

500 Words by Ricky Swallow (Artforum.com, February 2011)

Ricky Swallow's second solo exhibition at Modern Art, London, features a new body of cast bronze objects created from archery targets the artist found in Los Angeles, where he lives. Presented on plinths and installed on the wall, these works synthesize various references from art history, from British ceramics to California modernism. Here, Swallow discusses his approach to creating the show and his new processes in the studio.

COLLECTING OBJECTS—such as modern ceramics, Native American pottery, baskets, and Inuit carvings—and arranging them in different rooms in our home has, for some time, run parallel to my art practice. For this show, I wanted to capture that sense of vitality—how collecting has affected my studio logic and the forms of the pieces themselves. There's a quote I like by Ken Price where he talks about working with the cup as a form, and the ways in which it presents formal restrictions that create a structure to work within. He also speaks about the objects' universal quality, how the cup can exist as its own subject matter. That really articulated and echoed some of the concerns I had when I began constructing the vessels, bottles, bowls, cups, and jugs that the other sculptures in this show evolved from. There's a collective ownership and understanding that one brings to such recognizable forms.

I've also been thinking about the individual and handmade aspects of my work. This has led to a concern for the pacing of each exhibition. When I was planning this show, I knew that I didn't want there to be much in the viewer's peripheral vision. It needed to have the kind of breathing room that is there when I actually make each sculpture, even though in the studio environment everything looks kind of crazy and cramped. In the gallery there is that space—that ratio of intimacy of construction and experience that is important to me.

In my wooden sculptures, all of the gestures of composition happened in the very early stages of each piece, I would settle on a subject and then transcribe it in wood. Carving is such a measured act; it's the process of removing information in order to gain a form. With the new works, however, it has been a very additive practice of constructing forms, with more room for improvisation. What I was missing in my previous studio habits, or what I needed now, was a daily routine in which constructing pieces from materials at hand could inform new sculptures and lead to different sets and groupings of works. The idea of a cumulative process for me relates to both a collector's logic and the kind of studio pottery production where the sequence and subtle variation in pieces produce unexpected combinations. I've always been drawn to artists who are prolific while working with an economy of subject, materials, and scale where constant tweaking and rearranging of their established language becomes the most important tool; Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, and Giorgio Morandi are perfect examples.

There's an archery range adjacent to where we walk our dog in LA, and that's where I first found the cardboard targets, which the archers often leave on the hay bales after practice. I've been collecting the targets there for two years now; I feel like one of those weird guys scouting the beach with a metal detector trying to find something of value after people depart. The targets are often in various states of decomposition (and pierced differently based on the experience of the archer). Bringing them into the studio marked the first time I had incorporated a readymade form into my work. And there's been a weird sort of liberation in that—the fact that they are made, composed, and created by someone else and then collected and recast by me. There was an intuitive transition of treating the targets like a base material, in the same way that I had treated wood or clay in the past. My work has always essentially been about translation, passing a subject through various processes on the way to a fixed or permanent state, with each different material influencing the creation of new forms.

I've been spending time in the flea markets here, looking at "make-do's." Make-do's are antiques that have been creatively repaired or adapted—given an extended life rather than being discarded. I'm also interested in these other folk art forms—mosaic vessels, and furniture that has been clad in tile from broken pieces of other ceramic objects. Again, this economy of labor and materials toward something that's a translation of a traditional object, a replacement of its former self, is something I love.

I took a bunch of photographs of these objects for reference, thinking that there was something in that tradition of gleaning one form from other disassembled forms that I could use. So I made the jugs, which are constructed in the studio from cut-up pieces of the targets and other cardboard. It's interesting to begin with this material that already has a history, the punctured surface providing a sort of vulnerability (rendering the sculptures functionally obsolete from the outset). I wanted to make something that was more structurally sound and permanent out of these pieces and decided to cast in bronze. The patina of the bronze is an important element—it can dictate the form so differently. Most of my patina references come from ceramic glazes. Bronze is a kind of beautiful alchemical wizardry, which I'm learning more about through working with a great foundry here that indulges my experiments—developing new results from tweaked recipes and accidents