

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Bad at Sports
March 2011

INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS BRADLEY

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Guest Post by Dan Gunn

Chris Bradley is an MFA grad from SAIC in sculpture. He's recently exhibited at Swimming Pool Projects, Raid Projects in LA, Dorsch Gallery in Miami to name a few. I sat down with him to talk following the opening of his new show at Shane Campbell Gallery titled Quiet Company. The show is up until April 2nd.



Installation view of Quiet Company, Image courtesy of Shane Campbell Gallery

DG: Your references seem to be clearly of a certain kind from the basketball, to the potato chip and now the pretzel rod. Of what 'kind' are they? How do you choose what referents get into your work?

CB: I think it might just be happenstance, something just clicks, a revelation for lack of a better word. Recognizing that "Oh yeah, there's an idea here." Then it's just a process of trying to figure out what I'm interested in. I end up pulling in these things that have been important for a while or that I've noticed in a different way. Then I play with them in the studio and after I've worked with them for a long time they become part of my vocabulary.

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DG: For instance your show at Shane Campbell Gallery, Quiet Company, seems to be more associated with leisure. And I think that has to do with the palm trees. For me palm trees = leisure.

CB: For the show I've made targets set up in a precarious manner ready to be shot at. Or else they've been shot at and someone is a terrible shot. You can read that either way.

DG: [laughs]

CB: The leisure aspect is definitely a component, but I'm not trying to celebrate a tropical place or a vacation, I think it's more about the lack of the possibility to vacate. It's fabricating an exit that someone doesn't have an actual possibility of achieving.

DG: How do you indicate that lack of possibility?

CB: With this particular body of work it's the ordinariness of the subject matter. You know I'm working with junk food, beer and paint rollers. I feel like these are materials that are really available for a lot of people. For some, alcohol is a means of exit. I feel like the artifice of using the beer can as the home of the potted palm dumbs it down to a level of patheticness.

DG: Would it be wrong to look at your work as working with completely masculine stereotypes? I have a hard time looking at Quiet Company, especially, and not imagining a watching a Packers game with a beer and some potato chips.

CB: I think a lot of people look at it that way. I think it's totally fine. It's bro-culture totally. I live with a gay male artist who's doing projects on effeminacy within gay culture and then there's me who's doing commentary on masculinity within Middle America. But I don't necessarily read it that way, though I'm OK with it. Being around a lot of different people I realize that I feel like I am just a dude. I'm happy to be a dude and to own that. I've been interested in working with motors, steel and things that move that have been commonly associated with the masculine. So I'm OK with the association but I wouldn't say that it's what I'm after. I think it might be inherent in how I think and what I'm in contact with. Often what stereotypically comes with masculinity is seen as insensitive and cold and I don't feel that way about my work whatsoever. So I think that works to negate some of the narrower ideas of masculinity.

DG: How do you think about materials? What kind of criteria do you have for how they go together as sculpture?

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CB: I've had some of the potatoes and avocados for a long time actually. I cast them and I didn't really know what to do with them. I found some other resolution to the project that I was working on at the time. So I started playing with them again when I was in between projects and just made this target. Made a really strange pedestal and put them on top of it. I went "Oh that's doing something, let me see where this goes." That was the impetus for the target series.

I started thinking about the potato chip as a subject. You know I'm very much a builder, I used to be more into image and 2D stuff, and I still am but I don't really trust myself to do anything intelligent there. So I looked at the potato chip as a building block, but couldn't come up with something interesting. While I was at the liquor store I saw some pretzel rods and I thought that there might be something there. So I bought some real pretzel rods and built a target with them and I was into it, seeing if I could build other ways with them and ended up making the giraffe with it.



Installation Shot of Quiet Company. Image courtesy of Shane Campbell Gallery

There is something really approachable to the temporary, to the clips, to something bound vs. something welded or fabricated in a more permanent way. Because someone could go and just take it apart. I think understanding the way that something is built provides a direct way of accessing it. If someone knows how to use a ratchet strap they could take that thing apart.

If it's anything worthwhile people connect to it more because it's part of their world. A lot of people don't weld so that's not as accessible. I

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think that's more about believability and play on the precariousness of the palm tree and making a really stupid act that anyone could do. It has a certain way of communication.

Also with the targets the clips make sense because you can shoot it and then clip another one to it. There is a certain trickery that I want to maintain. Even in the trompe o' leil in something like the potato chip.

DG: The pretzel is kind of like an edible Lincoln log... Earlier you mentioned motors and motion, how does motion play into your work? I'm thinking specifically of the Cinnamon Spice Machine and its involuntary motion.

CB: I find it challenging to use kinetics in a sculpture in an effective way. For the sake of movement it's easy to do, but to make an artwork that couldn't be done without that movement is more rewarding. There is a balance in my practice where I'll be really into kinetics for a bit. It's a different thought process, but I get exhausted by it and move on to something else. I've been doing anything but kinetics recently and I'm starting to get interested in it again.



"Fountain" 2010 Image courtesy of the artist

DG: If this kinetics focused side is one part of your practice, how would you characterize the side that produced Quiet Company?

CB: It was my approach to figure out where I stand within a bigger discipline. I take that body of work as something painterly. I think it's about being in the studio and spending half an hour mixing paint,

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trying to get the color right. I've been relating with painters more, to try and understand what they do and what I do. I'm getting over the separation between the disciplines and trying to figure out where I stand with that. I was really excited to find a resolution for the wall because that was the last thing that resolved for the show.

DG: Can you describe those pieces?

CB: They are the pretzel rod prisms. I take them as outlines of paintings, and consider them sketches because they are so loosely put together. There is also "Horizon" which is kind of a squiggly line of pretzels.

DG: I read "Horizon" as a backdrop to your tropical paradise that goes to your notion of a limited escape through objects. A dreaming through objects. If you can imagine a line of pretzels on a wall as a horizon then you have a pretty active imagination or longing for something else.

CB: That's putting a lot on pretzels! I think that's often what painting is about. It's about illusion and trickery. If you can stand in a room and point past a line of pretzel rods I think that's pretty effective. But I don't know if anyone's doing that...



"Potato" 2010. Image courtesy of the artist.

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DG: How does humor function in your work?

CB: I'll take it as funny, if someone wants to take it that way. I hesitate to call my work humorous because of a weird insecurity about calling yourself something that most people want to be. To be funny is a nice thing, to self proclaim something like that is odd to me. It's also like being an artist, I mean anyone can technically be an artist I guess, but there's a different level to it when someone else comes to take you in and say "This person is really doing something valuable". You have to wait for those things.

DG: I wouldn't say your work is purely funny because there is also a kind of fatalism in certain pieces. I'm thinking specifically about a work like Potato, where an actual potato travels on an oval track around a wall. I get a kind of perverse pleasure thinking about it in relation to De Scott Evans trompe o' leil painting "The Irish Question" in the Art Institute, though I doubt you were thinking about the Potato famine... Still there is something about the bland taste of a potato traveling a circuit repeatedly that is both funny and fatalistic.

CB: I think the potato is a very loaded icon. I first approached it with those notions in mind with a very loose hand. I wasn't very conscious about what I was getting into. The first instance was a flying potato in Ireland.

DG: So it was Irish!

CB: It was a very performative gesture throwing a potato in the air, taking a photograph of it and hoping for the best. I think the fatalism that you speak of comes because the potato doesn't progress. It doesn't learn anything. Maybe we have it fantastic, because we don't just walk in circles? Or maybe we do. The potato is kind of monotonous, Sisyphean, pathetic and strangely frightening. That's how I see it.

DG: So if that's the iconology of the potato, what about the avocado?

CB: It's just another piece of produce...

DG: See, because I read it as the analog to the potato chip, as the thing which will eventually go on the potato chip.

CB: Sure! You can definitely read it that way. Avocado, guacamole.

DG: It was a culinary read...

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CB: Other people brought that up as well. I see it as some kind of parallel to something tropical. The more I worked with it I thought that it was kind of a romantic fruit with a big seed inside, and kind of lush. But in the end it's just produce.

DG: But what about your beer choice?

CB: I'm a Budweiser drinker. Nowadays I'm more of a light beer drinker and I would say that Modelo especial is kind of light. To work with beer cans you need to be conscious of who else works with beer cans, it's available and it's being used. So I went with a 24oz can to be specific with my choice and I ended up drinking a lot of cans. I started playing with these cans and I began to think about what it meant to be a Budweiser drinker.

The Modelo cans seemed to go really well with the idea of putting palm trees in them. It was a really conscious choice, a comparison between two different places. There is this longing for the other, for the unknown.

DG: A world inside of a beer can.

Dan Gunn is an artist, writer and educator living in Chicago.

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