

## A Replacement of Its Former Self by Christopher Bedford (Lesley Vance & Ricky Swallow at the Huntington, November 2012)

In 1950 and then again in 1951, David Smith received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, an award that permitted the artist to set aside, at least temporarily, his teaching responsibilities and commit himself unfettered to the studio. Unsurprisingly, those years proved productive for Smith, yielding at least three enduring masterpieces: *Australia* (1951), *Hudson River Landscape* (1951), and *The Letter* (1950). Various interpretations as a series of deliberately unintelligible glyphs, a plea to an exlover, a transcription of the famous letter in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, and a note to his mother about Ohio, *The Letter* is above all and most vitally a translation of one thing into another. *The Letter* is made intelligible as such by an inscription and a salutation that bracket a body of text made up of what Smith called "object symbols."<sup>1</sup> Yet everything Smith achieves in the work turns the traditional function of the letter on its head: the weightlessness of paper is given the heft and rigidity of steel, its fundamental portability nullified, the object tethered to the earth by a base; the letter's opening salutation is reduced to an abstract squiggle in space; and the body of the text does not communicate via a shared language, but dumbfounds with a succession of hermetic symbols known only to the author. The only element that can be easily understood as content is the signature, and not because the words are easily read, but because Smith's autographic mark is eminently recognizable as an image (or brand), making language, in turn, irrelevant. Smith, then, takes a form—the letter—with a standard cultural application defined by language, and denies that conventional utility, making it function only as an image to be looked at.

That the Australian-born sculptor Ricky Swallow would feel a kinship with David Smith and with *The Letter* in particular should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the former's work. Consider the following quotes, the first from Swallow and the second from Smith:

Growing up around a more working-class environment, the closest things to sculpture I was exposed to were the crafts related to the fishing profession my father was involved in—cray pots (lobster baskets) made from tea tree limbs, lead net weights poured into molds in our yard, or my father's welded cube structures for storing ropes . . . there was always this anxious necessity to keep oneself occupied . . . So I went off to art school with a fairly limited understanding of what constitutes being an artist, yet this observed daily ritual of work—of stubborn traditions followed and rudimentary materials employed—was something I adopted myself and I still believe in those basic principles . . . "hands out of pockets!" as my father would say.<sup>2</sup>

The mystic modeling clay in only Ohio mud, the tools are at hand in garages and factories. Casting can be achieved in almost every town. Visions are from the imaginative mind, sculpture can come from the found discards in nature, from sticks and stones and parts and pieces, assembled or monolithic, solid form, open form, lines of form, or, like a painting, the illusion of form.<sup>3</sup>

Both artists point resolutely to a philosophy of making that is grounded practically and ideologically in the labor activities of the working class, and to the materials, objects, tools, and processes of that world as the literal genesis of their efforts to forge a new world of images, a world of and about the one we all occupy. Smith believed that work begets work, and Swallow shares that conviction. But while both artists champion the notion of a laboring class, and count themselves as workers, their respective stagings of that position are somewhat different. As a practicing artist, Smith's relationship to the working class ideal was intentionally indexical, hinging on a set of processes and materials that related directly to the physical work done by men in foundries and factories, men with whom he felt a deep affinity. That Swallow shares Smith's investment in the virtues and value of work is clear, but his materials and processes do not parallel the labor performed by working men in the same way. Instead, the link back to "common people and common things" is actuated on the level of imagery, or as Swallow notes, "ritual" acts and objects familiar and accessible to all.

Take, for instance, Swallow's interest in domestic subjects, particularly vessels. *Stacking Cup/Tapered (Bone)*, 2011, is a modest object, measuring 4 1/4 × 5 1/4 × 4 1/4 inches—domestically scaled, one might say—cast in bronze and then patinated, in an edition of three with one artist's proof. Like many of his most recent vessels, the object is sketched from memory using a flexible system of cardboard and tape, its form continually embellished and improvised to eventually yield a splintered vision of its former self. Once cast and patinated—this one a soft, matte white—the surface of the object faithfully captures its deliberately rough means of construction; the imperfect joins in the cardboard and folds in the tape mark out a peculiar kind of facture that has become Swallow's signature. Quite clearly, then, neither mimesis nor trompel'oeil are of interest to the artist. His effort isn't to faithfully reproduce a likeness, but to denote the process of thinking and working from the quotidian to the quietly

extraordinary; from the observed world, to something other. The central principle at work here is the same one that governs Smith's *The Letter*, namely translation: the process by which the artist makes of the familiar and useful, an object that is markedly neither.

While Smith relied on his processes and materials to tether his work to the working milieu that was his intended point of reference, Swallow's approach to the same idea is, as we've already seen, more oblique and less specific. He gravitates to objects defined by what he calls an air of "collective ownership," their utter familiarity as things in the world making them particularly effective as blank canvases for the imposition of new meaning.<sup>4</sup> Though workingclass ethics, craft, and tools may be his point of reference, his objects signify more democratically than that, being everyday and common in the broadest sense. As a result, perhaps, Swallow's work exerts a magnetism that seems disproportionate to his choice of subject matter; one might even say that his sculptures should not be as interesting as they are! *Single Pot with Lid (Bone/Soot)*, 2011, could be a teapot or a shrunk watering can—old, discarded, or hurriedly fixed up to extend its life just a little. But the pot and the lid, both cast in bronze with a delicate white patina, sit atop two bronze pedestals cast from sawn wooden blocks, signifying immediately their status as objects to be looked at. As a still life, *Single Pot with Lid (Bone/Soot)* conforms to the basic conventions of the genre in that it proposes the forthrightly mundane as an object for contemplation. But this sculpture, like much of Swallow's work, scrupulously avoids the laden symbolism associated with the highest achievements of the genre. His assemblies do not, for instance, follow in the footsteps of Netherlandish vanitas painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, or the Renaissance memento mori tradition, and nor, for that matter, does he appear interested in advancing the radical formal experiments enacted on the genre during the artistic ferment of the early twentieth century. If Swallow has a kinsman within the ranks of the still-life tradition, that person might be the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, who, like Swallow, returned again and again to the same subjects, but even this comparison, while formally apposite, lacks any deeper logic.

*Single Pot with Lid (Bone/Soot)*, and many other works like it, command one's total attention not because they are allegorical, represent a self-evidently important subject, advance a wildly radical formal agenda, are pointedly topical or political, or trade in the easy appeal of modern-day spectacle. Rather, they embody the possibility—modestly and simply—of pure invention: a message made all the more accessible, direct, and resonant because Swallow performs his transformations on the most commonplace objects, objects available and used by each of us daily. When he reimagines the form of a lamp in *Table Lamp Study (Cadmium Yellow)*, 2011—casting his cardboard invention in bronze, and finishing the composition in yellow—the resultant proposition is remarkable precisely because Swallow wrings the elusively new from the familiar with the opposite of extravagance. The same applies to the aforementioned *Single Pot with Lid (Bone/Soot)*. Perched atop their diminutive black monoliths, the two components are quiet and unassuming in their scale and subject; yet in the curiousness of their construction and in their subtly orchestrated flirtation with familiarity and utility, they achieve the same autonomy as objects that Smith achieved so memorably with *The Letter*. If one of Smith's objectives was to parlay the life, ethics, and materials of the working man into the basis for a life in art, then Swallow's still-evolving practice might be understood as a comparable effort to demystify artmaking—to strip it of its hermeticism and specialization—and argue through his own subjects and working processes that everyday contexts and the most incidental objects can be the basis for a compelling idea; in other words, to make aesthetic ideas seamless with the common world in a very concrete sense.

Ricky Swallow builds himself into the material world through this method of translation, complicating common objects through his labor, inscribing in them a new order of meaning that has everything to do with his eye, mind, and hand, and little to do with the object's former outward signification. What they were made *for* is now immaterial; what matters now is *how* they were made and that they demand a new kind of attention. The artist himself notes: "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."<sup>5</sup> As Swallow works to further populate *his* world of former selves, the force of his ideas and the reach of his vision into our world become more and more apparent.

1 David Smith, quoted in *David Smith: A Centennial*, ed. Carmen Giménez (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2006), 404.

2 Ricky Swallow, e-mail message to the author, March 12, 2012.

3 David Smith, "Tradition and Identity," transcript of a speech given on April 17, 1959, at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, which Smith attended for a year in 1924–25, <http://www.davidsmithestate.org/statements.html>.

4 Ricky Swallow, "500 Words," *Artforum*, Jan. 30, 2011, <http://artforum.com/words/id=27455>.

5 Swallow, "500 Words."