

SAM GORDON AND B. WURTZ

SAM: How was your last show in Los Angeles? Prina, Welling, and you—quite an intriguing combination. Not something I would have thought of, although you did all pass through CalArts.

B: That exhibition at Richard Telles Fine Art turned out really well. It was Richard Telles’s idea, and initially I was a little surprised by the proposal as well. However, after a moment, I thought, this could be really good! Richard knew that Steve, Jim, and I were all friends and peers and thought it would be an interesting combination. In LA in particular, it seems that my work is more known in combination with younger artists. The more I thought about the idea for the show, the more interesting it became. If art is positioned on a continuum with pure conceptual art on one end and pure material formalism on the other, then I think the three of us artists fall pretty much right in the middle. This is fairly obvious with James Welling’s work, but Stephen Prina is often seen as being more on the conceptual end of the scale, while my work is more associated with the material end of it. This situation offered an opportunity to present the bigger picture so to speak—to look at our work in a different context. I was excited by the relationships among and between the pieces in the show, particularly those involving shape, color, and language. Also, the systems and processes represented are quite engaging.

SAM: Back to CalArts. What was it like?

B: CalArts was amazing. It really gave me an education in the best sense of the word. It’s located in Valencia, north of Los Angeles, and is pretty much in the middle of nowhere. The isolation made for an extremely concentrated experience. I have such fond memories of the high desert landscape and the weather there. Several years ago I drove by the campus and it looks completely different—very built up, with many large trees around the school.

There were so many interesting artists who taught when I was there: John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, Michael Asher, Barbara Kruger, Vija Celmins, Jonathan Borofsky. There was also a constant stream of fascinating short-term visitors coming from New York and Europe.

Stephen Prina and I were at CalArts at the same time, although I arrived a semester after he did. Shortly after my arrival he informed me that the student body had vetoed bathing suits at the school’s pool. I believed him completely until my first sight of the pool—there were many people wearing bathing suits! (Let’s just say that Steve’s delivery was quite convincing.)

I met Jim Welling years later, after my wife, Ann, and I moved to New York.

SAM: When did you move to New York?

B: We moved here in 1985. It was a trial stay, since we’d traded apartments with Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, who both got teaching positions for one year at UCLA. They were living in the West Village. We were living in Hollywood. We drove cross-country to New York, leaving in mid-September. As we were about to leave Los Angeles, a huge earthquake hit Mexico City, and there were all sorts of warnings of a possible tsunami hitting LA. We arrived in New York just before Hurricane Gloria was set to hit there. I remember seeing buildings close to the Hudson with masking tape xs placed on the windows. And then—after we’d been in the city for less than a month—we woke up abruptly in bed to . . . an earthquake! Everyone in New York had just thought it was a large truck rolling down their street, but being from California, we knew right away what it was. That was so bizarre. More than unexpected!

Kate and Mel came back to New York after their teaching stint, but Ann and I had decided to stay, and by that time we’d gotten a loft on the Lower East Side.

SAM: When and how did you meet Hudson?

B: I was in a group show at Artists Space in 1986, curated by Valerie Smith, called “Six Sculptors.” At the time there was a curator at the New Museum named Bill Olander, who was a friend of Hudson’s. Very sadly, Bill Olander died of AIDS later in the ‘80s. Hudson’s gallery, Feature, was still in Chicago then, but he was always coming to New York. Bill Olander directed him to see my work at Artists Space because he thought Hudson would like it.

I didn’t know who Hudson was then, and one day I got a phone call from him asking if I could send slides of my work. He told me he had a gallery in Chicago. I asked him whose work he showed. He said, “Richard Prince,” and I thought, Richard Prince is a good artist, I think this gallery sounds legit. I didn’t feel the need to ask him which other artists he represented. So I sent him some slides, and shortly thereafter Hudson was in New York and came to visit my studio. I still have an image of him that day. He had

on jeans and a leather jacket. In those days there were few men with shaved heads, so he was completely distinctive. I remember how intently he looked at my art, not saying much, but it was obvious how much was going on in his head. Soon I was in a group show at Feature, and not too much later, I had a one-person exhibition there. I have been happy to have been associated with him ever since.

SAM: Do you have any predictions, art-related or not, about what the future holds?

B: Interesting question. At this point in my life, I don't really think I can make predictions, and this realization came to me only recently. I predicted that George Bush would not win the election for his second term, and of course I was wrong—although I do think he won it because of dirty tricks of one kind or another. I predicted that Obama would win the last election, and I was right. But what does any of that mean? Life is such a complicated chain of events. We can only just wait to see what happens. Of course, it's interesting to look back at those who predicted the crash of the stock market and such, but that stuff is so cyclical that it's just a matter of time before history repeats itself. When I look back at my life so far, there are just too many things I would never have thought would have happened. Well, wait, here's a prediction: The future will have both good things and bad things.

B: How did your relationship with Hudson begin?

SAM: I moved back to New York in 1996—was born in Brooklyn, but grew up in San Francisco—feeling ready to start showing my work, though not quite sure where I might fit in. So I would go to SoHo often and see shows, and Feature was the place I felt pulled to. That September I asked if he was looking at slides. At the time he looked at things in October and November, and then April and May, so I sent him some stuff—and that next spring, I did a show of drawings and photographs in the small, middle room, while the estate of Candy Darling was in the front space. I don't know if you can do that anymore. New York is so different now.

B: I thought the last exhibition you had at Feature was excellent; the whole thing worked so well together. I was particularly intrigued with the film piece *The Lost Kinetic World*. It was such a supremely simple idea, but so brilliant. How did that work come about?

SAM: What scares me about that piece is that it just happened. Getting a little digital camera in 2003 got me

shooting a lot more photographs. It wasn't until 2004, really, 2005, when I started using the video feature on the camera. Something in my brain clicked. I had always been drawn to the singular image, whether it was in drawing, painting, or photography, and having this camera in my front pocket made it so easy. It was an accidental project that has become compulsively consuming at times, and that's what frightens me: The work has a mind of its own. I didn't set out to do something in particular; rather, the camera instrumentalized me. I remember talking to Wade [Guyton] a while ago about loving these short video clips, but not knowing exactly what to do with them. He found his "muse," the large-format printer, and as these clips began to fill my hard drive, I was forced to do something with them to clear space. So I began to string them together.

B: Were you surprised with the results?

SAM: I wasn't really surprised because I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. I had no idea what it would become, though I was pleased that I could turn just "hanging out" into raw material to make a piece from.

B: I have been intrigued for quite some time with the connection between your photographs and your other work—paintings and drawings. They all have a similar look and seem related, even though they are in completely different media. Can you comment on when and how your relationship with painting, drawing, and photography began?

SAM: They do all have a "look." Sometimes I hate it—it's too fey, or twee, or on the verge of collapse. Though it is interesting that there is no escaping your own hand, or eye, or what compels you. I picked up the camera around age ten and have been a shutterbug since, though switching from film to digital, which coincided with the turn of this century, definitely amplified the process. One thing I love about video is not needing to have all of the various materials required to make paintings, drawings, etc. The video can be epic while still fitting on an iPod. In terms of looks, though, sometimes it seems like high school. Supposedly Christian Rattemeyer doesn't like Feature artists—he doesn't get it or something—whereas Feature is one of Matthew Higgs's favorite galleries, I've heard. So looks and taste are fashion—or rather, fascistic.

B: Could you talk a little bit about the imagery that you use? Does it just come to you, or do you research it? Do you see it as symbolic?

SAM: There are symbols, like the swastika, that I've always been attracted to. And the star, that funny, abstract symbol of something which is already dead by the time we see it, by the time its light travels to Earth. I used to go to the picture collection at the public library to search for images that were stuck in my head, which now seems so charmingly obsolete. It seems most often that things find me, rather than the opposite.

B: It's so interesting that you began photography at such a young age, but I have to say that it doesn't surprise me. As far as your work having a "look," I don't see that as a problem. Of course, it can be for some artists—when the work just becomes a signature style, a product where all of the life gets sucked out of it. But in your case I see it as a sign that the work is genuine, that your personality is built into it. Sometimes when I look at an artist's work, I get the sense that it is faked, that the so-called eccentricity is completely calculated—and that really bugs me. I'm not saying I'm an expert on those matters, but after looking at art for so many years, I do get these strong feelings in certain cases.

SAM: You've been in some themed group exhibitions recently, such as "Styrofoam" and "Living Flowers: Ikebana and Contemporary Art." Interesting! Your work seems flexible enough to fit into almost any category, though I also wonder sometimes about these curatorial strategies of grouping artists. What do you think?

B: It can be dangerous, absolutely. It obviously depends on the curator. In the cases of the "Styrofoam" and "Ikebana" exhibitions, I think they both turned out really well. In both shows the integrity of the individual artworks was completely respected. The "Styrofoam" exhibition, at the RISD Museum of Art, was curated by Judith Tannenbaum, and she did a great job. Not only did the show turn out well, but it was really educational about the history of Styrofoam and its use in art making. The theme of the show was simple, but once the works were assembled in the space, many interesting things started to happen among and between the works. It went well beyond the link of everything having been made from Styrofoam. I'm sure some of the connections happened only by accident—that is one of the great things about art. As Richard Telles said, all of the best exhibitions have a bit of serendipity.

The "Styrofoam" exhibition made me think of a show I was in a few years ago, curated by Bob Nickas, called "W." All of the artists' last names began with the letter w. What a dumb but brilliant idea for an exhibition! I mean, isn't that theme just as valid as a lot of other themed group shows?

Of course, it wasn't just any artist with a w last name. They were all ones chosen by Bob, so that already becomes more particular. I think John Cage would have really liked the idea.

"Living Flowers," at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, was curated by Karin Higa. Again, a brilliant and unexpected idea for a group show. First of all, it is educational about what ikebana is—which is certainly not just sticking some flowers in a vase. Secondly, it brings ikebana into the realm of a complex philosophical form of sculpture. I really like how it facilitated the rethinking of what is considered "art." There are some exhilarating relationships between certain works in the exhibition—and certainly the number of them could not have been known ahead of time.

SAM: What is your routine, if you have one? Sometimes I love the routines I fall into. They can be incredibly productive for working, though other times the repetition makes me feel trapped, like, No Exit.

B: Hmm. Interesting to hear that you sometimes feel trapped ...

I really have no routine with my art practice. I do have the routine of going to my freelance job, taking care of the house, doing my exercises, etc., but I don't know if I feel so trapped with those tasks because it is actually good for me to go to my job and to be around other people. Otherwise, I would just spend too much time alone. Dealing with the house doesn't bother me so much, either—I'm pretty domestic.

My goal these days is to spend more time in the studio. That is where I sometimes feel trapped. There is always something else in life ready to intrude.

I do need to spend time with Ann and with friends, so that's something that gets added into the mix. But I have to say, because my studio is at home, sometimes I can dip in for just fifteen minutes and get a lot accomplished, and luckily, longer stretches of time happen, too. Basically I'm always thinking about my work, even if it is way in the back of my mind. My degree from CalArts is in "post-studio art," a term coined by John Baldessari as you know, and it's really true that I don't always need to be in my studio to be working on art. That's pretty great.

SAM: What is a question you want to be asked, or a good question that you were asked in a previous interview that made you think, wow, how should I answer that?

B: I have always been intrigued by the Top Ten lists that *Artforum* publishes, featuring items that aren't specifically

art-related. So I guess I would ask myself what some of my favorite things are. I really love music. I think Stephin Merritt's projects, such as the Magnetic Fields, are truly great.

SAM: Somewhere I read that his *69 Love Songs* is considered by some to be one of the last great masterpieces of the twentieth century.

B: Well, I have to agree with that. But I really think that all of the CDs are amazing. *69 Love Songs* seems always to get the attention, but I never tire of hearing the older stuff, and their new music continues to be good, interesting, beautiful, funny. I just got the twentieth anniversary remastered version of *The Stone Roses* and I can't stop listening to it. That's been fun. They somehow passed me by the first time around. I also like Beirut, the Evens, Crystal Stilts, Twi the Humble Feather, and—speaking of Stephen Prina—the Red Krayola. The latter band's influence certainly needs to be more acknowledged. I wish Le Tigre was still around; they were ahead of their time.

SAM: Well, *MEN* is a new configuration that adds another layer to transgendered/transmediated experience. *MEN* features JD Samson [Le Tigre], Michael O'Neill [Princess], Ginger Brooks Takahashi [The Ballet, LTTR], with contributions from Johanna Fateman [Le Tigre], and Emily Roysdon [LTTR]. Meanwhile, Kathleen Hanna is teaching at NYU, and a number of Riot Grrrl books and exhibitions are brewing.

B: I will have to check all that out. I'm glad to hear that things are moving forward with them. I like more classically-oriented stuff, too. A while ago Hudson took us to see a performance of Harry Partch's "Delusion of the Fury" at the Japan Society, and it was one of the best live performances I have ever seen. I had liked his music before, but it was incredible to see it performed live. I still like Bach, Handel, and Couperin, and I think Chopin is due for a rediscovery. Wayne Koestenbaum and I have talked about that.

I love that one can hear music on the Internet. I don't know how we got by without it before. I am truly grateful to be liberated from the tyranny of major record labels and the radio. One of my recent online discoveries has been Bachelorette, aka Annabel Alpers. She is just fantastic! She has three CDs, and they are all great. In essence, she makes the music all on her own, multilayering tracks of herself singing and playing instruments and computer synthesizers. The lyrics are fabulous, too. She's from New Zealand, and I was lucky to hear her play this past summer at the South Street Seaport. She was alone onstage.

I'm also really interested in architecture. It was a thrill to see the Farnsworth house and Falling Water. They deserve their fame. I also love the Merchant's House in Manhattan (Federal period, with Greek Revival interior). It is such an amazing time warp. I think Ada Louise Huxtable said it was like an insect preserved in amber. It's frustrating that so much crap gets built these days in New York, but there are always some good things as well. I like André Balazs's Standard Hotel in the Meatpacking district; I enjoyed watching it being built. And that new building on the east side of Cooper Square—the Cooper Union academic building by Thom Mayne.

SAM: All of the past NDP interviews are online, but one funny quote has stuck in my head since I took a copy of the journal out of its cardboard box the first time:

"FIA: Do you remember when Wade said that we should go to AA as in Artists Anonymous because we talk too much about art?"

"KELLEY: Oh, right."

B: Yes, it is weird that we talk so much about art when it's its own visual language. When I went to CalArts I thought that art shouldn't be talked about much at all. Of course, I got shit for that immediately. But I learned quickly that you can't kill art by talking about it. It just adds to the interest, and I admire critics who can write really well about it. I don't have much patience though for discussions that involve a theory where the art is perfectly plugged in as an illustration of it—or where the language gets caught up in itself and ends up not communicating very well or clearly. But generally I have to admit that I really do enjoy talking about art. It is so fun to visit galleries and museums with friends and either praise or trash the exhibitions, or rate them somewhere in between those extremes.

Okay, Sam. What would your Top Ten list for *Artforum* be right now?

SAM: 1. Goteblüd of San Francisco is fast becoming a mecca for all manner of vintage zines—rave zines, punk zines, lowrider zines, bike-messenger zines. An amazing archive of ephemera.

2. Matt Wolf's upcoming documentary based on Jon Savage's incredible history of youth culture before 1945, *Teenage*, should prove as revelatory as his previous effort, *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell*.

3. "Kiki: The Proof Is In the Pudding." A retrospective look at Kiki, a short-lived but influential Mission District gallery from the mid-'90s, at Ratio 3 in San Francisco.

These Top Tens customarily include music that's currently in rotation Recently Jeremy Deller and the Williams Fairey Brass Band have been battling it out with Bobby Beausoleil and the Freedom Orchestra in my head.

4. Jake Ewert's paintings. Cotton jersey warped with enamel; pizzas with oil paint, hung on the wall; a table stacked with works on paper. This was the painter you said Trisha had mentioned to you—a small world, getting smaller. A fabulous inefficiency waiting to be engaged.

5. Women in collections. Eve Fowler and a couple of her former students are starting a nonprofit to do what the title implies—to buy work and donate it to institutions.

6. The artist/dealer. Not since Duchamp, who was an avid broker of the art of his time, have so many young artists, some barely thirty years old, been so active in the production of their own work while actively selling the work of their peers, including but not limited to Matthew Dipple, Emily Sundblad, Jacob Robichaux, and Sara VanDerBeek.

7. Dean Daderko has been independently curating fantastic shows at a lot of different galleries and institutions around town for the past decade, including Andrew Kreps, Daniel Reich, and Dia. He is currently researching the legendary artist Gina Pane.

8. Philip Crangi. What happens when a jeweler goes to art school? Gorgeous from the word go. A recent favorite of Anna Wintour's.

9. Artist-run upstate homes-cum-test sites. Julie Mehretu and Jessica Rankin's Denniston Hill, Suzanne Wright and Sharon Molloy's Future 86, and Ramsey McPhillips's The Overkill. McPhillips, of Fruit Farm Film Festival fame, will host an endowment benefit for Participant Inc next fall.

10. W.A.G.E. [Working Artists and the Greater Economy] offers "The Institution.Owes.U" bills to be implemented when cultural workers are not offered compensation for presentation of materials or services rendered. The bills should be used in exchange for monetary compensation, food, merchandise, membership fees, event tickets, or for trade of anything the institution can offer as compensation to the cultural worker.

B: I feel that today so many museums are trying so hard to appeal to a broader public that they are losing sight of their original audience. Do you agree or not, and what do you feel about the place of art in the world? How about art in relation to politics?

SAM: Art is entertainment. What happened with indie film and indie music is happening with art: As it goes mainstream, it gets a bit lost in translation. I think the

weirdest thing about art and politics is how 9/11 has been great for some artist's careers. I love Martha Rosler, though the current war is what has made her so relevant again. Paul Chan is a self-proclaimed "ambulance chaser" in Iraq, New Orleans, etc., so that is a tough question to answer. Maybe that's why it's an area still fraught with possibilities.

B: So what do you think about all of Hudson's problems with Feature? What a loss it would have been if he had actually closed.

SAM: In terms of Hudson's exodus from the Bowery, it appeared to be the result of a perfect storm, an unfortunate confluence of events:

1) Embarking on an ambitious renovation right at the precipice of the market collapse.

2) Not participating in art fairs since 2000, by choice, as they became the primary vehicles for collecting art.

3) A number of his artists moving to other galleries, something that has always been a part of Feature's history.

Since opening in Chicago on April Fool's Day in 1984, artists such as Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, Kay Rosen, Raymond Pettibon, and Jim Shaw exhibited early on at Feature, and more recently artists continued to migrate: Tom Friedman and Monica Majoli have moved to Gagosian; Alex Ross and Takashi Murakami went to Marianne Boesky (Murakami then moved to Gagosian, too); Charles Ray, Vincent Fecteau, and Roy McMakin are now at Matthew Marks; Rachel Harrison showed at Feature for years before signing on at Greene Naftali, as did Huma Bhabha, who is now with Peter Blum. Not to mention some of the great artist's artists, as they say: Nancy Shaver, David Robbins, Dike Blair, Lily van der Stokker—too many to list.

Yet these people are only part of Feature's narrative, which also includes the graphic work of Tom of Finland and other great erotic artists as well as the anonymous tantric paintings that have appeared alongside the work of gallery artists. Hudson continues to dance from the center to the periphery, stretching the parameters of what we mean when we say art. ■■

