

Cardboard Age by Michael Ned Holte (Ricky Swallow: Bronzes, June 2013)

A tall, bone-white candle with a matching white flame; a black top hat doubling as a spouted pot; a red pipe issuing smoke in the shape of a French curve; a turquoise vessel, patchworked and porous: all visual conundrums assembled from corrugated cardboard sheets and shipping tubes in varying sizes, then cast in bronze and patinated to arrive at compact but densely-layered objects Ricky Swallow has referred to as “bootlegs.” The term implies duplicitous behaviour, and indeed, the artist’s recent sculptures in bronze eagerly await viewers with complex interplay between the second and third dimensions, sly allusions art historical and otherwise, and other sleights of hand: Sometimes, as Magritte emphasised, a pipe is not actually a pipe.

Despite the presumptive historical references – the Deco-ish curves of a yellow “lamp,” for example, or the “candle” that inevitably recalls one of Richter’s Kerzen – these bootlegs are not appropriations, but approximations. And for a material as reliably stable as bronze, Swallow’s bootlegs are remarkably unreliable proxies for originals that may have never existed. Material misapprehension has always been central to Swallow’s concerns, regardless of material. In his near-hallucinatory wood sculptures, which comprised most of his output from 2002 to 2009, blocks of limewood or jelutong were intricately carved to imitate the forms and surfaces of a diverse range of substances – animal, mineral, and vegetable – and often in startling juxtaposition. The artist’s transition from wood to bronze was largely pragmatic and gradual, with the earliest bronzes, including a trio of balloons covered with barnacles, following closely from the logic of the wood works.

However, a significant shift in his work occurred circa 2008 when cardboard was introduced into the process with a punctured archer’s target found by the artist – a readymade that he cast in bronze and titled Bowman’s record. A commonplace but versatile material, cardboard is as important to the resulting bronze sculptures as is the bronze, weird as that may sound. In an ongoing series of targets (each is titled “Plate” and numbered), the transition from cardboard to bronze exemplifies the makeshift quality of the former, which also provides each work with a readymade texture and detail – representing a significant shift from the artist’s fastidious (and labourious) fabrication of detail and texture in the earlier wood sculptures.

Casting also affords the artist an opportunity to produce individual sculptures in multiple, but many of Swallow’s bronzes (including each “Plate”) are in fact unique objects, with the cardboard originals lost in the process – “burnouts,” in the jargon of the foundry – though the textural quality of cardboard is maintained. These cast bronze sculptures activate a complex exchange between endurance and ephemerality, between past and present – and, presumably, the future.

The artist also repurposed fragments and scraps of the tattered targets to form patchworked cups, jugs, and crucibles: Literally, none of these “utilitarian” vessels, cast in bronze, holds water. In their archetypal simplicity of form and seeming fragility, these vessels suggest antiquity – occasionally emphasised with a blue or turquoise patina – and reveal the artist’s extensive working knowledge of the vernacular traditions of folk pottery as well as design objects. Field Crucible (Turquoise), 2010, indirectly calls attention to the process of casting – specifically, to the vessel that holds bronze ingots as they are heated to the melting point, with the crucible and liquid metal glowing orange. At the foundry, on an industrial stretch in Burbank, California, Swallow notes the homely charms of several of these silicate objects, encrusted with evidence of daily use – not to mention a sculptural appeal he likens to a crater-glazed pot by Gertrude and Otto Natzler.

If you have occasion to lift one, you’ll find that Swallow’s bronzes are heavier than they look – in large part because they immediately read as cardboard or, more specifically, painted cardboard, with the familiar rhythm of corrugation or the coiling seamline of a shipping tube left plainly intact. “Cardboard” is a lay term apparently dating to the end of the 17th Century and generically referring to a wide variety of industrial products made from densely compressed paper pulp. As art material, cardboard entered the picture relatively late and is closely associated with the development of Cubist collage and sculpture, with Picasso’s Maquette for Guitar, 1912, as apogee. This

assemblage is strung as if an actual instrument, with its strings leading to a sound hole constructed from a cardboard cylinder – an important precedent, one can safely assume, for the younger artist’s use of the shipping tube. Not coincidentally, Swallow’s bronze *Reclining Guitar with Dials and Retired Instrument (Yellow)* – the latter recalling *Man Ray’s Gift, 1921*, as much as Picasso’s guitar – arrived exactly a century later.

But art history is a point of entry, rather than a landing. In the modernist paradigm, collage and assemblage afforded the potential for radical material juxtaposition; for Swallow, a material (wood, cardboard, bronze) acts a unifying agent for abutting unlikely pairings of objects (barnacle to skull, hammer to guitar body) in order to arrive at a new sculptural presence that transcends the sum of parts.¹ In Swallow’s bronzes, cardboard provides continuity, but also versatility. In its everyday plenitude it offers the prospect of modular play and scalability – witness, for example, the stepped, matryoshka doll-like scaling of *Staggered Hats (Soot), 2011*.² If evidence of weighty bronze is skilfully hidden in these works (or lightened, visually), their cardboard origins are in plain sight, present in their absence.

In his earlier carved wood sculptures, the human skull played a significant recurring role, positioned in unexpected, provocative juxtaposition with familiar objects – stuffed into a beanbag chair, or swaddled in a folded sheet of paper, or besieged by barnacles. In his transition from wood to bronze, the skull has all but disappeared. The clock – a haunting figure of time, in its relentlessness – might now be said to stand in its place, and unnervingly, these clocks are “faceless,” too.

Still, the figure is constantly conjured in Swallow’s bronzes, most often via metonymic signs: hats, masks, a splayed book, a pipe issuing “smoke,” cups and other vessels – a world of objects, all calling attention to utility and, hence, the absent body of the user. Many of these sculptures are full-scale, which is to say scaled to the human body, and particularly to the hands, offering haptic points of entry for a viewer.³ “There is something so simple and ritualistic to the making of the sculptures, and they often refer to forms of personal ritual, or portable activities,” notes the artist on the intimate scale of these works. “The lamps, for example, are scaled to personal reading lamps as opposed to a room lamp, the jugs imply a kind of pouring oneself, drinking oneself, or handling... the small clock being an alarm clock, to alert-awake oneself.”⁴

At this scale, each of Swallow’s bronzes seems to address – isolate – an individual viewer. In *Magnifying Glass with Pipe, 2011*, a lens appears to magnify the red tube on the other side of it when viewed frontally; viewed from the side, the illusion crumbles quickly when it becomes clear that the “magnification” results from the use of a thicker tube. The simple effectiveness of the trick recalls Roy Lichtenstein’s 1963 canvas *Magnifying Glass*, which takes advantage of two sizes of Ben-Day dots. (And perhaps I should add that Lichtenstein’s painting is black and white, whereas Swallow’s *Magnifying Glass*, with its red “pipe,” marks a relatively dramatic shift to applied colour for an artist previously given to sculpture expressing only the inherent “colour” of a given material.) Both works call attention to the viewer, exacerbating the act of looking. *Binder with Magnifying Glass, 2011*, works according to the same principle, with two sizes of binder rings fashioned from cardboard.

More recently, a series of pedestal-based figures have emerged, assembled from “castoffs” used in other sculptures (top hats, the magnifying glass, French curves) along with sections and scraps of otherwise unaltered paper tubes. The artist has referred to these as sculptures of figures, rather than figurative sculptures, and the difference is more profound than it might sound. Swallow’s bronzes veer ever so slightly toward abstraction without quite crossing that imaginary categorical boundary: A “figure” that is obvious from one angle suddenly collapses into a precarious jumble of parts from others. With the reduced scale of these figures, the viewer’s body is not reflected, yet it is – we are – still implicated, as with the magnifying glasses or cups. The fragments of these figures, maquette-like “studies,” seem barely held together, provisional, as if we might easily reach in and rearrange the parts.

Circa 2010, Swallow moved into a house in Laurel Canyon, and the gradual renovation and furnishing of the residence became, by all appearances to those familiar with the process, a full-time occupation. The artist is a diligent, studious, and perhaps obsessed, collector of objects – chairs by Hans Wegner and Walter Lamb; light fixtures by Alvar Aalto; weed pots by Doyle Lane; dusting brushes by Carl Auböck; turquoise inlay jewelry by Zuni metalsmiths; hand carved bird decoys; a pair of paintings by friend Richard Aldrich, and so on.⁵ The continual circulation of these objects, both physically and virtually, undoubtedly informs not only the artist’s domestic realm but also the development of sculptures in the studio. But beyond an obvious and overwhelming attention to detail, from (mere) fastidiousness to “wizardry” (a term of respect), it would be difficult to immediately put one’s finger on exactly how the inlay on a Zuni bolo tie or a glazed ceramic snake made by a blind artist finds its way into one of Swallow’s sculptures – if it indeed does. On the other hand, a found candelabra constructed from modified cattle branding irons – loosely resembling a David Smith sculpture, intentionally or not – might have a more obvious influence on the artist’s own genetic coding.

Likewise, Swallow has confided that his bronze patinas tend to follow these bootlegging instincts, whether approximating the “dull manganese blacks of Hans Coper” or the “whites of these Aalto sconces we have – it’s a white that seems warmed up by years of light or dried out- brittle-matte.”⁶ The introduction of colour, usually as a monochromatic patina arriving at the end the process, is crucial to the success of these bronze sculptures. Whether bone white, deep cadmium yellow, or “antique” turquoise, colour not only completes each work but activates and structures the whole bootlegging enterprise: Swallow’s patinas are alchemical disguises, transforming bronze back to cardboard or even suspending a sculpture ambiguously between such definitive categories.

The full transition from to bronzes from “woods” also coincides with a shift in working methodology entirely appropriate to the medium in question. If Swallow’s wood sculptures represent a slow and steady realisation of a predetermined form – say, a prone backpack, emerging from a block of jelutong wood through labourious carving and filing – his bronzes reflect a process closer to the speed of thinking: an additive, accumulative process, hinting at trial and error. While there is still plenty of work that goes into each bronze, the labour happens in fits and starts rather than as a sustained hum. In multitasking, sculptures often emerge simultaneously, evidenced by fragments and details migrating from one sculpture to another – not unlike Wegner chairs, Aalto lamps, Navajo blankets, books, records, and Inuit figurines ceaselessly circulating around the Laurel Canyon house. See, for example, *Standing Figure W/ Pockets & Buttons*, 2011, with its negative space of a French curve in a scrap of cardboard, deployed as a female figure’s flowing hair, or the cardboard rings of comb binding that reappear, somewhat incongruously, to bridge to folded planes in the otherwise abstract *Binder Form* (turquoise), 2012.

Exactly composed, these sculptures often imply a similar temporal (and stylistic) multiplicity – each a circuitous journey from one time to another. When visiting a museum I am similarly reminded of the coexistence of multiple temporal realities. Not the contemporary art museum or modern museum but the comprehensive museum – the *musée imaginaire* – where a room of ancient Korean pottery gives way to Arts and Crafts furniture which sits unexpectedly across the hall from a gallery of still-fresh photorealist paintings, and so on. The flea markets Swallow haunts are surely just another kind of “museum without walls.”⁷

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“What is done is done,” Dorian Gray tells Basil Hallward, referring to the mysterious death of actress Sibyl Vane.
“What is past is past.” The incredulous artist replies to his unaging muse, “You call yesterday the past?”

That question, divorced from its context in Oscar Wilde’s gothic novel, becomes the subject of Swallow’s wall-mounted *Font Study*, 2011, which deploys the text in four lines of rounded “type” fashioned from sections of whole and split cardboard tubes, all in white:

YOU CALL
YESTER-
DAY
THE PAST?

The text seemingly marks an unexpected appearance of language in the artist's sculptural work, though for some close observers of the artist's broader output the arcing typography of *Font Study* surely echoes the bronze house numbers ("2461") Swallow designed for his Laurel Canyon house, by "freewheeling" dowels of red wax and casting the numbers in bronze. Of course the temporal theme borrowed from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fits perfectly alongside clocks, lit candles, and dapper accoutrements of a bygone era: A small top hat hangs from a hyphen projecting from the "R" in the second line. The aging portrait of an eternally young Dorian Gray will likely unnerve any artist eager to create timeless works of art.

The relentless work of time is a consistent refrain in Swallow's sculpture, particularly as the artist transforms ephemeral cardboard into the timeless bronze, and comingles past and present: A patina is the visible effect of time, as in aging or weathering, but also the chemical reaction used on bronze and other metals to simulate the visible effect of time – a surface treatment that exists on the surface and somewhat below it, too.

The labour involved in realising Swallow's carved wood sculptures is so immediately apparent – perhaps even hyperbolic – I have wondered if the amount of work invested in the more recent bronzes has become practically invisible. After a trip to the bronze foundry, where the artist maintains a dedicated workstation dubbed the Swallow's Nest, I have no doubt there's plenty of work to be done, though much of the "heavy lifting" has become sublimated in the resulting objects. In fact, I've become convinced that Swallow is never not working, which is to say the swirl of his activity – from the foundry to the studio, from late night eBay scrolling to predawn flea market cruising – is, indeed, all work. When I reluctantly advanced the term "tinkering," a word I can relate to one but some might shun, Swallow replied, "I think part of being a tinkerer is that there is never a true resolution or end to any prescribed activities – activities produce more activities, collecting produces more collecting..."

"I think I've always had a very restless energy – even distracted disposition whilst at the same time being very obsessive about making things and learning about how to make things... When I say there is never any resolution in tinkering, I mean the very nature of it requires you can't leave anything alone – there is always room for tweaking-improving." ⁸

A year ago or so, Swallow recommended to me a book by Donald Hall titled *Life Work*, which is part memoir, part instruction manual – and in total, a meditation on life and death. ⁹ In it, Hall humbly notes the obvious: "There is only one long term project."

¹ Elsewhere I've noted a parallel in Swallow's sculptures to the music of John Fahey, where a solo guitar performance, in that musician's inimitable finger-picking style, unifies diverse compositional elements—Kentucky bluegrass, military waltzes, Gregorian chants, and so on—with no regard to supposed hierarchies. See my text "The Grit and the Oyster," in *Ricky Swallow: The Bricoleur*, edited by Alex Baker (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2009).

² In this sense, Swallow's use of cardboard also recalls his use of readymade PVC pipe and other plastic modules, circa 2000.

³ Here, I am indebted to Michael Fried's understanding of the way readymade handles function in Anthony Caro's tabletop sculptures, which might represent an important precedent for Swallow's pedestal-based sculptures. See "Caro's Abstractness" and "Anthony Caro's Table Sculptures, 1966-77," both in *Fried, Art and Objecthood* (University of Chicago Press, 1988). The artist also called my attention to

his interest in Californian artists such as Ken Price, Ron Nagle, Vincent Fecteau working at a more intimate scale, which provided various models and even tacit approval for the scale Swallow's own bronzes. "Working within the scale that I have the past few years is also a type of reaction... almost consciously, to distance the work from L.A. big boy sculpture—where surface and decisions can seem overlooked or allowed to become more generalized." Email to the author, September 10, 2012.

⁴ Email to the author, August 10, 2012.

⁵ Swallow's interest in objects is often closely tied to their maker, and in this sense his collecting doubles as a kind of scholarly project, invested in individual artists developing bodies of work over time—often including artists who are anonymous or "flying under the radar." One important example of the latter is Doyle Lane (1925-2002), an African-American ceramicist working in Los Angeles from the mid-1950s through the 1980s, known for his colourfully glazed "weed pots" and tile constellations he referred to as "clay paintings."

⁶ Email to the author, July 17, 2012. Swallow also notes, "I think the traditional turquoise patina also came out of looking at early Aalto Paimio-era furniture, Walter Lamb, and ahem, well, turquoise bolos! The yellow, or brighter colours—reds, blues—I can say were most likely triggered by a kind of continual surface envy I have for the ceramics (especially the weed pots) of Doyle Lane."

⁷ I am referring to André Malraux's notion of the Musée Imaginaire, sometimes translated as "museum without walls." See Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁸ Email to the author, July 18, 2012.

⁹ See Donald Hall, *Life Work* (Beacon Press, 2003).