

LESLEY VANCE TALKS TO RICKY SWALLOW ABOUT ART, NEIL YOUNG, AND DOLPHINS WITH EXPENSIVE JUMPERS

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LESLEY: I'm always interested when artists make big changes in their work, so I wanted to start by talking about that. Maybe, to focus the question, we could talk about subject matter, because I would say in your older work you were monumentalizing objects that were about to become extinct—the Game Boy with barnacles, the colored plastic Apple-computer skulls, the encased PowerBook, etc. These were objects that were only being used on Earth for a short window of time.

Around 2001, wood replaced plastics and the subject matter shifted to objects or creatures that exist in the present time; for example, hats, fish, a helmet, a cactus, snakes. These things have been around for hundreds of years, thousands of years, millions of years backwards in time; they exist in the present and they will exist into the future. Whereas a Game Boy was in the culture for a few years and then became obsolete—it was a dead object when you made a sculpture of it.

RICKY: The earlier work was about trying to fix things against time, and it still is. The first of those obsolete models I made was a tape deck, which was this Toshiba tape-deck/boom-box my family always had in the house. And I took it and used it in my studio. I can't remember what made me want to remake it, but as soon as I finished it, the real thing was stolen from me. All that work with the technology stuff and video games . . . the reasons I chose those objects were somehow different from how those

objects were read . . . but at some point I felt like I didn't want to be the "pop kid" anymore.

LESLEY: Does this have something to do with getting older, having more life experiences, changes in the kind of music you were listening to . . . ? It does feel like the work has grown with you.

RICKY: There were a lot of exhibitions at that point with turntables, video games, tabletop, arcade records . . . but to me all those things were the first objects that you could spend time with yourself. I remember using those and having them be my thing. They're almost like the first sort of studio one has, the first place that's your own where you can conquer and understand things without needing someone else there. And that was important. Where I grew up, in this small coastal town in Australia called San Remo, there were far fewer of those things than if you grew up in a city. They take longer to get to the coasts of Australia. So when I started making those computer games, it was a statement about what things meant to me at the time, and I was a bit naïve about how those would be read. It's not a celebration of the 80s.

LESLEY: So it was more about what the objects meant to you, not what they meant to the culture or their obsolescence.

RICKY: It's like painter's radios, because the way that they survive is by becoming stereos for people who work in a trade where it doesn't matter what happens to them [THE STEREOS] physically. So everyone has . . . there are a lot of dads who have those things.

LESLEY: Mine has one in the basement tool area that I can never forget. It's got to be several decades old and I'm sure it will live with the tools forever.

RICKY: They don't go to heaven, they just go to the garage. And I was interested in museums and museum displays when there's some sort of compression or understanding of a timeline, and I tried to translate this interest by removing all the color and the function, and making the Game Boy, computer, etc., almost these tombs that are just the shapes of themselves. It's like those coffins in Africa that get made in the shape of the person's profession, like if you're a carpenter you get a big giant saw, if you're an athlete you get a sneaker or something like that. I felt like they [THE OBJECTS] entomb themselves. I can't explain quite why, but it was important that they were empty and there was nothing inside them other than their

design, so they're remembered for their design.

And back then I was interested in being an "artist of your time," and I was interested in being a young artist, and what that meant. And it got to the point where I just wanted the work to be more like songs, or more like albums I like. The work I was making then couldn't have been more different than the kind of things I was into.

LESLEY: You mean what you were into in a cultural, artistic sense: music, other art . . . ?

RICKY: Yeah, I was making computer games out of cardboard, but I wasn't listening to Kraftwerk necessarily. I had been into electronic music, but. . . . Somehow different major phases in the music I'm listening to definitely change works. I think, with the wood. . . . I don't know how to say this, but it got to the point where I wanted to make warmer artworks. And I didn't really know how to do that. And the last things I made before I started making the wooden sculptures, the last kind of cold still lifes, were those iMac computer things. And so much of it was outsourced to other people . . . I made the prototypes and then got a company to make them. But there's a big protestant work ethic with me. I had the feeling I wasn't being a proper artist anymore in terms of my own strict definitions of what that means, and I felt like I had to prove something to myself in the studio, so I just started making that bird. You know the story, right?

LESLEY: Yes, but I want to hear it again. When you lectured at Cal Arts this story had everyone talking the next day. Everyone said in disbelief, "He taught himself how to sculpt like that from a craft-store book about how to sculpt birds out of wood?!"

RICKY: *How to Carve Realistic Birds* by David Tippery? Yeah, I don't know, I can't remember how I found that book. It had all these carvings of birds on the cover, and they were in different stages. And it just reminded me of my own work, in that they were like dupes or something, but they weren't rendered, they were blank; so I bought it, and that was one of the only times when I didn't know what I was going to do next. I got that book and I just started making the bird, and it was fueled by this curiosity to see if I could actually do it realistically. I was following it step-by-step in the book, and it was before I had many chisels in my life, so I was using Dremels and things.

And then I was in Belgium, and I saw round medallion carvings by a Dutch carver who, at one point, was the assistant to this guy Grindling Gibbons, and they were called *Earth, Wind, Fire, Water* or something—the four

elements. One of them had a skull and a sword, and it was the first thing I saw that made me feel like I could make more than the bird. The bird could be with other things. The thing with a still life is that way detail can amplify the ordinary and allow a more extreme narrative.

Then I went home and the bird was the only thing in my studio. I had all these plywood tables that I make when I'm anxious about not making anything. I just had three tables and a bird. The bird seemed like it needed a home that was smaller than the big room it was in. Things that I've made are often things that I'm capable of wearing out, so my studio sneaker ended up being carved out as the home for the bird. If I were to carve that piece now it would be one solid piece, because that's important.

There's often a time loop that occurs with my work, so that the shoe has a relationship to the *Vacated Campers* sculpture of my studio shoes I had made years earlier. That's kind of the humble beginning of the woodcarving story. It was at a time when I was going through a separation, and it seemed important to create a fixed relationship between the bird and the shoe. I guess I just allowed myself to be more present in the finished things, to allow myself to be readily available in the work, like a host . . .

LESLEY: Like you are built into the object . . . it's a more emotional object . . .

RICKY: It's like I've made something occur rather than remembering how everything used to occur. I think I need another question to hone in my focus . . .

LESLEY: Well, we're talking about why the shoe contains the bird Your work makes me feel conscious that our bodies are on our skeletons; that we're these walking containers. And so . . . we rely on the abstractions of language to function in the world. I've been reading about how our brains perceive things we encounter as spatial metaphors, and this happens subconsciously, but it seems to me that language collides with the sense we have of ourselves as physical bodies.

I'm noticing that in all of your recent work, one thing contains another. Two disparate objects are brought together, and in the union there is this poetic resonance The fish in the tire, the skull in your hooded sweatshirt, the bird in the shoe, the snake in the helmet, the cactus in the pot . . . it seems like you're creating new metaphors to describe the world around you.

RICKY: I'd never thought of the cactus in the pot.

LESLEY: Actually, I first think of the water in the cactus.



Highland Park Hydra/Field Recording
2003
jelutong, steel
105 x 104 x 40 cm

RICKY: Yeah.

LESLEY: Although with the other works something literally contains another thing, and it's about shelter and vulnerability, but with the cactus that vulnerability is there because the cactus surface is like skin, and there's graffiti carved all over it.

RICKY: I guess that sort of attitude about a coupling of things . . . it was kind of evident in the work before the carving. It's this weird nurturing thing. But I'm sure it has something to do with my home changing so much. Like moving here from Australia, moving to L.A., moving to London. . . . By home I mean a city, a house, circles of friendships, your creative, nurturing forces . . . I have these three different locations. I think it's unsettling for me.

Somehow in the work I try to settle that movement. There's so much codependence in the pieces that they don't need an environment—like the skull in the beanbag. Someone else pointed out that for the skull to be pushed

so far into the beanbag implies an impact. I guess, for me, I wanted the skull to be so far in there that you couldn't imagine the beanbag without it. It's not my sculpture of a pregnant woman, but I had the skull in the studio and I had the beanbag, and I was about to move from one city to another, and so there's something about me being in a transitory space and the beanbag being a malleable piece of furniture. It's like a nomadic kind of couch.

LESLEY: Does this have something to do with how everything has a low center of gravity?

RICKY: I can't imagine sculptures that aren't on the floor.

LESLEY: But I mean in terms of situating you in a place, which becomes like a home? They don't have implied movement; the movement is self-contained in the piece.

RICKY: There's a certain domesticity to it. But how could a beanbag be anywhere other than the floor.

LESLEY: True.

RICKY: I think of it as a domestic heart. Not an emotional heart, but as an organ . . . a furniture heart. And I guess it's this thing that has a center and the center is the skull, but all the piping in the beanbag trails back to that recess where the skull is. To me, I think of it as some kind of weird circulation system, so without the skull the organ wouldn't be able to complete the function. As if it's not something you could sit in anymore. I think if we keep talking we can get to the bottom of this pairing thing.

LESLEY: To me it's like your work is creating a new language with metaphors . . . because language is slippery, and it fails so often when you need to describe the emotion within memories or objects or people. . . . So you have to put these two strange things together and then something happens that describes these complexities to you.

RICKY: I think writers can do that. Like when you read a book and you're suddenly in that place. I get so disappointed with self-referential art—art that is just about other art.

LESLEY: I'm not saying writers can't do it. . . . I just think it's difficult for me, and I think others, to express a depth of emotion within ideas using words . . . It's frustrating.

RICKY: Maybe that's what's different about the wood pieces that I don't think is apparent in some of the other

works. The other works are like . . . if I was being really cruel to myself I was like a kid being clever. I wanted things to warm up, for the work to have a lasting impact on people. Part of that relies on the intricacy of their making, and the performative aspect of their making.

Say the fish in the tire [PRIVATE DANCER]; One thing that came to my mind while I was making it was a J. G. Ballard short story. Everyone is leaving Earth to go somewhere, maybe Mars—I can't remember. A scientist finds what may be the last fish on earth in a puddle, and so he goes and gets another scientist to show him, and the fish is flapping around, and they try to figure out how to capture it and get it to survive so that fish can start up again, and then they go away and these

kids come with rocks and they throw rocks at the fish and kill it, until the fish is one with the pond. Only through a limited environment was it able to maintain itself. But I also liked the idea that if it could only do one thing, that one thing was enough—like it could only go around in circles, and it's against all these walls, so no one could ever find it there.

LESLEY: I have this habit of projecting myself into work that I look at, so when I look at that piece I feel like I'm the fish. Maybe there is water in the tire now, but it will evaporate, and so the fish becomes vulnerable.

RICKY: There's definitely a sort of empathy in the work that I want to be there.

LESLEY: Yes.

RICKY: In my favorite still lifes the animals aren't dead things that have had all their life removed through a hunting process. This is something that I thought about recently, because I was just at the Met in New York—kind of on the



Private Dancer
2002
jelutong

rap of a friend in London. She wrote a piece about Chardin and told me I had to look at them closer. . . . There's one at the Met that's of these rabbits, and more than looking like dead creatures, they look like people who have had a hard day at work and have just come home exhausted. They are slumped over each other and they look helpless, but they don't look "over." I think Eric Swenson does this really well. There is a way you feel for the animals, a way you can't help but think you've been there before too.

LESLEY: We could just slide into talking about evolution from there.

RICKY: I think it's too easy to forget that we are just other animals.

LESLEY: We're very narcissistic animals.

RICKY: People are surprised when they find out other animals in the kingdom express loyalty, for example. We're just dolphins with expensive jumpers.

LESLEY: I'm reading a Harvard professor's book about the opposing viewpoints between Freud and C.S. Lewis relating to the existence of God.

RICKY: Freud and Lewis in the ring together!

LESLEY: Freud is the atheist and Lewis is the atheist-turned-believer. I'm nearly finished, and the central theme seems to be that Freud spent his life as a non-believer depressed, without many close friends, sometimes addicted to cocaine, etc., while Lewis became a believer and suddenly felt complete, settled, contented. And I am thinking, am I destined for misery? One significant factor in Lewis's turn has to do with thinking about the empathy humans feel for one another, our 'moral fiber.' And I'm listening to this audio book in my studio thinking, "What? Animals who are not 'we' also exhibit these traits." But maybe they didn't observe this at that time.

RICKY: I don't know why, all of a sudden, the use of animals became almost consistent in the practice . . . I don't even like animal art!

LESLEY: Well, we all come from the same thing . . . We've been fish, we've been monkeys. I read somewhere that they think at one point in our evolution we almost became extinct.

RICKY: Even when I was in art school I was reading Darwin, and there was this thing about evolution in the work that was always discussed, and now it never really comes up.

LESLEY: That's one of the major things I think about when I see *Killing Time*, with the dead fish on the table.

RICKY: I think that piece is quite religious. There's something in my attitude about endless guilt. There's some moralistic thing there I guess. Some of the first pictures I saw repeatedly were images from the Catholic Church. I went to a Catholic primary school for half of my early education. My grandmother had a lot of images of saints around, and a giant tapestry of *The Last Supper*. I wouldn't say I'm a religious person now, but that sort of imagery is as much a part of my stubborn vocabulary of images as, say, Powell Peralta.

LESLEY: Does that have more to do with your family or personal history than with religious belief?

RICKY: No. I think that . . . when I made that *Scream* mask, people thought it was a religious sculpture. Right

now I'm making a piece for Venice that is a seated skeleton in a very basic wooden chair, and, accidentally, it's probably originally from a church because it has a space in the back for where you might put your hymn book. The skeleton is sitting holding a staff, and I was thinking about the Zurbarán painting of St. Francis in ecstasy, and also the Caravaggio version—the skull somehow looks like the pose of a saint in that it's got the staff. It's looking up for some kind of salvation, and the hand that's resting on the chair is holding a whittling knife, and the staff is half carved out with this whittling trick. . . . So the skeleton is depicted as though it has carved the staff out of boredom, or out of a way to further mark its time post-flesh. Because the whole thing is wooden, it raises the question of whether it has carved its entire self out of something.

But I think of it less in a religious sense, and more in terms of this confidence saints have in their solitary nature. They are sometimes depicted performing miracles, but, more often than not, they are depicted in very tightly-cropped panels by themselves, or carved as these very vertical German carvings, where they're on these tiny little rock bases. It's like they are human islands. There's definitely something about how independent they are.

LESLEY: So this is you in your studio.

RICKY: And in that piece the only thing that separates it from being a sculpture that's 400 years old is the hooded top that's draped over the chair, so it's the same hooded top from my earlier self-portrait. In some way that skull was supposed to date that self-portrait. This new piece is definitely not a self-portrait, but the hooded top definitely connects it to *now*, and to other pieces I've done. I guess the hooded top is a contemporary monk's habit.

LESLEY: So is that why you've put the Adidas logo on the piece with the hooded sweatshirt over the skeleton head? Or the decal on the sculpture of the glove?

RICKY: The shoe also has a logo. With the Adidas hat, it was just the hat I had at the time. But I'd seen these disturbing but amazing photos of hikers in the snow who had perished, and their jackets—and in some circumstances their beanies—were still on. They were like skeletons wearing extreme sportswear gear. And it wasn't so much this consumer idea that the brand outlives the person, but the idea that a dead thing could occupy something that could still be functional . . . that death is kept warm.

LESLEY: This is something else about all your work when one thing contains another. There is usually a non-living

thing containing a living thing—even if it’s the piece with the chain in the hat. (Am I stretching it there?) Maybe this has something to do with how we occupy space.

RICKY: I guess that’s why the chain trails out like some kind of weird spine. I still don’t know why there’s that need.

LESLEY: I think we are figuring it out. I do feel like empathy is important in your work, and that’s my first response. If you think about what empathy is and how it occurs as a feeling . . . you need to have more than one thing, since it’s about relating to someone or something outside of yourself.

RICKY: It’s overly romantic, but there is some kind of emotional struggle to make anything in the studio work. If I think something is really moving, I want everyone that’s close to me to have experienced the same thing—like if I went to a concert I really like, or when I saw the film *Nashville*. So, just this idea that there is the ability to move people . . . I feel like it used to happen with art a lot more before art had to compete with a lot of other things. When art was the movies and television. . . .

I think music sticks, and I don’t think artworks stick in the same way. Having every Neil Young album is kind of like having access to a whole series of narratives that you’re not involved in, but you can somehow get involved in through the music. Studio soundtrack is a very long question. It’s something about a lasting impression and the sculptures are supposed to be a lasting impression of something else.

LESLEY: I can see you and your work hanging out with a Neil Young song.

RICKY: Good idea.

LESLEY: I was talking yesterday about how Neil Young can weave his own personal narrative into a song and it’s okay. Like on *Silver & Gold*, he can sing about being in a band called Buffalo Springfield a long time ago, and there is still this emotional significance that expands away from him, even though the song lyrics are so specific to his life.

RICKY: Yeah, but if you read a Neil Young song printed, I don’t think it’d translate. . . . In *Shakey*, all his quotes . . . when I first started reading them, there was this disappointment, because initially he doesn’t appear to say anything that’s a revelation. I don’t think he’s someone who’s really into art . . . he’s a really straight-up guy. He’s into cars. How many of our friends are into cars? It’s all in the delivery, medium, whatever.

LESLEY: Yes, but it’s when he throws in these little anecdotes, or mentions his son or his wife or Laurel Canyon in a song . . . with the delivery. It feels like real life somehow.

RICKY: I was at a friend’s place the other night and we were arguing about which Neil Young song to put on, and I wanted to put on “On the Beach” and this guy, Manfox, was like, “Oh man, don’t put on any of this wah-wah Eric Clapton shit.” He was basically saying the album was rubbish. But he is into music . . . he’s not a hater. He just didn’t like that record. And I was listening to it and I never realized that there are bongos.

LESLEY: Really?

RICKY: Play it back. There are bongos. And this guy was trying to say it was tacky. It was elevator music. And without the words, maybe it is.

LESLEY: I want to talk about the nature of wood, the material.

RICKY: One of the embarrassing things I have to tell people when they ask me what I do is that I’m a wood-carver. And then there is this question: How can I tell people I carve things out of wood without them thinking I should be arrested? It’s the stuff of wizards and unicorns. I’m talking about traditional wood carving versus what I do. I’m proud of how traditional it is and how handmade it is, and one of the things I think is important is that one goes to the studio and actually makes things. But, to be a wood-carver is sort of returning to something old. And since I haven’t been using plastics and sanding, I feel like it’s almost a more wholesome studio.

I guess it’s also an acoustic material. It’s a living material—like it still moves when it’s taken off the tree. Although you try to plan for as little movement as possible, it still has the ability to expand or shrink. When I chose that wood I was looking for another material that was as mute as the cardboard or the white PVC—something that doesn’t have a purpose. Like the only purpose it has is its subject. It’s about description and abbreviation. But if the material itself is abbreviated then it’s kind of invisible. It’s one of the most *unwooden* woods you can find.

LESLEY: But it’s still wood. It’s a lot like flesh.

RICKY: It’s a very bodily material. That wood is traditionally used for pattern making, and conceptually it interested me that its major use was to show people what a thing could

look like—to suggest an idea rather than to structurally improve somebody’s house. It literally has this function that it’s not quite at a “real world” level of finish. It’s the material of a proposal.

You know, regarding empathy, I don’t think these things would have the same effect if they weren’t done in wood. I think the kind of material you use definitely affects what you make in that subject. It just causes you to look at things in a different way. Things appear to me now that I want to carve. They appeal to me both because I’m conceptually interested in what they could do with something else, but also because I wonder how they would be, or how much stranger they would get if they were sculpted in wood. In more of the recent things, like, say, the table, there’s one large slab of wood representing twenty different kinds of materials to unify the description into one experience. There’s not the distraction of details in terms of surface renderings. And I hope that’s what makes the experience of them more intimate, because you’re in the “beige zone.”

LESLEY: And everything is life-size. It’s like an alternate reality, or parallel universe. Something else I wanted to know is, I have these paintings that I associate with what I was listening to at the time I was painting them, or what was happening in the news, what I heard on NPR when I was working on them. Does this happen to you?

RICKY: That happens to me, yeah. When people ask me what my influences are, I can think of music more quickly than I can think of art, but in fear of the next question being, “and how is that blah blah blah blah . . .” There’s not some song or album associated with a piece, but there are blocks of music. And so there is some music that I can’t listen to . . . in the same way some music draws forth past people or past homes. . . . And it’s almost like to channel those people again is not something I’m interested in.

But when I first moved to L.A.—I don’t live here anymore—that was the beginning of the [JOHN] Fahey years, and I think of the Amoeba “Fahey” files as the soundtrack to a lot of things. Even the first [DEVENDRA] Banhart record is the soundtrack to the making of the cactus piece. And it’s also what people have given me. *Shakey* is my “Biennale book,” and subsequently my whole Biennale soundtrack, in a way. I have to choose images for the appendix for this book, and there will definitely be an image of Neil Young in there.

In the studio I feel like having to have assistants is necessary in certain places and for ambitious pieces, but ultimately being in my studio by myself is mostly what I do or crave. When you’re in the studio having music or having a choice . . . it’s like that sort of attitude . . . it’s the privilege of company without the complication or distract-

tion of people. It’s a way to socialize with information. And the information is as important culturally as any art.

LESLEY: And this all has to do with the condensed living time that your sculptures contain when they are finished . . . it’s the hours you spent with it in the studio that are present, and also the music you were listening to and the events going on around you. . . . We should talk a little bit about time in your work.

RICKY: I’m someone who thinks about, “Okay, it’s mid-February. What was I doing a year ago or what have I done in the year since last February?” I’m in L.A. now, and I was here five months ago. What have I achieved in terms of productivity in the time since visits here? I keep studio logbooks of hours, even though I don’t pay myself an hourly rate. And now I’m just as particular about these books as I am about these pens that I got in Japan. And it’s because it’s there to remind me. . . . It’s interesting to answer the dumbest question in the world, like: “How long did it take you to make this sculpture?” And I can say “464,000 hours.”

But it’s also that at the end of the day I need to see the number “12” at the end of the page, and if it’s not there I feel like I’ve ripped off the project. I am kind of nerdy about that. My dad talks about having a fishing logbook, and he questions the legitimacy of my birth date, because according to his fishing log, he had to fly back from Tasmania because mom was in labor with me. I was born a day early or a day late of my actual birth date. So he thinks it was just a mistake on the birth certificate that got turned into my birth date. But . . . anyway . . . this piece [POINTS TO CACTUS IN CATALOGUE] is the biggest thing I’ve worked on completely independently, which may be one of the reasons I’m attracted to it. But . . . you know how you were going to ask me that question, ‘If you were in L.A. . . .?’

LESLEY: If you were more pleased with the work you were making when you lived in L.A. versus when you moved to London, would you move back to L.A.? [LAUGHS]

RICKY: And I say, “I love L.A. I’d move back here in a second.”

LESLEY: Well, you know that snake in the helmet? Hmmm . . . it’s fine but it’s just not like that cactus piece. . . . [LAUGHS] Geography is pretty important with that cactus piece. That’s a very “Highland Park” cactus.

RICKY: The kind of affection I feel for this environment could never be reciprocated in London, because London

isn't an environment, it's a city, and it doesn't feel like it has ever been a landscape, whereas L.A. feels like it's only recently, and not even totally successfully, been turned into a city. The kind of nature is so persistent, you know, it dangles from freeways and grows through tennis fences and back the other way and all that sort of stuff. And when I was here [L.A.], I felt like I lived in a place, whereas now I feel like I'm part of a city.

And you can live here and be part of it without feeling the same as all the other things in the other parts. Whereas in London . . . well, I guess here a traffic jam reminds you that you are just one of a whole lot of people doing the same thing, but in London the public transport thing, and commuting—maybe in New York it's like this as well—but you are more locked into the routines of everybody else.

I guess when I think about Highland Park, this cactus was just around the corner from Joyce and John's. It was between my house and Joyce's. And it's this kind of "boredom tree." All the graffiti on there looks kind of similar, and I don't know if it's all been scratched in there by a group of kids on the same day, or the same kid over a couple of days, but there's definitely something about it collecting information, and then it just having to listen to that information—like it didn't choose to have all that information on it, but it is what it is. The idea that the plant could represent a demographic is interesting.

LESLEY: With this piece I'm thinking that it's the vulnerability of the plant that triggers empathy . . . the cuts and drought the plant has endured.

RICKY: Yeah, but the persistence of this plant for me is very L.A. Like the kind of idea that people drive around in dead cars here.

LESLEY: Well, it's also like you don't get how gravity makes this plant possible. It's like a body with arms that are barely attached. And I remember the real cactus when you were making this, and parts of it were dead and brown . . .

RICKY: And it couldn't stay up.

LESLEY: Especially with parts breaking off, when it's very bodily . . .

RICKY: Well, they heal . . . when we lose limbs, we're not okay.

LESLEY: We can cut ourselves though.

RICKY: We can't cut . . . well, some people do carve things into themselves. I think it's a good homage to the neighborhood, how in the end the surface description is a description of what's underneath, and how a cactus grows and how it makes its cells, with all those pockets to store and circulate water. It's one of the only sculptures that has an interior from the outside. And that interior and exterior space is always quite important in the other sculptures. Even in this, in the bicycle helmet, the interior and the exterior just sort of collapse into each other through those apertures, and then those apertures are disturbed by snakes that have the ability to go through the inside and the outside. Whereas when you put a helmet on, it protects you from the outside.

LESLEY: There's also this way that the snakes are like the human brain . . .

RICKY: Eeeewww!

LESLEY: I mean, obviously there's this helmet, and it's the actual size of a helmet, so when I look at it I imagine putting it on my head, and then when I see the snake there's the immediate association of what's in my head with what's in the helmet.

RICKY: You'd be like Medusa on a bicycle. I guess how content the subjects are with each other is quite important to me. The helmet never touches the ground, because the snakes are underneath and lift it up. It's the first thing I've made which depicts a moving thing, like it's my baroque-dance piece. The fish and the bird, they're paused in the thing—they're not flying around or swimming. Everything's exhausted. And the snakes, not that they could move at any minute in real life, but they are depicted moving through something, and the way they pull on the straps of the helmet and the straps tie . . . it's the depiction of a living still life rather than a dead still life. ❗