO



Ruby Sky Stiler and Ian Cooper.

IAN COOPER: A new chapter. The beginning of a new era in time. I'm gonna pose a question to you now, Ruby: Something that I find compelling about your work is your blatant interest in sculpture taking on human physical attributes. Particular qualities that you are wrangling with being awkwardness, self-consciousness, embarrassment, overcompensation-which I feel like comes up a lot in some of these more recent works-overcompensating for its own existence, particularly by way of being "adorned." Running with this idea, some works appear to me to masquerade as confident, or sexy, or alluring, but they seem to be just barely passing muster as such. So, here's the question: do you ever find yourself sizing up actual humans and imagining their forms as springboards for a hypothetical, future artwork?

RUBY SKY STILER: No, not in a literal way, but I do find that living in the city, at the end of a long day, I find myself totally agoraphobic, because it can be such an endless act of judging and being judged all day. I definitely do this: look at someone and get a sense of

who they are and what they are projecting out and what their attitude is, "summarizing" people according to their physical appearance. I don't think that I'm an anomaly. In the city particularly, people focus a lot of attention on their personal style. For better or worse, how you put yourself together is an effective way of generating an image of what type of person you'd like to be, or for others to see you as.

IC: Especially in such a Petri-dish environment like the subway. Those opposing benches make me feel like I'm preparing to play dodge ball.

RS: Yes, and all of those small symbols of individuality...aggressiveness-

IC: Defensiveness-

RS: Yeah. So, to answer your question, I think I do that to a certain extent, but I wouldn't say I choose an individual and attempt to re-create them as a semi-abstract object. Not at this point, anyway.

I do see my work affected by-and I *am* inspired by trends that are pertinent now. The aspects that may seem nostalgic in the work are nostalgic in a way that is updated, or current.



Ruby Stiler, *Old and Cool/New and Boring*, 2007, foam, hot glue, acrylic paint, 60×32×32 inches.

IC: Right. None of the works appear to be dwelling in the past. I was referring specifically to the piece that you made, *Old and Cool New and Boring*.

RS: That's a clear example. All three of the sculptures in that small body of work are kind of "dressed," but have no perceivable physical "body." No Human physical form, although they are very anthropomorphic. And that piece has a really dark presence. I think, initially, the

piece projects a really "street" sensibility that recalls S&M culture...biker...downtown, Americana. But then when you get a sense of the scale and posture of the piece, it's just so vulnerable: it doesn't move on its own, has no autonomy. It needs to lean on the wall, and it's obviously extremely "overweight."

IC: It's relying on so much of those adorned signifiers for its very existence.

RS: On another level, the way that it's made, which simulates being constructed of leather and zippers-when you look closer it's actually fabricated from classic art supplies: paint and paper. And the scale of those elements is sort of strangely off-everything is "cartooned." It's a funny thing, it doesn't actually have a "bad attitude," it's not going to resist, and it won't actually stand up for itself in a fight. So, it's just so much about image, and I think that body of work tries to summon an aura of authenticity around a physical object, by using these themes or signifiers that recall different attitudes in our culture.



Ruby Sky Stiler, detail, *Old and Cool/New and Boring*, 2007, foam, hot glue, acrylic paint, 60×32×32 inches.

IC: It's so funny that the form exists *because* of the surface! They don't appear to be so much dressed, as the amalgam or composite of all of the adornments makes the...thing... "The clothes make the man". In these cases the surface, i.e., the way you make things begets the actual work, and makes the meaning. And I think it's important for you to discuss the title of this piece...

RS: The title, *Old and Cool New and Boring*, is actually a term my nephew, Ole, made up.

He always says that when he is looking at cars. He and my sister live on "the Mesa" in New Mexico, which is an off-the-grid, mildly anarchist community. Mesa culture is all about authenticity: If you eat food out of the dump, than you're for real. The impulse is to not be a part of conventional society. So, Ole is growing up with that mesa ideology, and so when he sees a car that's a "beater"-that just looks like a pile of shit-he says, "That's old and cool." Conversely, he labels all cars, that, for instance, my mom would drive, "new and boring", because she's a yuppie in that context-even though she's straight up driving a Subaru that has about a foot of mud caked around the outside. I think that mind-set is grown out of this idea about-or romance with-"genuineness" and creating that through image.



Ole sitting on Zoe's car (on the Mesa), 2008.

IC: I think, specifically, some of the materials you have chosen to explore in simulation-again, important to note, not the *actual* materials, but these fabricated "stand-ins" for those materials-are made in such a fashion that they could never *be* the real thing. So the viewer doesn't have that kind of dialogue where they are wrestling with "real" materials...

RS: This relates directly to that long discussion we had in the car ride on the way back from Deposit: Rachel [Foullon] and I were discussing how tricky it is to figure out how to represent things and negotiate materials. Why not use the "real" item? That's kind of a nuts and bolts question: How am I going to make this object, and what is it going to be made out of? For me, it's all about setting up a criteria or framework wherein I can actually spend time "making," because that's the aspect that I really enjoy, and that's where I become inspired: developing this physical language.



Studded belts at St. Mark's vendor, 2008.

IC: I've experienced your work over so many years now and in it-and certainly this yields true for many artists-elements circle around and come back into play. Things gather, come to the foreground, then recede, only to resurface later. One of those elements, currently in the "foreground," are images that teeter on the brink between high fashion and just plain St. Mark's garbage-things that allude to a certain lifestyle, but are affordable for any teenager from New Jersey:

Studs, zippers, and chains, and then there are feathers, or other "new age-y" signifiers that remind me of *River's Edge*, or some 1980s notion of being both open and spiritual, yet simultaneously hard-core...over-sized safety pins-all things emblematic of coolness, but are totally purchasable. Not like prison tats, or something you are only awarded through the actual triumph of experience. These items are like rub-ons. Also, I think by virtue of you making them, it makes them even more indistinguishable-whether it is luxury good, or..."Hot Topic."

RS: I would actually debate that. As I said earlier, I'm quite attuned to this idea of a person (or form's) "look." So fashion is a medium that I look to a lot for inspiration. In some ways I really idolize that particular vein of creativity. I think it's a really valid expressive form, and I think it's very interesting, yet that's not the arena that I'm interested in participating in, only insofar as introducing aspects of it to an art context. I like to think about the ways that we create value, and in a sense, my sculptures-which sometimes borrow directly from designers that I admire: Vivienne Westwood, for instance-are not made "well." They are *not* made as gorgeously and durably as they would be if they were made by the couturier-



Image from a Vivienne Westwood collection.

IC: Nor would they select these same materials.

RS: Exactly. There's a weird politic in the way that things are made, and how they create value. My sculptures appear-although they are not made by the same standards as the fashion industry: expertly tailored, luscious, and gorgeous-to have a much different kind of value: In a way, one that is even higher. Even though the fabrication is technically on the low side, they actually operate "high"...which is so weird. The expectations are so different looking at an art object than they are looking at commercial products. There is so much language that is established within these different conventions. You're prepared to look at things with a different kind of an eyeball, or something.

Again to return to the question, and in terms of defining my reasons for making things by hand: I do think that there is something distinct about simulation that can be more powerfully evocative of the essence of the original thing than the original thing itself.

IC: One strong connection between our work seems to be this cultivation of appropriated sources. I like to think of it as trolling through or mining these sources. We both re-envision or re-imagine these existing things vis-à-vis different materials, and for generally a very different, or alternative, effect than that of the "original" thing. So I like to think of there being many different ways of behaving like this as an artist. One version is an artist who just sort of traverses the earth, allowing a multitude of various objects, forms, or notions to pass through their widely cast net. Some things get caught, and others pass through-

RS: Rachel [Foullon].

IC: Sure. Another artist that comes to mind is Daphne [Fitzpatrick]. I see them as sort of marching through life, experiencing...things coming at them constantly and they're like, "Yes, please!" or, "No thanks, next." Another version is this hunter artist, who's actually seeking out certain things that fit their pre-conceived structures or parameters: looking for elements that subscribe to their point of view. Perhaps, Mike Kelley makes sense as an example under this umbrella. I used to think of you more as a hunter, but now-especially after taking that recent trip with you to Naples and Pompeii, which were such different contexts and environments than your familiar aesthetic oeuvre-I think of you as having more of this "filter" effect. Whereas I feel that I struggle with this permanent state of mind, no matter where I am on earth, you were really so open and receptive to this new array of different things that we were encountering...and you literally came back to New York, and introduced it right back into your work-just from that trip!



Pompeiiian Vase.

RS: It's hilarious that you would define yourself as not a part of that way of working, considering we just established how that very process occurred with this new Laguna Beach piece! I always feel that when I need something, I find it, and when we took that trip, I was looking-searching. I was in the mood to be inspired. Although, I have to say that all of those things we saw are really relevant to my work: antiquity, archeology, and fabrication of history. Particularly relevant was our experience in Pompeii, which was so fascinating because it's a city that once really existed, but now exists only through the lens of contemporary historians. Something that was being discussed as we were there, that we were all joking about, is this big controversy with the colors of the frescos. Archeologists had conceived of this color: a terracotta color, coined "Pompeii Red." Everything at the site was restored with this color in mind, and then along comes this unfortunate discovery. It's developing as we speak: A scientific discovery that this may not have been the original color. The real color could have been oxidized through the heat of the fire, and mutated to look like this reddish color. This is a major historical site, and all of our ideas about this site are entangled with this iconic color. It's become a symbol of that culture, and now, as they realize that it was potentially a big mistake, it makes this great example of how history can sometimes be...fictional.

I came prepared to look for something there that related to my interests, and I found it. There is an ever-expanding, evolving realm of interest for me, and I get less and less concerned with controlling how elements relate to each other. I just trust that they will.

IC: Maybe, then, it's just where we are at: As we mature, these dichotomies, that I used to see as very different artistic approaches, are kind of collapsing...

RS: I remember when I was an undergrad, I would find some artist's monograph-I can't even think of who...probably some really fucking heavy-handed artist, like Kiki Smith or something-and literally tote that shit around for months, and be like, "This person is a genius. This is who I want to be." I think, when you're a young artist, that's a part of defining who you are. You have to do that! It seems necessary, but now, I never do that. My relationship with artists and their work is always changing. Do you find that?

IC: Definitely.

RS: I'll come back to an artist whose work I used to really love, and still am inspired by their work, but in a different way: not thinking they're pure genius, and the only artist for me! I think my idea about being an artist is more of a human-thing, and less idolization.

IC: Let's talk about that sculpture that you made when we got back from Pompeii-



Ruby Sky Stiler, *Old Friend From The Future*, 2008, Foam core, hot glue, acrylic paint, bristol board, pedestal, 34×35×78 inches.

RS: *Old Friend From The Future*.

IC: How do you reconcile the compositing of so many of those different examples of archeological findings into this one, sort of, ultimate repair job? I always connect the image of a broken vase with the trope of someone, in vain, trying to crazy-glue back together this once perfect form...Yet the scale of the sculpture is so weird-it appears as though you've found some Rubik's Cube-type methodology of working with these many smaller fragmented vessels, in such perfection, that it ended up growing into this mother-ship of repairs: a form more powerful and affirming than any of those individual ones could ever be, on their own...and as an aside, before you address that: Early on in the making of this piece you mentioned that you were considering additionally working with some more contemporary examples of broken vessel shards, and then at a certain point that fell away. What happened?

RS: That piece really relates, again, to this idea of authenticity we discussed earlier. Originally, I had thought I would "update" the sculpture-give a wink to the viewer that implies: I know, that you know, this is a fake. But later I realized that gesture was too obvious-almost condescending. Once you see the piece its fraudulence is made extremely clear.

It does have this initial aura of seriousness and historical integrity-an authoritative presence-but as you approach the artwork more closely, that totally falls apart. There are so many liberties I've taken in inventing that piece: the scale, the way it's fabricated, the subtly updated color...



Ruby Sky Stiler, *Old Friend From The Future*, detail, 2008, Foam core, hot glue, acrylic paint, bristol board, pedestal, 34×35×78 inches.

(Danny Gordon enters the studio)

RS: Hi Danno! Come in! You're live...

Danny Gordon: Oh, I'm live? I'm *always* live.

RS & IC: [Laughter]

DG: Am I interrupting?

RS & IC: Yeah...

IC: Anyway...I also think the tone is really important. You said you didn't want to come off as too "flip," or too obviously subverting the idea of history just having its own cache of authenticity. I kept thinking those "contemporary" inclusions were going to be like, a bunch of broken bottles-because the thing is a vessel, which is essentially a thing that just holds water-that's what the fuck it was right? For some reason, I was holding on to the image of a broken, glass Sprite bottle. Because on some level those things were just tools-sure, they were decorative, but arguably any vessel has some amount of decoration...

So, now speaking to the context that Old Friend From The Future had within Fresh Kills [the recent exhibition at Dumbo Art Center]-I imagine there must have been a bit of pressure-knowing what his over-arching theme was-to have your work fulfill Dave [Kennedy Cutler]'s curatorial agenda? I know you were thinking, on some level, that when he included you in the proposal, he was thinking of the work you were making that dealt pretty directly with castaways, or objects sifted through detritus. Obviously the show is titled after the landfill of the same name, and Dave's interest seemed to be about exploring the physical aftermath of a destruction, on that kind of epic scale, etc...So, I wondered if there was a pressure to produce, well, "trash" again, like the work you were making in your second year at Yale...

but you really didn't do that. You addressed the show's theme in this more roundabout way, by exploring things lost, things saved, things repaired...The companion sculpture in the show, titled, New Scary Thing-which, out of the context of the exhibition, has one kind of read, but when co-opted by the curatorial umbrella-takes on a really different meaning-



Ruby Sky Stiler, *Presenting The End of The Beginning of The End*, 2006, Mixed media including foam, paper, acrylic paint, glue, polymer clay, 48×50×35 inches

RS: Right.

IC: To me, that piece became darkly reminiscent of the accounts of raining dismemberment and loss of body parts that was happening, wholesale, on September 11. That became a thematic thread of the exhibition, in a way. Even Danny [Gordon]'s photographs: Trying to put back together things that were once whole...New Scary Thing-the title being perfect here-is sort of emblematic of those macabre, yet circumstantial, realities: Grim reports, days after, of people discovering dismembered hands on their terraces-pieces falling hither-nither. In one sense the sculpture houses three stand-ins for evening gloves, or something, and in another there is a more horrific read. Am I projecting?

RS: Maybe...but those two pieces embody that desire to anthropomorphize, and turn an inanimate object into a human form. So both works are, in a way, a theatrical reintroduction of utilitarian objects: a vase and a coat hanger-which are decorative, yet functional objects, usually found lurking around in the background-in the corners, or in the shadows-that come alive as they are employed by me. Intrinsically, they both mimic human forms-

IC: Alluding to what they're cloaking?

RS: Both original objects evoke the image of a singular human form-

IC: Autonomy, or solidarity-

RS: The type of thing that you project human characteristics onto easily. So, I conceived of this pair as having a relationship, or dialogue, in that way. When we were installing the show and Danny was trying to shove *New Scary Thing* into the back closet-

IC & DG: [Laughter]

IC: Oh, God-strike that from the record!



Ruby Sky Stiler, *A New Scary Thing*, 2008, Steel, polymer clay, acrylic paint, wool felt, 32×32×72 1/2 inches.

RS: [Laughter] I was really upset, because I felt like the two works needed each other...

IC: This brings us back to what we were first discussing...It's no surprise that particular drama actually played out, because that piece projects such embarrassment or self-consciousness that it seems almost content to exist out of the spotlight-it is, literally, an awkward stick with gloves on.

RS: Yeah, and meanwhile, I'm trying to be its spokesperson, or advocate, like a "stage mom"-

IC: It's ready to crawl into the back room...in its own mind.

RS: Where as its fat friend would never do that!

IC: Exactly! That vessel feels completely comfortable on the pedestal...

RS: It's so funny that you mentioned that, because during that installation, I felt so badly for that sculpture-really empathized with its situation! It was really getting fucked! ...Sorry, Danno!

RS, IC & DG: [Laughter]

RS: No...though It was helpful for me to formalize this idea of "advocating" for an object-that would prefer to lurk in the background-so it can have its moment: To be in the center of the room, and perform.

IC: It's unique and amazing, how you've set up such a dynamic with these pieces where, in a way, the instinct is for them to fulfill their own destiny! Then, in an exhibition environment, you take on the roll of caring for them, and shepherding them into a place where they can reach their full potential!