In the Studio by Leah Ollman (Art in America, May 2014)

“QUIET SCULPTURE” reads a sheet of paper on the wall of Ricky Swallow’s studio in Los Angeles. The words, stacked one atop the other and encircled by lightly drawn dashes, double as a declaration of intent and a wry, cautionary plea. They add their charge to the wall’s dense collage of images, notes and objects, a continually circulating pool of source material that currently includes two beaded panels that Swallow guesses are the unsewn sides of a Sioux tobacco pouch; a dozen sculptural sketches in bare and painted cardboard; a newspaper article on Donald Judd; several small Hopi Kachinas; postcards of work by Duchamp and Picasso; pages of rhythmic patterns (featuring letters, circles, tadpoles, variations on the shapes of wooden chair backs) painted by Swallow in bold gouache.

Beyond the fertile clutter, the rest of the studio is white-cube-gallery spare. A few pedestals hold humbly vibrant sculptures, cast in bronze from objects “scratch-built” in cardboard and tape. Several other pieces are mounted on the walls. One, a broad, undulating ribbon of black, about eight inches high, unfurls like a makeshift flag. Another, in white, riffs on a pair of staggered arches and hints at de Chirico.

The alteration of familiar, everyday forms (from guitars to cups to clocks) has been a through-line in Swallow’s work since 1996, when he graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, in his native Australia. He learned to work with wood from a how-to book on carving realistic birds, but is weary of telling the story, however amusing and unlikely it is as an introduction to the refined still-lifes in wood that followed. He has long used cardboard, initially as an end material in itself, and later as the basis for bronzes alluding to Cubism’s fracturing of space and time, Futurism’s exaltation of motion, Surrealism’s unlikely marriages. Smoke in the form of a French curve rises from a pipe in one recent bronze sculpture. In another, a hammer meets the body of a guitar with a surprisingly gentle kiss.

Swallow moved temporarily to Los Angeles in 2002 and ended up staying, interrupted only by a 2004-05 sojourn in London. He’s emboldened, he says, by the prolific history of small-scale sculpture in L.A., citing work by Ron Nagle, Ken Price and the early Robert Therrien. He will be included in the Hammer Museum’s “Made in L.A. 2014,” opening in June.

On a warm, late February afternoon, Swallow, 39, sat down for a conversation in the Eagle Rock studio adjacent to that of his wife, painter Lesley Vance. He had just returned from New York, where he installed his work in the Whitney Biennial. On our way to his broad worktable, stacked with books and paintings on paper, we passed the cardboard genesis of Stair with Contents, which, at 22 by 35 by 22 inches, is the largest and most complex of his five pieces in the show. Perched upon the four-step, angular cascade are variants of shapes basic to Swallow’s visual lexicon—a multi-spout pitcher, an abstracted cross form that he calls “a spinning P,” and a zigzag snake with three hissing S’s resting between its jaws. The setup, he says, falls somewhere between a flea market display, a tableau and an altar.

LEAH OLLMAN Stair with Contents is a relatively large piece for you. You tend to work on a more intimate scale.

RICKY SWALLOW I arrived at working small fairly intuitively, but it feels like a position in some way, to not pander to scale. Inherent in sculpture is an expectation of monumentality. Working smaller provides a concentration of looking. There is some reciprocal relationship between the concentration of making at that scale and how you receive the piece, or how you hope an audience receives the piece. In all the art that I admire and that I'd say was an influence, it's all about the energy an object or painting can give off. Much of that work is on a smaller scale, what I'd call a Morandi scale of things.

OLLMAN What was the visual landscape like in the small coastal town of San Remo, in Victoria, where you grew up?

SWALLOW Now that I live in a bigger city, where everyone is a stranger, I think of the town that I grew up in as almost a folkloric place. It was a narrative-rich town, everybody knowing everybody. My father was a fisherman. His father was a fisherman. A lot of the colors I've been introducing into the bronzes in the last couple of years, a combination of white, black and red, which can be read through the lens of Russian Constructivism or modernism, also relate to the heavy gloss enamel used on fishing boats and fishing equipment.

My dad was always managing or maintaining his fishing boat, and those projects seem now like my first idea of sculpture. You weld rope baskets from stainless steel tubing and they kind of look like Sol LeWitt forms. Pouring lead into molds to make anchor weights in the backyard or upkeeping the nets through weaving—I was around a lot of that craft. There's an honesty or accountability in it that I like and is related to the kind of work I chose to pursue in the studio.

OLLMAN In art school, you majored in drawing. Were you also working in three dimensions then?

SWALLOW I happened to enroll in the drawing department, because that was the focus of my portfolio when I began. You could opt to do one other subject once a week and that subject for me was sculpture, so more and more I'd introduce sculpture into the drawing process. It was fun to learn in that backdoor way, having access to materials but not necessarily the lectures or techniques. That was an important step in terms of learning to be self-sufficient, or realizing that sometimes it's important to approach materials more intuitively.

OLLMAN The language you use in talking about your work usually has to do with change in status or identity, transformation, even alchemy.

SWALLOW I've always been involved in a process of object translation. Before I started making the wood carvings, I was making replicas out of cardboard much the same way an architect would make a model of a building. They were of first-generation handheld computer games, old stereos—things I took for granted, that I was feeling some nostalgia for as technology was changing. I thought of the finished things still existing as a proposal. I like that space of the industrial prototype or the monument, where something is being suggested or remembered—not being used, but looked at as a form.

OLLMAN When, in 2008, you discovered some card-board archery targets cratered with arrow punctures, you started working with them, casting the panels in bronze and also casting vessels and masks fashioned from fragments of the targets. What was it about that material that resonated with you?

SWALLOW The cardboard I was using before was dense. It was like a mat board you'd use for framing. It was chosen specifically for how uncharacteristic the surface was. When I found the first few archery targets, they were the opposite. They were these very active, abstract panels—of a texture and materiality that I was completely not responsible for. Something felt nice about that. I wasn't really attracted to them as objects that had been produced through weaponry. It was more their abstract, [Lucio] Fontana quality.

OLLMAN For the last several years, you've been building forms—cups, pitchers, notebooks, human figures—mainly out of cardboard tubing of different scales and gauges. You've referred to these pieces as "bootlegs." Is there something illicit about them? What are you trying to smuggle?

SWALLOW I never think of a bootleg as an unauthorized thing, but as a private rendition of something. I collect what I consider a lot of bootlegs, like Native American Zuni Disney character pins, for example, which are weird, crude, messed-up versions of cartoon characters. I like when versions become more and more removed from their origin but they still stubbornly hold on to a source image or a source object. Sometimes I'm even bootlegging my own things.

OLLMAN You also collect pottery, and many of your patinations derive from ceramic glazes. What other points of intersection are there between your work and work in clay?

SWALLOW One of the things that's been instructive about looking at wheel-based ceramics or pottery is how inherently abstract the technique is, as a meditative or ritualistic, repetitive task. You learn to throw a cylinder or tube and from that you pull everything. It's the mother form, this singular form from which you're able to produce an array of objects or vessels. That's how I treated the cardboard tubing form, not as limited, but as malleable, despite its being an industrial readymade material.

OLLMAN "Grapevine," the show you curated for L.A.'s Kordansky Gallery in 2013, was an homage of sorts to a constellation of ceramic artists in Southern California [Ron Nagle, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, Michael Frimkess, John Mason, Peter Shire]. Each of them, you wrote in your catalogue essay, approached clay with an irreverence toward tradition.

SWALLOW There's something about ceramics as a material that can both acknowledge itself and disguise or contradict itself. All the artists in the show dealt with that in different ways. In their work, there's a respect for and technical understanding of what clay can do. They don't use clay to make pottery but to make sculpture, which seems very much a straightforward proposal now, but it's easy to forget how radical a lot of that work once was.

Like bronze, ceramics goes through a process where you start with an earthen or natural substance. You try to micromanage all the steps in order for the firing to produce a certain effect, but there's all this stuff you can't control, and those embellishments, those subtle fluctuations in color and material, end up being part of the success of the finished object. You succumb to them. Each of those artists really followed through with an object's conception and finishing, and that's a dated idea that I like. You're not surfing while something's being made. You're staying up all night watching the kiln.

OLLMAN What is shared by the sculptures you make and the objects you collect, including basketry and furniture, is a strong sense of visual integrity. You seem very committed to the culture of artifacts, the ritual objects of everyday life, and, ultimately, to William Carlos Williams's notion "no ideas but in things."

SWALLOW I've always believed that the ideas your art contains should extend from the making of them and what the object is doing, not something that's overlaid. Meaning should be extrapolated out of the thing, rather than an object extrapolated out of meaning.

I have a romantic notion of what the studio is as a place and what it's capable of. There's a famous Coco Chanel quote: "Look in the mirror and remove one accessory." It's to do with elegance and removing anything that is extraneous to your successful look. That can be applied in sculpture, too. Ron Nagle and Ken Price had this saying, "TMT," which means "too much touching," if they felt something wasn't working and was being fussed with too much, or if you went too far. I think with sculpture it is also about removing stuff and knowing when to stop.

OLLMAN You're avid about music, and certain players crop up in your conversations—[the English guitarist] Derek Bailey, especially. But what about the underlying affinities in your work to structural elements in music—repetition, for instance, and rhythm?

SWALLOW That's a tough question. Music to me is so abstract. I'm such an absorber of it. It's almost inhaled in the studio, but it's not something I understand. I think all artists ultimately envy the effects of music, the indelible effects. That would be the ultimate compliment, for a sculpture to stick in somebody's head in the same way that a song does, for someone to associate a sculpture with a particular time or event or vacation or something like that.

OLLMAN In Looking at the Overlooked, Norman Bryson's 1990 book about still-life painting, he discusses the distinction between rhopography, the depiction of so-called unimportant things, and megalography, the depiction of grand events—history with a capital H. Rhopography, he writes, has the "potential for overturning the scale of human importance." That rings true of your work with mundane subjects.

SWALLOW I don't see any limitations in humble objects. A lot of the things that I've remade in sculpture are things of ritual to one person, a small personal reading lamp or one cup. Something you have a direct relationship to, that you use in a daily way. There's something about selecting those things that have a one-to-one relationship with someone and then having a one-to-one relationship with the making of them. There is a meditative quality to overlooked things that allows them a different kind of energy or power.

The guitar, or certain cup forms—they're veterans of art in terms of still life. They are forms that have been pushed through every strainer. That makes them durable. They're not exhausted, they're not closed. To me, the most natural way of participating in art-making is to accept that you are a visitor to all this material, you're reinterpreting standards.

OLLMAN Your most recent work strays confidently from familiar, recognizable referents to more fragmentary, less functional subjects. But you're wary of the A word. You're on record as having a "built-in moral resistance to abstraction" that you've tried for years to overcome. Where did that resistance come from and why the need to transcend it?

SWALLOW Some of my older work is so narratively drunk. To go completely cold turkey was impossible. I've always been attracted to abstraction but never thought it was something I was supposed to do or the work that I was supposed to make. Part of the new pieces becoming more formal or abstract is about enjoying and accepting the terms of what the pieces want to do, or appreciating a different way they can lean.

It's an abstraction I feel OK about, because it comes from manipulation of tactile materials in the studio. It's not pre-ordained. It's a cause-and-effect thing—nurture, not nature. As abstract as some of the recent things are, they have a vulnerability to the surface; they have creases or dents; they're not quite hard-edged. They look like used abstraction. Like abstract sculptures that have been badly treated.